

General Secretary's Address to Annual Conference

Inspiring leaders: a framework for the next five years

It was difficult to know how to pitch my speech to annual conference this year. Should I pass judgement on the government's stewardship of education since 1997? Or analyse each party's proposals in the run-up to the general election? Or just re-tell the jokes in my last 12 conference speeches?

Taking on board George Bernard Shaw's comment that "*We learn from history that we learn nothing from history*", I have resisted the temptation to look back. Instead, I want to set out what I believe to be the main challenges for the next government and for ourselves, both as an association and as individual school and college leaders.

Better education

General elections provide the opportunity for a debate on what is really important in education. That is: a relevant, but not over-crowded curriculum, assessment that is fit for purpose, accountability that is intelligent, strong autonomous schools empowered to work in partnership, resources that are sufficient and equitable, high quality buildings, trust in school and college leaders, policy that is evidence-based, encouragement to the brightest and best of each generation to become teachers and the best of them to become school and college leaders.

We ask too that the election debate on education should be framed in the language of evolution, building on the undoubted successes of recent years and not denigrating all that has gone before. "Lots done, more to do" should be the message. We recognise the tension between this and the desire of politicians to demonstrate their reform credentials with shiny new policies.

All that glitters is not gold: let's resist the deceptive allure of the latest eye-catching wheezes – many of them picked up during the latest bout of policy tourism – and instead aim for sustainable, steady change that will make a lasting impact.

Pre-election ASCL conferences

This is not the first time that I have had to make this argument. Looking at my speeches to annual conference in the run-up to the last two general elections, the themes are consistent, the problems persistent; only the name of the government department changes – DfEE in 2001, DfES in 2005 and DCSF in 2010, with the possibility of another new name by the time of our 2011 conference – the Ministry of Education perhaps!

In 2001,

- I welcomed the government's description of GCSE as 'no more than a progress check' in the 14 to 19 phase.
- I bemoaned the insult of the 'bog-standard comprehensive' and the manifest fiction of 'one-size-fits-all' schools.
- I wondered whether the funding fog in Wales would ever clear (it hasn't) or whether the funding inequities in both England and Wales would be reduced (they weren't).

In 2005,

- I welcomed the new relationship with schools ...
- ... and the reports of Mike Tomlinson in England and Richard Daugherty in Wales, on both of whose recommendations we could fairly claim to have had considerable influence.
- I talked about 'good government, bad government' and gave plenty of examples of both from recent experience.

It was the 2005 conference that I followed from my sickbed through text messages from those attending. 'Kelly a disaster.' 'I am being patronised.' 'Press alleging we jeered her. We didn't.' Even in that innocent pre-Twitter age, the strength of concern was rapid and deeply felt.

Trust

But it is one of the underlying themes of the 2005 conference, which is as relevant today as it was then, to which I want to return now. That is trust. Trust in professionals. And, specifically, trust in school and college leaders. The president spoke about it on Friday.

It was the 2002 Reith lectures by Onora O'Neill that gave me the phrase 'intelligent accountability'. The lectures, entitled *A Question of Trust*, offered an analysis of the lack of trust – and thus of over-accountability – in public services.

More recently we can point to several practices or pieces of legislation that continue to demonstrate a lack of trust in school and college leaders:

- the enormous amount of statutory regulation;
- the way in which the professional judgements of teachers play such a small part in external examination grading;
- the top-down imposition of targets;
- the obsessive safeguarding culture that assumes no one can make a sensible judgement about risk.

It seems that if it's not compulsory, it's forbidden; and if it's not forbidden, it's compulsory. The use of regulation has long been in overdrive, promoting tick-box compliance, reducing flexibility and betraying lack of trust.

So the restoration of trust in school leaders is at the top of our wish list from the government that will shortly be elected.

David Puttnam will tell you how he built a pyramid of trust right down through his Oscar winning team, epitomised by giving new alarm clocks to the drivers whose job was to get the actors to the set on time. Clive Woodward created the same trust right through his World Cup winning rugby team and its support staff. Great leaders do the same in their schools, through to the cleaners and catering staff. So it should be with the secretary of state as leader of the England education team.

Remember the story of the cleaner sweeping the floor at the Houston Space Centre. President Kennedy visited the Centre and asked the cleaner "What do you do here?" She replied not "I'm sweeping the floor", but "I'm helping to put a man on the moon".

Trust us and we will pass that trust down the line to create a truly great education system and, like Puttnam's film crews, we will all have the Oscar on our cv.

