

Accredit notes

Interview **Julie Nightingale** Photographs **Ed Maynard**

On the days when an education story breaks in the papers, it usually appears with a quote from John Dunford attached. In the eight years since he took over as general secretary of the Secondary Heads' Association – it assumed the all-embracing title of Association of School and College Leaders last year – Dunford has made it his business to raise the profile of the organisation via the national media, with the result that the Leicester-based organisation punches above its weight with ministers and media alike.

It's a strategy he recommends to the IEA as a tactic for boosting membership – the ASCL's has grown by 5-7 per cent consistently over the past few years and now stands at around 12,500. Engaging directly with members is equally important.

"The quality of the publications and advice service for members is really important and communicating with members has to be done really well. Certainly the slogan of this association is run by members for members. That is one I would recommend to IEA."

Assessment for learning

Dunford is a member of the IEA and a keen advocate in particular of assessment for learning – the process defined by assessment guru Paul Black as "using your school data to check learning gains".

Apart from the advantages of being able to track a student's learning curve, past and future, it helps to inform the teacher how best to teach a particular student or class, Dunford points out.

"It's also giving the teacher the ability to ensure that lessons are firmly rooted in learning rather than teaching."

This may sound as if the teacher's role is gradually shifting to one of "facilitation" but he disagrees with the interpretation.

"I don't really like the word facilitator because it implies a degree of neutrality that is not appropriate. The teacher is still very much directing the learning process but they are thinking much more clearly about that process as a result of the feedback they are getting from assessment for learning."

It's time to raise the status of teacher assessment, says John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders

For the student, it puts them in the driving seat by improving their understanding of their own learning. "They understand clearly what they have learnt and they understand more about how they can learn. So you've got assessment and teaching and learning all very much tied in together in a way that I think is unique."

His other big assessment interest is internal or in-course assessment and the way in which chartered assessors – teacher-assessors who would be accredited by the IEA – could be used in the external qualifications process.

Dunford believes raising the status of teacher assessment, so that it makes the government and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) more receptive to making it part of the qualification system, is a critical issue for the IEA.

Halving tests

"I think we need to reduce, probably by at least 50 per cent, the number of external tests that children take during their school career. It seems to me that the best way we could do that would be to substitute the half that has been removed with high-quality teacher assessment."

Teachers already assess children's work as part of their school role, he points out (in addition, in-course assessment is already a fixture in vocational training). A chartered system would mean that existing assessment was moderated by an

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accredited chartered assessor – a school's head of subject, for example, or someone otherwise senior to the teacher. That school-based assessment would form 50 per cent of the final grade with the other half still depending on exam performance.

"I'm not talking about coursework as it has traditionally been set over the past few years, where a lot of it has been assignments sent down by the examination board, creating extra work for students and teachers," he explains. "I'm talking about an ideal world in which teachers' normal

assessment of students is done with a greater degree of rigour and is monitored by a senior person in the school who has been externally accredited by the institute as a chartered assessor."

The ASCL has been lobbying for a chartered assessor scheme for schools over some years and the idea was incorporated into the Tomlinson report on 14-19 education reform. But it was rejected by the government – a decision that, amid the rows about the "watering-down" of Tomlinson's other proposals, went largely unnoticed but that Dunford is convinced was a profound mistake.

He believes the rejection was a political decision, not one based on the idea's merits. "It was rejected because the government were frightened of the *Daily Mail* saying that teachers would mark their children's work softly.

"And all the evidence is that that is nonsense. There is clear evidence that the teacher assessment tends to be stricter than external exam assessment."

Coursework clarified

An accredited assessor system would, in addition, dispose of arguments about students being given the chance to redo coursework, he says.

"The external examination system is not run by some faceless bureaucrat. Basically it's run by teachers, working on separate contracts to examination boards.

"It could be brought within normal teachers' normal working life without creating huge extra workload for them because you're using the assessment that good teachers are doing anyway."

Dunford and the ASCL have by no means abandoned hope.

"We've been trying for the past three or four years to persuade the Department for Education and Skills and the QCA to adopt this system. We clearly persuaded Mike Tomlinson that it was a good idea.

"So I think this is an idea whose time has come. I think that politicians need to put more confidence in the professionalism of teachers and I think the institute is a very important way of acknowledging their professionalism."

The other advantage of in-course assessment, he insists, is that it can cover more territory.

"Functional skills are most appropriately tested by quick and dirty externally marked tests. Sit down, do a test, have you passed or haven't you? The great thing about in-course assessment is that you can test a much wider range of skills than can be tested in external examinations."

