

ASCL Annual Conference 2010 Ed Balls

Thanks John.

It's an honour to be speaking here at the ASCL annual conference for the third time.

When I spoke at your conference in Birmingham last year for the second time, I said that I'd gone in the space of 12 months from being a novice to a veteran.

This year, your General Secretary tells me I've gone from being a veteran to a record-breaker.

The first Secretary of State to speak here three times – let alone in three consecutive years.

As I was told earlier, I've scored a hat-trick.

And let me thank ASCL for presenting me with this signed football on which it's written: "ASCL 3 Ed 3 – an honourable draw".

Let me say too that I enjoyed listening to the speech made last year by your then President, Jane Lees.

And of course, the year before the President's speech was given brilliantly by Brian Lightman, who is now your General Secretary elect.

But I thought John Morgan's speech just now was particularly thoughtful and challenging.

He raised a number of difficult issues that also came up in the discussion that I had with some of you over lunch including:

- Diplomas and functional skills;
- accountability;
- and inspection.

I will cover all of these issues in my speech this afternoon.

But John also pointed to a number of areas where we have made real progress over the past year including:

- the fastest progress of all continuing to be made in the most disadvantaged areas;
- the growing number of pupils staying on at 16 and then going to university;
- and even rarely cover.

I remember shortly after I began this job having my first meeting with all of the social partners.

I was there with Jim Knight.

And we discussed our new Department for Children, Schools and Families and our vision for our schools system but there was lots of head-shaking when Jim Knight said: "how are we going to handle rarely cover?"

I went back to my office after that meeting slightly puzzled.

I thought to myself: “Who is this rarely cover? And why is she causing such a big problem?”

It was some time before I realised rarely cover wasn't the name of a particularly troublesome member of the social partnership.

And I was just grateful that I hadn't asked my office to fix a meeting in the meantime.

But I should also say for anyone who read John Dunford saying in the Independent Newspaper how he had counted the pictures of all of the previous Secretaries of State during boring meetings at the Department, they're not on the wall in my office.

And believe me, while we often agree and sometimes disagree, meetings with your General Secretary are never boring!

In his speech, John Morgan described what he called the ASCL way of: “schools helping schools and leaders supporting leaders”.

We've already had an ASCL Act so you'll understand why we were reluctant to title our 21st Century Schools White Paper as the ASCL White Paper.

But that principle is very much at the heart of it.

And I am proud that while my time as Secretary of State has been all about putting the needs of children and young people first, our schools policy has been founded on backing and supporting our great school leaders.

Some people have said that we've not gone far enough or fast enough.

But in our White Paper, we said that we would give school leaders more freedom and responsibility to drive their own school improvement by reforming the role of School Improvement Partners and ending National Strategies.

On the curriculum in primary and secondary schools, we have promised greater flexibility for head teachers and teachers and ended Key Stage 3 tests.

And because we want school improvement to be sector-led, we said that we will make more use of our best head teachers so they can run more than one school, with better pay, and develop more federations.

That's why we're now building on our National Leaders in Education and our Academies and trust programmes by creating a new system of Accredited School Providers and Accredited School Groups that will allow us to spread the benefits of great leadership more widely across the system.

We announced the first 13 Accredited Providers who can run two schools and the first 6 Accredited Groups who can run chains of three or more schools a week or so ago.

And while there were universities, colleges and a multi-Academy sponsor amongst them, I believe that the fact that they were mainly maintained schools is a very significant reflection on the reality of our education system .

I am a great supporter of Academies because they are playing an important role in breaking the link between deprivation and low attainment.

But when you talk about why Academies are working, there are differing views.

Some people say that Academies only succeed because of their freedoms and independence.

And they say that it is the fact that they have broken away from the rest of the state school system that means they can flourish.

I don't agree with that view.

Because that means that only Academies can succeed.

And it means that all maintained schools must by definition not succeed.

Yes, extra freedoms are important in breaking cycles of underachievement.

But in my view, the things that make Academies work are:

- the way they relentlessly raise aspirations;
- their ethos of high expectations for every pupil;
- their external challenge and scrutiny;
- sometimes, their modern new buildings and facilities;
- but, above all, it is their great leadership.

And when you look across the state system at other successful state schools, these are actually the things you see there too – including in many of your schools.

So the challenge for us is not to make every school an Academy but to:

- support our best leaders;
- give them the space and flexibility they need to innovate and drive improvement;
- and harness their skills and expertise by putting the ASCL way of schools helping schools and leaders supporting leaders into practice.

But we must all be honest with ourselves.

We couldn't have done this 12 years ago.