Fail to trust us, over-regulate us, make us over-accountable and some of the mistrust and fear will inevitably find its way down the line to teachers and support staff, and then to the students themselves.

Instead, let the principle of subsidiarity be applied to the governance of education, with power passed to the lowest level consistent with the public good.

Intelligent accountability

In 2003 we argued publicly – and we are still arguing – for more intelligent accountability for schools and colleges. We pointed to the huge number of lines of often over-lapping accountability. We drew attention to the poor measures of school performance and to the way in which data was used. We pointed out the perverse incentives of the accountability regimes, in threshold measures such as the C/D borderline at GCSE or the disincentive to taking a broad range of qualifications in the post-16 CVA formula.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the 'pupil and parent guarantees', with redress to an expanded local government ombudsman service. And listen to how pleased the LGO is, giddy as a toddler running amok in the Early Learning Centre: *This is an important and exciting extension of our functions. We are setting up new teams to handle these complaints.* Excitement for the LGO; more accountability, more bureaucracy and more unnecessary work for school leaders.

This is one of no less than four new complaints mechanisms introduced by the government in the last couple of years – complaints to Ofsted, complaints to the LGO – and two of them announced personally by the prime minister – year 6 surveys and the latest manifestation, parents voting to get rid of school leaders. Our challenge is to over-ride this negative approach to parent/school relations and engage parents positively in the education of their children.

Unintelligent accountability is similarly evident in the grossly unfair league tables of raw results, which the July 2009 white paper described as inadequate.

The select committee stated recently that *the tables present a very narrow view of school performance and there are inherent methodological and statistical problems with the way they are constructed. There is an urgent need for the government to move away from these damaging tables towards a more rounded account of a school's provision.*

The report card may, or may not, be the answer. It is being piloted and the jury is out on whether it will be an improvement. The early signs are not encouraging. Each component of the record card will be extremely complicated – akin to the Duckworth-Lewis method of calculating who wins a one-day cricket match, but less straightforward.

Like the select committee, ASCL opposes a single grade, already dropped from the colleges' report card, *Framework for Excellence*.

But our main issue with the report card is the failure to see it in the context of the wider – and already excessive – accountability system.

Conservative party statements on accountability have paid undue reverence to the league tables, with a worrying hint that vocational studies will count for nothing.

We see little sign that a government of any colour will really get to grips with what is needed to produce the intelligent accountability that we seek.

The concept of the balanced scorecard is developing widely across the public sector, as accountability passes more into the hands of consumers of public services. So we need to work with the government on how a scorecard approach might be used to reflect better the wider role of schools and colleges – and what can be abolished if a scorecard is introduced.

Remember the ASCL mantra – one policy in, one out.

Intelligent inspection

As part of its campaign for intelligent accountability, ASCL has long argued for a quality assurance process, with school self-evaluation as the internal component and inspection as the external validation. The 2009 framework is a move in that direction, but more radical changes are needed.

Schools and colleges need to be judged in context, not just on data. Too often the inspection judgement is little more than an echo of the data, paying little heed to the context. Some feel that the judgements could have been telephoned in beforehand.

Raw results represent young people's life chances, so of course they are important, but the inspection grade should recognise the context – that it is much harder for some schools and colleges to get good raw results.

As with our policy on the report card, ASCL's Principle 3 must apply: *A good school serving a challenging area should have the same chance of a high grade as a good school serving a less difficult area.*

I set out some proposals for change in the *Times Educational Supplement* three weeks ago and I won't repeat them here, but the need for change is clear from an email I received recently from a member in an inner city school:

Despite sweating blood to build a wonderful new school, raise attainment, reduce permanent exclusions to zero, slash fixed term exclusions by a third, reduce NEET to 5 per cent, and improve attendance to above average, Ofsted could still judge attainment as inadequate because it is significantly below the national average and this will have an impact on the other judgements.

I am left feeling white hot fury ... My school is hugely challenging and my wonderful staff work themselves into the ground for our students; yet everybody is feeling that they are potentially a failure. What is the incentive for good people to work in really challenging schools where everything feels stacked against them? We need a system that does not produce such fear and demoralisation.

Well-being

Schools fully accept their wider role in the education of the child, but nowhere is accountability threatening to be less intelligent than on well-being.

We heard at the 2009 ASCL conference Carol Craig telling us convincingly how wrong is our current direction on well-being. Yet, in spite of the uncertainties around well-being, schools are to be held to account for something on which they have, at most, a partial contribution to make.

