

President's Address to Annual Conference 2010

Inspiring Leaders

Introduction

This conference begins and ends with a tall chap called John. On Sunday morning our General Secretary, John Dunford, will send us home with his final conference speech and with some advice to get us through the next five years. Today, I shall be concentrating on the here and now. How it feels to be a school or college leader.

In choosing my theme for the year – *Inspiring Leaders* – I wasn't thinking principally of how to do it. I was thinking of you, of the ASCL membership, dedicated professionals with a strong moral purpose; leaders whose set of values has fairness and the importance of young people and their education at its heart. People who, by any measure, can all be said to be successful and who know and regularly acknowledge that their success has not been down just to themselves but must also be attributed to those around them in leadership.

This is your conference. We will not pass any resolutions this weekend; that is not the way we do it. But there will be plenty of opportunities to participate. I know you will not sit passively during the seminars but will question and add your own experiences in order that we help each other's learning. Schools helping schools, leaders supporting leaders – that is the ASCL way and, all credit to the government, it is becoming the preferred way. In addition to some thought-provoking and inspiring platform speakers, we have each of the three main political parties to question and to challenge. We make no apologies for the extra political sessions this year. It is right that they are there because, like it or not, education remains a political football of premiership status and, whichever way the ball bounces you, as ASCL members, will want and deserve your voices to be heard above the crowd.

It is also wonderful to be here in London, with Vancouver behind us, now only two years away from being the next host of the Olympic flame. For that reason I hope you will forgive me if the occasional sporting metaphor appears this afternoon.

The Secretary of State's Challenge

At last year's conference in Birmingham I had the pleasure of giving a vote of thanks to the Secretary of State following his speech. Mindful of our concerns about initiative overload, he had promised that he had just two priorities:

- To raise standards in all our schools and colleges
- To break the link between deprivation and attainment

It was easy to agree, on behalf of ASCL, with both of those priorities because undoubtedly they were, and still are, ours, too. Of course we all continually strive to raise standards – no school or college leader "coasts" on purpose. And whatever the social mix of our intake, we also take the greatest pleasure when students from less favoured backgrounds achieve well. I could sit down for two minutes and let you talk to your neighbour and every one of you would have such a story to tell of inspiring individual achievement in adversity.

But the Secretary of State was also set an ASCL challenge – stick to your two priorities and please don't let anything else distract us from them.

Well, we have played our part. Standards have continued to rise in secondary schools and colleges. They continue to rise at a steeper rate in schools in more challenging circumstances. The

“gap” still remains too wide but it was pleasing to see, for example, that the proportion of students from the poorest 20% of households gaining university places has, at last, begun to increase. Positive news, then, so you might expect me to report that, as I have travelled around the regions to our information conferences and branch meetings, I have been met by a sea of smiling faces; by school and college leaders happy that they had not been distracted from their two main priorities.

Not quite. One might have understood had there been a fuss over “rarely cover”, a piece of the jigsaw that is the workforce agreement, aiming to reduce the workload and improve the balance of life for teachers (something which it has patently failed to do for school leaders) because, as we all know, that agreement is also about raising standards – priority number one. But, actually, all things considered, schools are managing well the challenge of implementing “rarely cover”. No, the main memory that many will take from autumn 2009 is about the height of the perimeter fence or the accuracy of a list of names and dates.

Safeguarding... and the threat of Ofsted to enforce compliance

Safeguarding was a common concern on everyone’s minds last autumn; a perfect example of a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Particularly if you were due for inspection, and no school could really relax given the new framework, there will have been frantic activity to ensure systems were correct and adhered to by all. Stories were reaching us of administration staff bursting into tears at the thought that an error in their list might damage the outcome of an inspection. Something is seriously wrong if the thought of inspection is having that effect on such staff!

And no-one was safe; one such inaccuracy in a list even kept our own general secretary from entering a party conference!

But Ofsted is no joking matter and nor is it all bad. Many responses to the new framework indicate greater satisfaction with the process, especially the involvement of leaders in the inspection team meetings.