Because:

- there were too many underperforming schools;
- there wasn't a critical mass of great school leaders;
- there was no track-record of collaboration across the schools system;
- the teaching profession was demoralised;
- and there had been decades of underfunding and underinvestment in schools.

We needed the centralism of School Improvement Partners and National Strategies.

And we needed to end the decades of underfunding and underinvestment that had left our schools so run down and our head teachers and teachers so demoralised.

But:

- we now have 200 National Leaders in Education;
- we've gone from 1 in 2 schools below our basic benchmark of at least 30% of pupils achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths in 1997 to 1 in 13 today;
- the number of schools where at least 70% of pupils reach our basic benchmark has gone from 1 in 20 to 1 in 3;
- we've boosted the status of teaching and it's now the number one career choice for graduates;
- we've more than doubled per pupil funding;
- and we've worked with ASCL, the National College and others get all schools working together on sport and in behaviour and attendance partnerships, as well as increasingly in trusts and federations.

It is because of that real transformation that we can now stand back and devolve more power, freedom and responsibility to school leaders.

And just as we couldn't have done this without extra investment and extra support, so too couldn't we have done it without your General Secretary, John Dunford.

I remember when I met John for the first time after I began doing this job.

At the end of our meeting, he said to me: "The thing you have to understand about school leadership is that isn't just a job, it's a vocation."

In all of the discussions that I've had with all of you over the past few years and whenever I've visited your schools, I've seen how passionately you believe that:

- every child has potential and can succeed if they're given the right support;
- and no barrier whether that's where they live, their parents' income or a special educational need or disability should be allowed to hold them back.

And I know that at the end of a long week when you've been dealing with teacher absences, got a governors meeting to go to, the housing office won't return your calls and you've just received the DCSF schools email, it is that moral purpose that drives you on.

When I think of the great head teachers that I've met over the past few years, I think of John too.

Because he epitomises that moral purpose and has consistently:

- pressed for more intelligent accountability that properly recognises what you do in your schools and doesn't just rely on a narrow view of the attainment of the average child – which we are currently working out how to make a reality through our School Report Card;
- pushed us to cut down on bureaucracy on school leaders – including by being amongst the first to champion the idea of school business managers;
- and called for us to trust you – and I hope you'll all agree that while some people said that National Challenge was all about centralisation and school closures, it is actually about extra support and local leaders making a difference and very much in the London Challenge mould.

The Prime Minister and I were talking about John only a few weeks ago when we visited a school in Durham with the whole of the Cabinet.

It was also the school that John used to be the head teacher at.

John texted me that morning to ask me to pass on his best wishes – although I'm not sure whether I was meant to pass that on to Carolyn Roberts on having the whole Cabinet descend on her school or just to us because we were visiting his old school.

I'd actually been there about 18 months or so beforehand.

And the transformation in 18 months from a run down, outdated building to the brilliant, modern new facilities was quite amazing.

We were taken around the school.

And when we got to the library, we saw a group of pupils sitting around a table playing with a football for their SEAL lesson.

I asked what it was and the pupils said it was a game about diversity, the football had questions on each of its panels and you had to roll it and answer the question it lands on.

Rather riskily in front of the TV cameras, I volunteered the Prime Minister to have a go.

But before he could get over to the table, one of the pupils had picked up and football and, in front of the TV cameras, thrown it over to him.

As the ball soared through the air, it was, I have to tell you, one of those slow-motion moments when your career flashes before your eyes.

I thought to myself: "Will he drop it? Or will he head it?"

Fortunately, the Prime Minister caught it.

If you thought I was relieved, you should have seen the head teacher.

But I also told the Prime Minister that I was coming here today and that it was John's last conference.

And on behalf of the government and all of the Secretaries of State and Ministers who have worked with him, I'd like to present him with this letter from the Prime Minister thanking John for his invaluable public service.

So we all wish John well in whatever he does in the future.

His legacy is an education system that is far stronger than the one he inherited.

And we all have a duty to ensure that continues.

That is our collective challenge.

As your President said, I came here last year and I talked about the two priorities that I wanted us to focus on:

- first, breaking the longstanding link between deprivation and poor attainment that has scarred our country for too long – so that every child and young person can fulfil their potential;

- and second, building on the progress that we've made over the past 12 years – so that we can have rising standards and excellence for all.

My first priority is breaking the link.

Last year, we published our first research document on the link between deprivation and low attainment.

We are publishing an update today.

It shows that:

- the gap continues to narrow;
- but there's still much more to do;
- and, as John Morgan said, this is not just a challenge for schools in the most deprived areas but a challenge for all schools – because a third of pupils on free school meals are in schools where there are below average levels of deprivation.