And, worst of all, the accountability on well-being threatens to be based on numerical data – the number of children taking a school lunch, the number doing 5 hours of sport a week, and so on. If a judgement is to be made on well-being, it should be made by a person not a statistic. But you can see how the demands of a school report card or Ofsted pre-inspection data drive the system towards numerical data. The cart is firmly in charge of the horse.

We need a calm debate about what can reasonably be expected of schools and how this wider role should be sensibly evaluated.

Data

Remember Gudder's comment about mathematics: *The essence of mathematics is not to make simple things complicated, but to make complicated things simple.* The same is true of data.

Data is useful only for the valid inferences that can be drawn from it. ASCL members are daily using data intelligently to shed light on almost every aspect of performance. But there are too many examples of the bad use of data. For example:

- 3 levels of progress from key stages 2 to 4 as an accountability measure. Yet this correlates so closely with attainment at 16 that it tells us little that is new.
- The national challenge launch that produced headlines wrongly implying that all schools with fewer than 30 per cent with five top GCSE passes were failing, causing reputational and actual damage to the schools.
- The *Daily Mail* article on the chief inspector's balanced 2009 report, headlining an improving school system as *A Lesson in Incompetence*.

Myths abound in parts of the media. Surveys of parents always give high marks for the work of the schools and colleges their children attend. The Ipsos Mori Issues Index shows that the proportion of people citing education as one of their main areas of concern has dropped from 45 per cent in 1997 to 12 per cent now. There are all kinds of diseases in both the reporting and government of education. There is:

- *Percentitis* – the tendency to use inappropriate statistics to judge schools, ignoring the context in which the school is working;
- *Categoritis* – the tendency to put schools into categories – “schools causing concern”, “coasting schools”, “national challenge schools”, “special measures”;
- *Academitis* – the tendency to reorganise schools in order to achieve a government target.

There must be something in this “-itis” mentality, and it’s this: *It’s The Intake Stupid.*

The recent National Equality Panel report stated that every extra £100 per month in family income put a child a month ahead in cognitive development by the age of five. Nothing could illustrate more starkly the different contexts in which ASCL members work.

Yet we are united in our determination that achievement must be increased, that 23 per cent of young people without level 2 qualifications by the age of 19 is too high and that this challenge for school and college leaders must be faced.

Bureaucracy

And, of course, accompanying all this accountability is unnecessary bureaucracy, creating work for ASCL members in colossal, and frankly unacceptable, quantities.

The Merits Committee of the House of Lords helpfully reported last year that the DCSF had issued more statutory instruments in the previous year than any other government department and the Merits Committee said that

DCSF should adopt a less heavy-handed approach to maintained schools. If the DCSF considers that a light-touch framework for academies is appropriate, that lighter touch should be extended to all maintained schools.

Since then the flow has continued. Between September 2009 and last month, there was an average of 2.5 Statutory Instruments a week affecting schools in England and Wales. The highest was eight in a single week. Only in one week was there no Statutory Instrument.

Michael Gove has promised to reduce this if the Conservatives win the election. If they do, we shall hold him to it. We don’t want Labour bureaucracy replaced by Tory red tape and new requirements.

Whatever schools and colleges have to do, somebody makes it more complicated. Just look at this so-called ‘support infrastructure’ to help schools provide extended services. All completely unnecessary.

Let’s insist that guidance has to be on one side of A4 or we won’t read it. Just think – that interminable pile of statutory guidance and regulations on your desk – reportedly 6000 pages in 2007-08 – all reduced to sheets of jargon-free A4, containing the essential information and no more. One side on anti-bullying, one side on healthy food, one side on the essentials of safeguarding, one side on the new A-level grading system, one side on personal tutoring ... all perfectly possible. Then you would have the time to write and implement the really important documents, such as your teaching and learning policy.

Politics and policies

The recent select committee report on school accountability states that *the government has continued to subject schools to a bewildering array of new initiatives and this has in many ways negated the good work started in the New Relationship with Schools.*

Education policies have been produced on an almost weekly basis for longer than the lifetime of this government. These are fired at schools and colleges like particles into the Hadron Collider. Alas, our policies are not buried under a Swiss mountain.

Licence to practise is a classic example of a policy that is a solution in search of a problem. Not everyone in the DCSF can spell it, so with luck they won’t be able to implement it either. This is policy on the hoof, jumping the first legislative fences with glee and teachers hoping that the rider will be unseated just before the parliamentary finishing line in April.

