

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 ON FRIDAY 8 MARCH**

**ASCL President's speech to ASCL Annual Conference 2024**

**Friday 8 March, 10am**

Welcome to the great city of Liverpool and welcome to ASCL's Annual conference – and what a conference we have in store for you.

Not only are we celebrating 150 years of our great association, we are also saying goodbye to our superb General Secretary Geoff Barton as he steps down after seven years in April.

BBC Breakfast will never be quite the same again without Geoff's regular appearances.

During the Covid pandemic, in particular, he provided a clear, calm, and reassuring voice which was badly needed during those turbulent times.

And we are hugely pleased at this conference to be welcoming our new General Secretary – Pepe Di'Iasio – who takes over from Geoff next month.

Many of you will know Pepe already from his term as ASCL President.

We simply could not have a better person to follow in Geoff's footsteps.

Pepe is an inspirational leader and an amazing communicator. He will take our great association from strength to strength.

And our greatest strength is of course – you – our members.

We now represent the voices of 25,000 school and college leaders across the nations of the UK.

You lead alternative provision, special schools, state and independent schools, FE and sixth form colleges.

In primary, middle, secondary and post-16 phases.

In every part of the UK and across a range of senior leadership posts.

It is an organisation of incredible diversity but one which shares the same core value.

To secure the very best outcomes and life chances for children and young people.

I'm very proud that I am part of our association's growing diversity of voices.

I stand here today as the first ASCL President from the primary and special school sector.

ASCL has had many different incarnations during its 150-year history – and please do take the time to visit the special anniversary exhibition at this conference.

Our immediate predecessor organisation was the Secondary Heads' Association – which in 2006 became the Association of School and College Leaders.

So, my election as ASCL President – from a primary and special school background – is another step in that journey towards a growing breadth of representation across the education sector – ASCL really does speak for all.

Yes, I really do know about the mysteries of teaching phonics, early years assessments – and sitting on very small chairs – and most importantly, about the very high standards children can, and do, reach at the end of their primary years.

Today, it seems fitting – as we are in Liverpool – to recall some of the sayings of one of the city's greatest wordsmiths.

No, I'm not talking about John Lennon, Beryl Bainbridge, Carla Lane, or Paul McCartney.

But about none other than the great Liverpool manager, Bill Shankly, who – besides being a footballing genius – also had a way with words.

This is what he said about his experience of education:

“Me having no education, I had to use my brains.”

Bill Shankly was born in a very different era – before the modern welfare state.

He experienced constant hunger during his childhood, left school at 14 and went to work in the local mine.

Now that is very different from my story.

I was myself a child from what might be described as an “under-resourced” or “disadvantaged” family.

A family that was abundant in warmth and love, but which needed additional support to maximise the educational opportunities on offer.

My working mum just did not earn the money needed to ensure I was in a position to access that “offer.”

But I benefitted from a post-war consensus that recognised that by improving the conditions of those who had least, we ultimately benefit as a whole nation.

I benefited from clothing grants, school journey grants, sixth form maintenance grants, child benefit, a range of youth services and good social housing.

They were all essential components of my childhood, each contributing to my family's ability to make decisions based on my needs rather than economic survival.

And it is this experience that led me into teaching and leadership – because I want every child to have the same opportunity.

But – today – I am increasingly worried.

I am worried that:

- 4.3 million children live in poverty in the UK. It is a simply staggering, shameful statistic.

- Many live in inadequate housing, without a good, healthy diet, adequate clothing, or heating.
- That the disadvantage gap has widened since 2019 across all phases of education.

And I am worried about the capacity of schools and colleges – faced as they are with grave shortages of funding and staff – to deal with the socio-economic challenges of a grossly unequal society

At this conference last year, my predecessor as ASCL President, Evelyn Forde, raised the alarm about how education has become an unofficial fourth emergency service – picking up the pieces for under-resourced local services.

And at exactly the same time, we also have a situation in which the budgetary pressures on schools and colleges are simply unsustainable.

It is a vicious circle which can only result in more cuts, less provision, and the very real risk of declining standards.

Inevitably, it is the children who most need the state, who will suffer the most – those who are from families disadvantaged by the wealth and opportunity gaps in our society, those with special educational needs.

There's a General Election round the corner. And it is a crucial moment for the future of our education system and our country.

I say this as the leader of an independent trade union with no political affiliation.

But whoever is in charge of the next government simply must commit to a sufficient level of spending on public services – certainly in education, but also on the infrastructure of social care and mental health support which is a vital part of the tapestry of a caring society.

And I want to make a particular plea over the urgency of improved funding and focus on special educational needs.

The SEND system is on the brink of collapse, bogged down with delays in assessments, lack of funding to support children, disputes between parents and local authorities and massive high-needs deficits.

The government's only answer to this is a plan to reform the system which will take years to deliver, and which lacks the vital requirement of sufficient funding.

Let me say this very clearly.

The crisis is here.

It is happening now.

These children cannot wait for years.

This is an immediate and pressing priority.

Stop talking and act. Now.