The ASCL was vociferous in its support

for other parts of the Tomlinson 14-19 proposals and, like many other interested parties, although it has welcomed the vocational diploma as an overdue innovation, it was disappointed that the government drew back from enfolded A-levels into the new diploma system.

"But there's a review coming up in 2008 so we haven't seen the last of that," Dunford adds. "We shall certainly be arguing for it."

It is the limited scope of A-levels that is the problem, he insists, and may be one reason why universities complain that A-level grades do not provide them with sufficient insight into a student's academic capabilities.

Module access

Carping by universities is not, however, a reason to change the way A-levels are graded, he says. Besides, from summer 2007, universities will have access to not only students' module grades but also a breakdown of module marks, should they want it.

"We do not need to change the grading system at all to give the super-selective universities the information to distinguish between the very good and the excellent. Certainly the whole grading system should not be skewed in order to do that. I'm completely opposed to the idea of the A* grade, for example – it's quite unnecessary."

He's similarly anti-the International GCSE, which some independent schools are now adopting, purportedly to stretch their pupils further intellectually than the standard GCSE allows. Introducing it in state schools would be a backward step, Dunford thinks.

"It would be a grave mistake to approve the IGCSE because it will create a two-tier system, much like we had at O-level and CSE. If there are problems with the GCSE then let's address them but I am totally opposed to approving a different kind of



CV: John Dunford and the ASCL

▮ The Association of School and College Leaders has more than 12,500 members in UK secondary schools and colleges. There are about 30 employees at the head office, in one of Leicester's leafier areas, along with another 15 consultants and field officers.

▮ John Dunford has been general secretary of ASCL (and its previous incarnation, the Secondary Heads' Association) since September 1998.

▮ He studied maths and economics at the University of Nottingham and was president of the Student Union there in 1968-69. He has a doctorate from Durham University.

▮ He was a maths teacher in Nottingham, Sunderland and Durham before becoming headteacher of Durham Johnston Comprehensive School, an 11-18 school with 1,500 pupils, in 1982.

Dunford has written extensively on education policy and the school curriculum, management and inspection processes.

▮ He is a member of the Local Government Association's Commission on the Organisation of the School Year. He is on the advisory board of Teach First, a trustee of Worldwide Volunteering and a council member of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

exam. It will create a divide between the independent and state sector that, again, will be counterproductive."

Pragmatic rather than political, the ASCL has not made a habit of locking horns with the government over every strand of education policy. It does have concerns about the welter of initiatives dreamt up by ministers and civil servants at the DfES and the lack of time for evaluation before the next reform arrives but, Dunford insists, constant change is part of the landscape for any organisation.

Devolution: discuss

It is perhaps why he is more receptive to an idea now being discussed in some more radical corners of the education world – for education to be devolved from political control altogether. The idea that large public services might perform better if they were run independently – as the Bank of England has been since it was unshackled from the government in 1997 – was mooted in a speech by chancellor Gordon Brown.

It is not a notion to dismiss automatically, Dunford suggests. "I thought it was an interesting idea. It was put forward in relation to the health service by Gordon Brown but the thought went through my mind – is that the best thing to do with education? We are thinking about it."

There are arguments in both directions, he suggests.

"You might think it would depoliticise education but education is not party-politically [orientated] very much at the moment because Labour and Conservative policies are very similar.

"It's more about the political process than about party politics, and about the secretary of state for education and civil servants not leaving it to the professionals."

Education and politics

There have been five secretaries of state for education since Labour took office in 1997. Although this rapidly spinning ministerial merry-go-round is nothing new – "the average term of office of an education secretary since 1944 is 2.2 years," John Dunford points out – some see the constant change as inevitably destabilising.

"It is a problem if ministers come in and seek to put their stamp on the department with their own policies – as Ruth Kelly did with parents and food, for example," he says.

"With Alan Johnson we are seeing this quite different approach. He hasn't felt the need to introduce his own initiatives, he's taken the big issues and he's dealing with them and I think that's absolutely right."

But Dunford thinks there's also a problem with education in that the civil servants change around frequently as well.

"There's a kind of parallel universe in the Department for Education and Skills to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. I think that has always been overcautious about assessment and has had no real understanding of the principles behind assessment and the way in which assessment for learning has hugely increased the expertise of teachers in assessment. I think they ought to build on that and tell their politicians to have more trust in the professionalism of teachers."