In the same Bill is the policy that every child in secondary school shall have a personal tutor. Not a bad policy, actually, except that what is really meant is personal tutoring – a role, not a post, and possibly carried out by several people – and almost all schools already do it in one way or another. But the Bill still states – guarantees, even – that every child shall have ‘a personal tutor’. And, doubtless, some parent will haul an unfortunate headteacher before the Ombudsman about it.

These issues are all the subject of discussion at the social partnership, to which ASCL has been strongly committed for the last seven years.

I wrote last year in the *TES*, and I repeat here, that, just as the Department of Health has a chief medical officer and DEFRA has a chief veterinary officer, so the DCSF needs a chief educational officer – the professional voice in the Department, a role that used to be carried out by the senior chief inspector up to 1992. Like the chief officers in other departments of state, the CEO would not only be an independent and authoritative voice *outside* the political domain, but an experienced professional voice in the policy-making process *inside* the department.

Assessment

The public would rightly look to the CEO to inform and reassure them on educational practice and standards. There is a media myth that standards are falling. But it is almost impossible to compare exams in one year with those in other years – and nonsense to suggest that they can be compared with the exams of 20 years ago. The advent of calculators and computers means that you can now get a top grade in maths or science without a slide rule or log tables. The world is changing and that must be reflected in what is taught and what is tested.

The 97 per cent pass rate at A level is something to celebrate, not criticise. Look at the lower pass rate at AS, which has remained at around 80 per cent since it started. Remember that those who fail AS or get low grades often give up the subject after one year, so that, thankfully, very few people are wasting two years of their lives by studying for, and then failing, A level. That is surely a good system.

What is worrying is to see the way in which assessment is driving the curriculum. Learning and curriculum should come first; assessment should follow. Yet – CSE apart – there has been only one brief period during the last 40 years when this has happened. That was at the start of GCSE in 1986, when the new GCSE syllabuses were planned first and the style of assessment was then chosen to be appropriate to the course. Now, assessment is so much in the driving seat that few A level classes are using books beyond those exclusively produced for that specific A level syllabus. The assessment system rewards spoon-feeding and discourages wider reading.

There are two narratives of education – a broad curriculum interwoven with *assessment for learning* is one narrative and a narrower, more instrumentalist curriculum with *assessment for accountability* is the other. Both have *assessment of learning* at the end of the course, but the former provides an immeasurably richer education.

This association has long championed the use of chartered assessors – experienced teachers accredited to carry out internal assessment to external standards – and we welcome the progress made by the CIEA, but this needs to be taken forward more urgently after the election at all key stages.

The current regime of high stakes, external testing at the end of key stage 2 certainly needs reviewing. However, ASCL believes that there needs to be a strong external component of assessment at key stage 2, alongside teacher assessment, to act as a baseline for judging secondary school progress.

Secondary schools are held to account through GCSE and A level results and, likewise, it is right that there is some form of summative assessment at 11 through which primary schools are held to account.

The Conservatives have proposed the idea of key stage 2 tests being held at the start of year 7 and marked by teachers in secondary schools. While the proposal addresses some problems with the current system, it exacerbates others. It could encourage parents to have pupils tutored over the summer; the delay in accessing results would mean teachers starting the year without an understanding of students' strengths and weaknesses and more importantly where intervention was needed; and secondary school teachers do not have the capacity to mark exams at the beginning of the year.

Curriculum and qualifications

We have welcomed greater freedom at key stage 3. Now we need some stability to develop it. The absence of the key stage 3 tests and the flexibility in the curriculum has freed secondary schools to improve the quality of education within a broad national curriculum framework. Ofsted has reported recently that, since the abolition of the tests, schools have adopted more creative approaches to learning. Yet this has not been without its challenges. All teachers under the age of 43 have spent their whole career under a centrally directed, suffocatingly detailed national curriculum. So it has been a challenge for school leaders to free up the thinking of their younger staff and encourage them to take advantage of the curriculum flexibility that characterised the earlier part of my career.

Yet most of the pressures to conform remain – examination syllabuses, accountability mechanisms, political priorities, media campaigns and parents who want their children to have the same sort of education as they had themselves, although they would be horrified if their cars or their doctors had not kept up with the times. We need the flexibility to ensure that the curriculum is responsive to the scenarios set out so clearly in Robert Hill's 2020 futures project for ASCL.

Young people spend on average 1.7 hours per day online (with one in six spending more than three hours per day online), 1.5 hours on their games consoles and 2.7 hours watching television. They live in a celebrity dominated society where success appears to come instantly and without any real effort. It is difficult for teachers to compete. Success in learning just doesn't come fast enough. Nobody under the age of 21 would subscribe to the dictum of Mae West that *anything worth doing is worth doing slowly*.