“Raising the bar, Ofsted style” is not so much paralleled by a high jump competition, more by a hurdles race where the athletes are running too fast so the height of the hurdles is increased to slow them down. (Athletics itself had to employ this tactic a few years ago, changing the aerodynamics of the javelin to reduce its flight as the best threatened to throw it beyond the stadium edge!) Raising the bar may have some points in its favour as a strategy but not if it adds to the pressure on schools in challenging circumstances because of the new over-emphasis on raw attainment. Such unfairness continues to anger and frustrate members the length and breadth of the country. We must continue to press on this point!

But no unfair system is going to get the better of us for long! Soon the fightback stories started to appear as, when visiting a school nearby, I was greeted by the headteacher who had recently locked her inspection team in a room, guarded by her deputy, until it could be proved they all were CRB checked. Her inspection went very well after that. To be fair to Ofsted (did I really say that?!), by the end of term they had clarified their guidance to inspectors, as they also did for the ridiculous, unattainable descriptor at the top of their behaviour standards. But what they didn’t do, and never do, was say sorry to those schools and their leaders that suffered from over zealous inspecting in the first term of a new framework.

Isn’t it about time that, however unwillingly it does it, Ofsted stops taking on the role of unofficial enforcer of compliance with every new initiative or guarantee concerning children and makes its own efficiency savings by concentrating, in schools and colleges, on the quality of the learning experience? Leave matters of compliance to a separate audit process.

Isn’t it about time there was an Ofsted framework which sees them validating the judgements schools and colleges make about themselves, having rightly encouraged all of us to adopt a rigorous, evidence-based approach to self evaluation? After all, many school and college leaders

interpret performance data far more intelligently than inspectors. Not surprising, really, as for inspectors it is just a matter of writing a report – for some leaders, it could mean their job!

A relevant and personalised curriculum

What about that learning experience, based on a curriculum able to be personalised to bring out the best in every young person? It used to be that a wonderful teacher was what mattered most, find one and there was no need to worry about what they were teaching, the class was enjoying it; leave well alone.

In the eighties it became the curriculum, “broad and balanced”, and no-one must miss out. So, work on the teaching skills where they are weak in order that all can enjoy, make progress and succeed.

Now, above all, it seems that students must follow courses that they can pass, preferably at a higher grade than statistical predictions suggest they should achieve. After fifteen years of such an approach there are now signs of the green shoots of “trust the professionals” allowing us some welcome flexibility to tweak the curriculum and not lose the ability to ensure more and more succeed. We can thank the government for those signs of trust and the pleasure our teachers will have rising to the challenge.

Diplomas

Diplomas find themselves in the middle of this debate. Whilst the number of students on the courses is low, the majority of schools are now involved in some way. From those pioneers with students approaching accreditation at the end of the first two-year diplomas there have been many encouraging noises about the enjoyment and engagement of students, particularly in the principal lines of learning. But there remain genuine concerns from colleagues who are frustrated at the current complexity of the diploma. Here is just one example of exasperation received recently from an ASCL member in the north east.

“We have found the Creative & Media course particularly exciting and motivating for our students- they actually love it!! Sadly, several of them will shine on the Principal and Additional Learning and will produce a super project but may not get the Diploma because they will struggle to achieve Functional Maths at Level 2. This is horribly unjust. There is no other qualification that requires a pass in Maths to achieve success. Ironically, some of them will pass GCSE Maths, but that will not count.

This will kill the Diploma stone dead after this summer unless someone uses their common sense. We shall certainly revert to BTEC if it is not changed. So the DCSF needs to come up with a solution for this summer!!”

Trust us when we say that we want the diplomas to succeed, but to do so their structure must be simplified.