I know you're concerned about the pupil and parent guarantees, as well as about our School Report Card.

I believe they're important because they both go to the heart of breaking the link and are both first and foremost about social justice:

- of all our guarantees, our pupil guarantee is the most important of all because it means that all children in primary school and in Year 7 who have fallen behind or are in danger of falling behind will get the one-to-one tuition they need;
- and our School Report Card will recognise all of the things that you do to help break the link and not just focus solely on average attainment as league tables do now – I know that the idea of a single grade is controversial and I've made my concerns clear too but our School Report Card is important because it's about celebrating your success and also because we shouldn't let schools off the hook if they have higher than average attainment but don't do as much as they could to break the link.

We are today publishing the next document in our Breaking the Link series, which is on the link between special educational needs and low attainment.

It tells us that:

- the proportion of pupils with special education needs achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths has doubled since 2006;
- but the gap is still very wide;
- while a third of pupils have a special educational need, two thirds of those 11 year olds who don't reach Level 4 in English and maths at Key Stage 2 have a special educational need so improving support for special educational needs is central to raising standards;
- and there is enormous variation in the way that special educational needs are identified – because as I've heard heads say many times, when a pupil arrives in Year 7 with what have been diagnosed as behavioural problems, what you often find is that it's a special educational need that hasn't been identified.

We've done a lot of work in recent years and have drawn on the possible expert advice:

- we're investing in speech and language support for children following John Bercow's review;
- we're providing 4,000 new specialist dyslexia teachers following Sir Jim Rose's review;
- we're working to improve parental confidence in the SEN system through Brian Lamb's review;
- and we are today publishing the review that Toby Salt from the National College has done into the supply of specialist teachers for those children with the most severe needs.

One of the issues that he has raised is that 45% of head teachers and teaching staff in special schools are over 50 – compared to 27% in mainstream schools.

So we have to act now to ensure the next generation of teachers has the training and capability to help children with severe learning difficulties.

And that's why we will now:

- work with Teach First to extend it to special schools;
- offer all new teachers a six month specialist course that will enable them to be better prepared for their first job working with children with severe learning difficulties;
- work with the TDA to develop new training on teaching children with severe learning difficulties to ensure that every teacher has access to the professional development that they need;
- and put new arrangements in place to collect data on skilled teachers to manage supply effectively for the future.

So as well as saying that breaking the link is everybody's business, there can be no doubt too that improving support for children and young people with SEN is absolutely central to raising standards.

And excellence for all is my second priority.

As I said last year, I believe that we know that the things that make a difference in schools are:

- inspirational teaching;
- an engaging curriculum;
- a focus on the progress of every child;
- discipline and good behaviour;
- support from parents and other children's services;
- a challenging approach to school improvement;
- and above all, great leadership.

Our White Paper is about getting to the next level in all of these areas so that every school is a good school.

But as John Morgan said, there are two particular challenges:

- on funding;
- and on accountability.

First, on funding.

Head teachers are right to say that a two per cent cut in schools funding would mean fewer teachers and teaching assistants and larger class sizes.

And that would be a real setback to what we've done over the past 12 years.

That's why in the Pre-Budget Report, we announced that, while making tough savings at the centre, funding going direct to schools will rise in real terms for the next three years.

We will set out the details in the coming weeks so that all schools have the certainty and the time they need to plan for the future.

It will also include the review of the Dedicated Schools Grant.

And we will also be clearer about the funding that is provided for deprivation as part of that.

There are some tough decisions.

But the combination of rising funding and tougher expectations on efficiencies means schools will have the resources they need to meet the frontline cost pressures they face.

We think it's about 0.9 per cent of efficiency savings needed across school budgets.

We need to start planning that now.

That's why I've been clear that we can't afford to sit back, put our heads in the sand and ignore the reality of the situation.

If we do, we will then have to make last-minute decisions about staffing in the future and sometimes last-minute decisions on these issues aren't the best decisions.

That's why we also published a discussion document in November on the challenging but achievable efficiency savings that schools will need to make and have been holding a series of conferences with ASCL, the National College and others.

There are savings we can make through collaboration, through schools supporting schools, through business managers, through savings through procurement.

And we will also set out the next steps that we will take to support you in the coming weeks.

The second challenge is around accountability.

John Morgan talked about the role of Ofsted in his speech.

I am clear that independent inspection is vital.

And I believe that it has provided an important contribution to the progress that we've made over the past 12 years.

Ofsted began using a new inspection framework in the autumn.

It did raise the bar.

And it was skewed from strong to less well performing schools

I know that Christine Gilbert is keen to work with you and with us to clear up any miscommunication and myths around it.