Against this background the job of the teacher is immensely harder than it was even ten years ago when the internet was in its infancy. To engage the impatient young people of generation Y, something more is needed.

The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires. William Arthur Ward

And this means ensuring not so much that young people learn more, but that they become better learners. We have to move from dependent learning to independent learning.

In the words of the OECD report *Teachers Matter*, *Teachers need to be capable of preparing students for a society and an economy in which they will be expected to be self-directed learners, able and motivated to keep learning over a lifetime.*

This is not, of course, the stuff of government documents. Last year's white paper, for example, mentioned many times 'performance', 'delivery' and 'outcomes', but rarely if ever 'creative', 'understand' or 'inspire'.

Diplomas

By contrast, the Nuffield 14-19 report set out a comprehensive vision of that phase of education – clarity in its aims, breadth in its curriculum, more active and practical learning, increased collaboration between institutions, and greater responsiveness to local communities, teachers, parents, learners and employers. The Welsh Bacalaureate has shown the way in creating a holistic qualification. The AQABAC has demonstrated that an examination board can go beyond the national template and respond to what schools want. The enthusiasm for these demonstrates the desire to accredit the skills developed alongside the formal curriculum; sometimes described, perhaps pejoratively, as “soft” skills, but in truth the skills of communication, problem solving, team working and community engagement so essential for success in the 21st century. In the independent sector, schools are good at developing those skills: Harrow School has shown that an individual school can create its own overarching certificate, the Harrow Diploma. In the maintained system, sixth form colleges are developing a similar overarching qualification.

We believe there is a way forward for England, drawing upon the Welsh experience. Key to the Welsh Bac is the requirement for 21st century skills to be taught within the main components. That is a significant step further than the “wrap-around” qualifications and has a material impact upon pedagogy.

However, we need simplification of the diploma, but retaining the truly applied nature of the course, with its different style of teaching and assessment and its emphasis on independent learning.

If parliament can pass an ASCL Act into law (which had nothing to do with this ASCL, I should emphasise), as it did in November 2009, it can certainly embrace an ASCLBAC as the overarching qualification that this country has needed for a generation.

Funding

One of our worries about the diplomas is funding. The government has invested massively in their development, but after the election it may be too easy for a new government to cut this back, failing to recognise that diplomas are expensive to offer, especially while the numbers are low. If the government believes, as we do, in the type of learning that diplomas accredit, it must continue to invest in them. You cannot have been a headteacher in the years of wretchedly poor funding from 1982 to 1998, as I was, and not have recognised the difference made by the real-terms funding increases since 1999. Year after year my school building deteriorated and departmental budgets were cut to the bone. Now there is, I hope, cross-party recognition that both revenue and capital spending on education are investment – investment in young people, investment in communities, investment for the future economic prosperity of the country. Colleges and schools create public value in their communities, but they need ongoing investment to enable them to do so.

The president described on Friday the funding reforms that ASCL seeks.

Leadership

As school and college leaders, we are optimists about what we can do for the life chances of young people. We implore politicians to use that optimism to build a great future for our young people, irrespective of race, gender or background.

Do not over-regulate us, but put in place only enough regulation to ensure that one school's success is not at the expense of another. In the 1980s and 1990s we were encouraged as school leaders to rejoice at the misfortunes of the school down the road because it would increase our intake numbers. Now, when a school nearby is in trouble, ASCL members pick up the phone and say 'How can I help?' Government must support that collegiality.

This is symptomatic of a change from the culture of competition that existed during my period of headship to the culture of collaboration and partnership that exists now in most places.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the successful support mechanisms of the London Challenge or in the National Leaders of Education and National Support Schools, which have provided lifelines to other schools struggling under difficult circumstances.

At last there has been a realisation on the part of government that schools improve schools. I hope that that is shared by all parties. The expertise lies not in the DCSF nor in County Hall nor in the private sector, but in other school leaders. Whether as NLEs or SIPs, consultant heads or executive heads, there are now hundreds of school leaders – not just heads – playing a part in the wider leadership of the system.

Indeed, the extent of partnership working means that we have reached the stage where all school and college leaders are now co-leaders of education in their area. Appointment procedures, accountability and funding mechanisms may still focus entirely on the single school, but the reality is different and it is time that these systems caught up.