Two days after National Maths day and, as a mathematician myself, it grieves me to say that “sums remain a problem”. On the one hand we have Imperial College suggesting that soon every offer they make for any of their courses will include an A* at advanced level in maths. Or the recent report of the Science and Learning Expert Group, in which Sir Mark Walport recommended “strengthening the mathematics content of STEM pathways, ... particularly for Chemistry and Physics A levels”. There is no denying that to hold our place with the best in scientific research and development these are good moves. But such steps are unlikely to meet the greater challenge of a substantial increase in the number of students following STEM subjects to at least level 3.

The learning journey of today's student

Try though I may, I am always unable to resist the draw of curling; the ice rink's answer to shove ha'penny. I fear this may presage a retirement playing bowls rather than golf! And it is the sweepers who really grab my attention, as they brush the ice ahead of the stone, smoothing its progress towards the target, resting when all seems well, only to return to sweeping with renewed vigour should momentum be lacking or direction need adjusting. Housework on ice!

Beware the "curling" parent, who believes that they are doing their best for their offspring by trying to ensure that all obstacles to a smooth and happy progress through life are removed and they are able to glide effortlessly to their target, often chosen by same curling parent.

Beware the "curling" teacher, and I fear that most of us, often against our better judgement, have developed to fit that bill! With an education system possessing data on its learners which is the envy of the world, and an over-elaborate testing and examination system to provide most of that data, is it any wonder that we are guilty of doing everything we can to make sure our "stones" reach their individual targets, our teams their collective ones. Find me a staffroom where there has not been heard "I worry that I am just spoon-feeding my students through A level".

But there is hope. Personal learning and thinking skills are finding a place in many a school's reshaped key stage 3 curriculum. Free-standing at level three, the extended project is being welcomed right across the sector, not so much for its grades and UCAS tariff points but for its process, adding a much-needed dimension to students' development. There must be optimism for our curriculum, if the first A* grade awarded to a student in my own sixth form was for an extended project entitled *"To what extent has the essence of cricket been compromised by the wealth of Twenty20?"*

But please, let's not "curl" these vitally important skills. Higher education and employers are crying out for creativity and imagination; for energy, enthusiasm and adaptability; for problem-solvers and team-workers. The danger is that politicians may wish to measure these outputs and, rather than give professionals the space to develop them and trust us to know when we have done so, they will be tested, examined and graded and we will all be rushing for our "sweepers" again.

The medium has always been a large part of the message with curriculum developments. Let there be no more white papers that reflect the current style, so depressingly highlighted by Warwick Mansell writing in the TES last July when he analysed the language of the white paper – Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future; Building a 21st Century School System
"... search as you might, one subject appears to be virtually non-existent, and it is the one that research shows actually matters most: that is, how a teacher can provide their pupils with a high-quality learning experience in the classroom, otherwise known as teaching"

He illustrated his point further by counting the frequency of a few of the words used in that particular white paper;

- performance/performing 121 times
- deliver 57 times
- outcomes 55 times

but, in contrast

- understand/understanding 3 times
- inspire/inspired 4 times
- library no mention
- book once

Party political ping pong

So which leadership team can feel fully confident in planning strategically during the spring of 2010? There is a general election just around the corner and education debate, promise and threat is to the fore. We might now officially be out of recession but the coming spending review will see us all having to pay for getting into this economic mess. Another new experience for young leaders, managing a shrinking budget – it's not fun.

Both the main parties promise more academies and greater individual autonomy for schools. Although we would welcome the increased autonomy, it must not come hand in hand with the poor treatment some of our members have experienced as their schools convert to academy status. Similarly, with increased autonomy comes the temptation to use it to the detriment of neighbouring institutions. That is most certainly not the ASCL way and I challenge you all to use freedoms wisely and for the common good, working collaboratively when appropriate to ensure maximum value is gained from those freedoms.

National framework, local flexibility remains very much our belief. Schools and colleges do best without undue external interference from local authorities. However, there are some areas, school places, admissions, special educational needs, transport and joining up local support services that sensibly require LA coordination and where too much freedom can spell danger and an expensive waste of public money!.