And Christine has told me and I know you too that pupil attainment is important but it is not a limiting factor.

It is possible for a school with low attainment to still be judged good or outstanding overall, as long as teaching and learning are strong and lead to good pupil progress.

And inspection does have to be fair.

Ofsted isn't the only means of providing accountability.

There's also our new School Report Card.

And I know it's been controversial but I do believe that we have to listen to parents too.

We've seen how the police, the NHS and all public services are becoming increasingly accountable to their users.

And engaging parents is an inescapable part of knowing how a school is performing and also when change is needed.

So we are breaking the link and providing excellence for all by:

- recognising, accrediting and empowering our great school leaders;
- matching those new flexibilities with tough accountability;
- promoting collaboration so that schools can help schools and leaders can support leaders;
- and providing real-term increases in funding.

That is our approach.

But there is an alternative approach.

And that is that the best way to improve schools is to:

- scrap the National Curriculum and the National Agreement;
- have no role for Local Authorities in school improvement;
- expect parents to have the time and know-how to set up their own schools or private sector firms to come in, run schools and make profits from doing so;
- allow some schools to wither and decline
- and watch as the pupils in those schools fail.

John spoke about his experience in Sweden in his speech.

The evidence shows not only that standards there are now falling, but inequality is widening too.

And by saying that the key to school improvement isn't supporting and turning around existing schools but setting up new schools down the road that take your funding, it would also fundamentally undermine your leadership and most certainly won't be about schools helping schools but schools set against schools.

It is a vision of a schools system that is fundamentally at odds with the vision set out in our Schools White Paper

I believe that would be a massive setback to everything that we've achieved together over the past 12 years.

And that is why the next couple of months will be defining for the future of our education system.

John Morgan made one other point in his speech around our White Paper not being about teaching.

And I'd like to end by addressing that.

My job is to:

- be accountable for £60billion of public money;
- ensure the right legal framework is in place;
- provide clear guarantees to parents;
- give support to the teaching profession;
- ensure you have the resources and the powers you need to do your jobs;
- and ensure the accountability system recognises and rewards what you do properly and fairly – and let me say that John Dunford has pushed me to keep Key Stage 2 tests and, while the system is not set in stone, I believe that scrapping them would be a retrograde step and our School Report Card is the best chance we have to break away from the narrow focus on average attainment that league tables provide.

It isn't my job to tell you how to lead your schools and how to teach and inspire children.

You can't do that through a White paper, a change in the law or Ministerial diktat.

You can only do that through great school leadership.

And that's your job.

I did give it a try a few weeks ago when I taught a lesson for Teach First week.

It was an hour and a half lesson for a Year 7 class in a pretty tough school in Paddington.

I have to say, it was really hard.

I thought to myself: "what do I teach?"

It was a literacy lesson – and the theme that the pupils had been learning about was conflict.

And it was made much more complicated by the fact that there were 10 adults and 2 TV cameras in the classroom too.

I talked to them about world leaders and showed 6 pictures of world leaders.

They recognised Martin Luther King, Gandhi and the Dalai Lama.

I didn't expect them to recognise Aung San Suu Kyi.

To my surprise, they didn't recognise Bob Geldof.

I said: "Come on, you must know the Boomtown Rats".

And all one of the pupils said was: "Is he related to Peaches?"

But we talked about how peaceful protest and non-violence can drive change.

I showed them a section of the film Gandhi.

And we studied Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech and what was persuasive about it.

It was quite hard for me to keep their attention.

I realised that interaction was the key!

I also had to deal with 3 or 4 children who found it difficult to concentrate.

Although the hardest part had been taking the register at the start!

And halfway through the lesson, I split them into groups and asked them to write their own speeches about what they wanted to change in their school.

The first speech was about being on report.

The second speech was about how the sinks don't drain fast enough.

And the winner stood up and said:

"I have a vision.

I have a vision of longer lunch hours so I can spend more time with my friends.

I have a vision where teachers can spend more time preparing for lessons.

I have a vision".

There was spontaneous applause.

The pupils said they liked his speech best because it was like Martin Luther King.

And they all left the lesson smiling and laughing.

Meanwhile, I walked over the chair and collapsed into it.

I was totally and utterly exhausted.

But you and your teams do that every day, not just once but four, five or six times.

I know how hard it can be to inspire children.

I know how tiring it can be to keep control.

And I know how rewarding it can feel.

That is your job.

My job is to back you to be inspiring leaders.

It has been a pleasure working with you over the past few years.

If I'm honest, I hope we can look forward to continuing to work with you in the weeks, months and years to come.

And as I said last year, who knows, maybe even to seeing you again next year.