We want to see the new government build on this collaborative culture. We do not want to return to bad old days of dog-eat-dog policies in the false belief that a good dose of the market will improve standards. This represents a challenge as much to ASCL members as to the government. The siren voice of isolationism may be about to seduce you away from collaboration and partnership and it will be a challenge to maintain the current impetus towards partnership working, firmly rooted in the moral purpose of improving the life chances of all young people in the area. It will be the disadvantaged who suffer if the school system splits into 20,000 autonomous units – a corner shop version of the education service and not one that this association supports.

But there are clouds on the apparently sunny uplands of school leadership – far too much central government direction, unfair accountability and the threat of being first in the queue to be a financial saving when schools federate, which counts as my least favourite government announcement of the last year. Then there is the increased vulnerability of school leaders. The number of ASCL members sacked in the past year is 163, up from 150 in 2008 and 93 in 2007.

In school and college leadership, sometimes you are the pigeon and sometimes the statue. Right now, too many ASCL members are the statues – and the pigeons have too little self-control.

One of the formative influences on my school leadership was the 1977 HMI booklet *Ten good schools*, with its emphasis on the importance of school leadership. So it was particularly good to see the Ofsted publication this year *Succeeding against the odds*, telling the stories of 12 outstanding schools in challenging communities. Again it was the quality of leadership – and the length of service of the heads in each school – that stood out as common factors.

I know most of the heads of these schools and they all demonstrate my four leadership Hs: *Hope, humanity, humility and humour*.

This hall is full of leaders of hope. Leaders with humanity. Leaders with the humility to know how hard the job is to raise the aspirations and achievements of young people. And especially leaders with humour. You know how to motivate staff and, through them, your students. You almost certainly obey the First Law of Leadership – Smile, even when you don't feel like it. And you are aware that *there is no level of enthusiasm that cannot be eliminated with sufficient discouragement from the Head*. This is an audience of radiators, with not a drain in sight.

Leadership is not just about heads and principals. There is now genuinely distributed leadership, empowering teachers to lead. Gone are the days of heads like my predecessor at Durham Johnston, whose catch phrase was said to be 'No'. Many in his day observed the two rules of headship.

Rule 1. The Head is always right.

Rule 2. If the Head is wrong, Rule 1 applies.

You know that innovation does not mean thinking up new things every week (Government ministers – please take note). The most successful innovative school leaders take ideas from elsewhere and adapt them to their own school, then implement them consistently and sustainably. That's innovation.

As John F Kennedy said: *Success is relative. The more success you have, the more relatives you find you have.*

It is a very different world of school leadership now from the time when I first joined the leadership team of a comprehensive school 36 years ago, in January 1974 when the post of 'senior teacher' was invented.

Leadership really is a journey, learning all the time, and I have worked with some wonderful people, leaders and led, who have taught me. I was fortunate to lead a great team of staff at Durham Johnston Comprehensive School and I have been especially privileged to have led the wonderful ASCL team over the last 12 years. That we now have passed the 15,000 member mark, that we have a 97 per cent satisfaction rate in our annual member survey, 98 per cent grading our courses good or excellent and 100 per cent giving ASCL consultancies top marks is testament to the strength of the team.

Conclusion

It may seem trite to say it, but it really is a privilege too to lead the ASCL membership. I am constantly in awe of what you achieve in your schools and colleges against an ever-changing background of top-down policies. You are truly an inspiration.

What I have tried to set out today is a calmer, more rational, better ordered framework of policies for the next five years that will enable you to continue to be inspiring leaders, the doubly significant motto for this conference.

A conversation with Jim McBain, ASCL's Regional Officer in Northern Ireland and for 22 years head of Omagh Academy in County Tyrone, reminded me that, as you come to the end of your time as a school or college leader, you focus more than ever on values and constantly remind yourself that they are the really important part of the job.

So it is with leading ASCL. The values of this Association have run through my bloodstream for the last 12 years, just as the values of Durham Johnston did for the previous 16. These are the things that this Association stands for, the values of respect for others, professionalism, equity, trust, fairness, a sense of justice, commitment, opportunity, interdependence, mutual support. All our policies, all our activities, all our member support are based on these values.

So, as I prepare to hand on the ASCL baton in six months' time, these values will be written through that baton like Blackpool in a stick of rock. It is because I know that Brian holds them as strongly as I do that I am so delighted that he is taking over.

And hold firm to your principles and values in these coming months, a time of great uncertainty. Our students, staff, parents and governors have never needed great school and college leaders more. They believe in you and, more importantly, they need you. Good luck to you all in the vitally important and inspiring job you do.

John Dunford
ASCL General Secretary
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