And I am also worried about something else – the sense that there is a deterioration in the sense of an unwritten “social contract” between families and schools.

Something has happened.

Maybe it was the way the pandemic disrupted the normal routines, and we simply haven’t ever really got back to pre-pandemic “normality.”

Maybe it is also that so many families are under pressure themselves – the cost-of-living crisis, unmet special educational needs, a rising tide of mental health problems.

What I do know is that many school and college leaders are seeing more incidents of challenging behaviour and – of course – poor attendance.

The rate of persistent absence has in fact doubled since before the pandemic.

Traditionally, we at ASCL like to conduct some surveys at this time of year as part of our Annual Conference on issues of particular concern.

This year we’ve done that with the survey app, Teacher Tapp, asking over 8,400 leaders and teachers in England what reasons they have been given for pupil absence this academic year.

Here are the headlines:

Term-time holidays – 87 per cent.

Attending a family event – 76 per cent

Too anxious to attend – 66 per cent

Too tired because of an event the night before – 51 per cent

Kept home because the parent is in dispute with the school – 32 per cent

There are obviously many stories behind those statistics. This is a hugely complex issue.

But what I find alarming is those reasons which suggest absence from school may not be seen in the way it used to.

And in particular, it is surprising that some children are kept at home because of a dispute with the school.

Nearly a third of teachers and leaders say this has been given as a reason. When we look just at responses from headteachers – who are most likely to have a complete overview – nearly half say they have been given this as a reason for non-attendance.

This is an extreme – but apparently common – example of the fracturing of that unwritten social contract.

Now I don’t know exactly why this has happened. It is, as I have said, complex.

It is important that we understand and work with parents – many of them face incredibly challenging circumstances.

And we certainly require some tangible solutions. It simply can’t all be on schools to do this. We clearly need greater investment in mental health support for children who are suffering from anxiety and depression.

And we need more attendance support services locally that can go out, knock on doors, identify what is going wrong and work with families.

But I think something else is also needed.

And that is a change of tone in the national conversation about education.

An acknowledgement that everybody in public life must do more to talk up the many good things about schools and colleges, and to talk about teaching as the noble profession it is.

We have a good education system – it could easily be great. We should be very proud of that.

It often seems like some politicians and commentators are far too quick to take potshots at schools.

Potshots that are often based on confused perceptions, political agendas, and which are generally misplaced.

Whether that's by leaping on important and sensitive issues – like sex education and trans or gender-questioning pupils – to generate a cheap headline.

Or banning mobile phones – when most schools have already done this

Or whether the school day should be five minutes longer.

It sometimes feels like death by press release. An endless stream of negative newspaper headlines. With schools used as a political football.

It should surely be obvious that if we are going to tell parents that school is essential – that – to quote the Department for Education's own campaign "moments matter and attendance counts" – then education needs to be something that is held in esteem.

And if politicians and commentators are constantly running down teachers and schools, and giving the impression that we can't be trusted, then they're helping to create a division.

I don't, of course, think that this – on its own – is the reason for that fracturing of the social contract that I spoke about.

But it certainly doesn't help. It creates a febrile climate. And when social media is added into the mix, things can get very nasty very quickly. As I am sure many of us have experienced.

Think also about the impact of all of this on recruitment and retention – which continues to be such a pressing problem for virtually every school and college.

How can we expect to recruit the numbers of graduates we need in the profession if the discourse around education is so often negative?

This really is the lowest of low-hanging fruit

Being positive about schools and education costs nothing at all. After all, schools and education are the "silver bullet" – as the Prime Minister has himself recognised – to economic growth and a flourishing society.

Let's not be naïve. There will always be a robust debate about any education system for the simple reason that it is incredibly important.

But we really do need for that debate to be more positive and less corrosive.

So, I say this to all in public life.

Be on the side of schools.

Be on the side of teachers and leaders.

And by doing this you'll also be on the side of children and their families, and the future prosperity and health of our nation

In fact, this goes further than purely being a matter of rhetoric.

It is also about how we do education policy in this country – the way in which we tweak and sometimes overhaul elements of the system to make it better and improve it for all children.

Education policy is predominately constructed in Whitehall and Westminster.

And it is very much a case of “done to” rather than “done with.”

ASCL – along with other unions and organisations – works incredibly hard behind the scenes ahead of policy announcements – and we do win important concessions.

But this is not the same as working together with government to develop good policies that make a real difference.

In reality, we're often simply trying to stop a bad idea from happening or make it better.

And sometimes this doesn't happen at all.

Take the Advanced British Standard for example.

That was announced in the Prime Minister's speech in last autumn's Conservative Party Conference without any warning.

A potentially massive overhaul of post-16 education announced without discussion with the people who would be expected to deliver those changes.

There's definitely a discussion needed about this vital phase of education.

It has been treated for far too long as a “Cinderella service” – massively underfunded and with a lack of awareness and understanding of the vital role of colleges in particular.

And there certainly needs to be greater parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes.

But, let's face it, we all know the Advanced British Standard will never happen.

