

House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Wednesday 5 June 2019

Dear candidate

We are writing, as President and General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), to wish you luck in your candidacy for the leadership of the Conservative Party and to suggest some education-focused priorities you may wish to consider as part of your campaign.

ASCL is a professional association and trade union representing more than 19,000 school and college leaders across the UK. Our members include headteachers and deputy heads, multi-academy trust CEOs and business managers, in primary schools, secondary schools and FE colleges. ASCL seeks to offer clear, evidence-informed views on issues affecting education, and has a reputation for engaging positively and constructively with government.

Our members are concerned that the focus on Brexit over the last three years has sidelined vital domestic issues and that significant challenges in the education sector are being neglected. We feel it is important to flag this up to you now as you consider your agenda for the leadership campaign. We appreciate how busy you undoubtedly are, so we'll keep it short.

- 1. Funding.** You will not be surprised to learn that this continues to be the number one priority for schools and colleges. The current level of funding is simply not sufficient to enable schools and colleges to provide the education to which our children and young people are entitled. This lack of investment is woefully short-sighted and is having a devastating impact on children's life chances. Standards in education have unquestionably improved over the past 30 years but this progress is being put at risk by the austerity agenda. Class sizes have risen and courses have had to be cut back alongside student support and enrichment activities. This crucial issue requires major strategic investment, with funding based on an accurate appraisal of the costs involved in delivering a world-class education system. ASCL [recently published analysis](#) which showed that schools will require an additional £5.7 billion in 2019/20, over and above the current provision in the education budget, in order to meet basic expectations. The situation in 16-19 education is even worse with real-terms funding per student falling by [16% in eight years](#). These cuts have had a severe impact on a phase of education which is absolutely vital to the onward progress of students to universities, apprenticeships and careers.
- 2. Recruitment and retention.** We were pleased to see the [teacher recruitment and retention strategy](#) published recently by the Department for Education. It is a significant step forward and contains some good ideas about how to improve the current situation. But the fact remains that we are already in the midst of a crisis with severe teacher shortages in many subjects just as the secondary school population is rising. It was extremely disappointing to see that the [Migration Advisory Committee recently decided](#) against even the small step of adding teaching in general to the shortage occupation list to help schools deal with this situation. Teacher shortages are particularly severe in maths, science and foreign languages, but they extend beyond that to many other subjects. The problem is not helped by the fact that the pay of teachers has stagnated over several years, and a significant pay increase, fully funded by the government is urgently needed. But it is also a product of a culture of an excessive accountability system, which is our third and final point.

3. Pressure. We understand that schools and colleges are public services spending public money and it is right that they should be accountable. But the eye-watering pressure of the current accountability system, and the qualifications around which it revolves, is deleterious to the wellbeing of staff and pupils, and is a major factor in the aforementioned recruitment and retention crisis. We welcome the Department for Education's current efforts to ratchet down that pressure by the much-needed [decision to scrap floor and coasting standards](#) in school performance tables, and the decision of Ofsted to focus more on the curriculum and less on performance data. Nevertheless, our system is still far too harsh, generating anxiety among staff and placing the careers of leaders in the balance as a result of Ofsted inspections and the annual publication of school performance tables. Meanwhile, the drive to instil more academic rigour into the curriculum through reforms to GCSEs and A levels has dialled up the pressure on students by another couple of notches. The result is a system that too often feels to those inside it as relentlessly joyless. We need to take a step back and imagine what a system would look like where there is a greater emphasis on supporting schools and colleges, and less focus on punishing them, and where we tailor qualifications to suit the aspirations and aptitudes of young people in the 21st century, instead of forcing them to negotiate a series of cliff edges in a restrictive diet of subjects.

We hope that this brief letter provides you with some useful thoughts about how we can improve the resources and climate of our education system, so that the staff who work in our schools and colleges with such enormous dedication and professionalism, are better supported in delivering the best possible education for every young person in our country.

We would be delighted to talk in more detail about any of the points raised, or to put you in touch with school and college leaders around the country who could talk further about the impact of austerity on the young people they serve.

Yours sincerely



Richard Sheriff
President



Geoff Barton
General Secretary