There's a General Election before then and probably a couple more before it is meant to arrive in 10 years' time.

And, in any case, there isn't enough funding or teachers to deliver it.

So, it is really a colossal waste of time and energy. A policy that is, at best, a distraction.

But that announcement has immediate real-world implications. It means that there are lots of civil servants currently running around working on the Advanced British Standard.

It creates doubt about the future of T-levels – which were once – in the dim and distant past of 2023 – the government’s flagship policy – before they have even been fully rolled out.

And it overshadows the immediate and very real problem of plans to scrap BTECs and other applied general qualifications – which rather than being hypothetical, are actual qualifications which are taken and valued by many thousands of young people right now.

This focus on the ABS – a far-off and undeliverable policy – comes at a time when we have a number of more immediately pressing issues, such as an absolutely dire recruitment and retention problem and a disadvantage gap which has got wider.

There’s never a good time for a pipedream – but particularly not when there are obvious and much more important priorities.

Back to Bill Shankly then, who once observed: “The trouble with referees is that they know the rules, but they do not know the game.”

That’s an observation that could be applied to the government – to any government – which insists on developing policy in a vacuum.

This is why we need to do policymaking in a different way – why policy needs to draw on the expertise and knowledge of people actually working in the education system.

We’re the canaries in the mine for policies that simply won’t work. And we can really help – positively and constructively – with policies that have potential.

To achieve this I think there needs to be a reset between the government and the profession.

That’s not without risk to the representative groups in education – including our association.

It means that our fingerprints would then be on policies that might not always land all that well in a world where there is often no perfect solution and where there are difficult choices to be made.

But that’s a risk we’re eager to take – because the benefits by far outweigh the potential downsides.

It would mean:

- Policymaking that is informed by the profession – by the experience and knowledge of teachers and leaders on the education frontline.
- Where announcements are not the usual Punch and Judy-style ding-dong as they fall apart under even the slightest scrutiny.
- Where policies are logical, sensible and deliver real impact for pupils.

These are surely outcomes that any government would want to achieve.

Co-construction is a better form of politics – of finding real solutions – where we accept there are tough constraints, and tough challenges, but where we work together to find a way to solve them.

And that brings me back today and to us. And it also brings me back to why I am an optimist despite the challenges I have spoken about.

We have an untapped reservoir of collective knowledge and expertise within the profession – that is you, the people who lead our schools and colleges – which will help us find the solutions we need.

That's why the theme of this conference is "interconnected leadership."

This is the connection between all of us as school and college leaders – wherever we are in the UK and whatever our context.

It is also about our connection to the past – the great leaders who came before us – the legacy on which we are building. They faced challenges equal to, if not greater than, ours – and they persisted.

And it is about our connection to the future – about how we are working towards a better tomorrow.

Because I believe that if government works hand-in-hand with us we can crack some of those seemingly intractable problems.

Such as narrowing the disadvantage gap.

Such as improving the fortunes of the "forgotten third" of youngsters who miss the coveted Grade 4 GCSE in English and maths each year and who are then condemned to a grinding cycle of demoralising resits.

Such as an accountability system of Ofsted inspections and performance tables which currently penalises the very schools that most need support.

An accountability system which drives stress and anxiety – eroding the confidence and damaging the wellbeing of teachers and leaders.

An accountability system that is one of the main reasons why we have an exodus of trained professionals from the profession.

And such as the dire recruitment problems which are undermining the entire system.

The fact that this year we've only recruited half of the trainee secondary teachers we need.

Targets missed in 14 out of 17 secondary subjects – including just 16% in business studies and 17% in physics.

All of these problems are the real challenges we face.

Not mobile phones that have already been banned, not the length of the school day, not the awful "culture wars" stuff which often just seems plain nasty, and not the Advanced British Standard.



I firmly believe all of the challenges that we face are solvable.

Through partnership between the government and the profession.

Using the experience and knowledge of school and college leaders, as well as their passion – your passion – to do the best we possibly can for all our students.

In an age of divisive politics, wouldn't it be refreshing for the next government to have the boldness to say:

“Let's do things differently.

“Let's achieve a new consensus.”

That would be truly visionary. Something akin to the ambition of those politicians who built the post-Second World War consensus. The very consensus that I – and many other children – benefitted from and which led to me standing on this stage today.

Those post-war leaders – in bleak times, when many of our cities lay in ruins, when so many families were grieving for the loss of their loved ones – were determined to not only rebuild the country but to make it better than it was before.

And they accepted that it was on their shoulders to do that job and make it reality.

That is the sense of ambition that we need now from our political leaders – and which I know is something that all of us here in this hall and beyond would enthusiastically support.

Back to Bill Shankly one more time, who said: “Aim for the sky and you'll reach the ceiling. Aim for the ceiling and you'll stay on the floor.”

As a profession, like Shankly, we will continue to aim for the sky.

On behalf of the children, young people, and families we serve.

And let's expect – no let's demand – that government joins us in this endeavour by seeing education, not as a cost, but as an investment in all our futures.

Thank you and have a great conference.