My wife and I visited Sweden for our holiday last summer. We kept our eye open for "Swedish model schools" until we met a friend, a former headteacher, who said they were ruining all that was fair in the Swedish system. "But they are promised to be the answer to breaking the gap between deprivation and attainment", said I. "Completely the opposite", replied Hakan, "it is the educated, well-off parents who take advantage of them".

So we stopped looking for Swedish model schools and instead, taking her inspiration from their log cabins, Susan designed a Swedish model hen-house on our return.

Let's hope that idea never comes home to roost!

Danger: a cut to one sector is a cut to us all

Education UK is viewed with envy from beyond our shores. But one area where we know there is still work to do is in raising the aspiration of students, not just to achieve better but to remain as learners for longer, for life ideally! So, whilst we can be grateful that, for one more year, school funding is secure, although not all of college funding, we can take no pleasure in seeing that another vital sector of Education UK, our higher education sector, is to take a cut of almost £1 billion next year. This is in a year when more young people than ever will apply and be qualified to attend university and to a sector that has 15 of the world's top 100 universities. (Finland has none, by the way!)

Applications are up massively once again, on top of a record cohort this year. In every subject but one there has been an increase, in some cases of 10% – 20%. But, if all our younger students, their parents and advisers hear is that it will be harder to reach university, many will give up the fight and often it will be those from less affluent backgrounds that fall first. It is not just the Sutton Trust that does not want this to happen! So I appeal to you all and I appeal to the universities not to overdo the publicity around this reduction in funding but to work together with us to maintain the excellent work that currently takes place between the sectors to help and inspire as many young people as possible to gain a degree. The global challenges of the 21st century will certainly need that to be the case.

By the way, as an illustration of the impact of bad publicity, guess which is the one subject where applications have dropped this year. Economics!

Efficiencies... easier said than done

In the run-up to this conference we have surveyed members to find out how they would seek to manage if there was to be a 2% reduction in their funding levels. Would more prudent spending lead to the efficiencies which we are told are possible?

We gave 15 choices and asked respondents to identify what they expected to be their top four strategies if faced with a 2% cut in funding. The most commonly chosen top four were:

- 1 Increase class size
- 2 Cut subject capitation allowances
- 3 Extend the lifetime of ICT equipment
- 4 Limit post-16 and KS4 option choices

I don't see any efficiencies there; these are cuts to frontline activities and will inevitably have a direct impact on both the key priorities of raising standards and breaking the link between deprivation and low attainment.

Again, there is hope. I am sure that a few years ago any similar survey would have seen "Cut the CPD" budget in the top four. I am pleased to say that there is now a stronger belief in the value of prioritising the training of all your staff. So let's hope that, in the next spending settlement we see in schools and colleges some of the central efficiencies already identified or hinted at and, in one example, strikingly endorsed by Ofsted in the report of the effectiveness of the national strategies:

"Too much monitoring by too many people did not always tackle weaknesses but simply continued to identify them."

What an indictment! But pleasing to see Ofsted being independent, too.

Funding

Da nobis pecuniam. In plain English that's *Give us the money.*

The funding outlook beyond the election is bleak and confused. If we are to plan budgets and staffing levels, we must have certainty.

All parties, we are told, will have to make massive cuts in public services in order to pay for the excesses of parts of the banking system. Within the Labour government, there are those advocating big cuts and those who still talk of investment. Liberal Democrats have specified areas to be cut in order to pay for education developments, but within what overall funding envelope? Conservatives talk of cuts, but will spend a lot on opening small new schools, run by parents and other groups, seemingly irrespective of the number of places required in the locality. That is an inefficient use of increasingly scarce resources.

The pressure to improve results even more and to extend opportunities will increase. Parents' aspirations have been raised without the means to meet them. The so-called 'parent guarantees' include no guarantee of adequate funding.

Yet it is at times of economic difficulty that the importance of education can most clearly be seen. A poorly qualified, unskilled workforce won't transform the country's economy.

A first class education service requires first class funding. So we must hold politicians to their aspiration that state school funding should rise to the level of funding in private schools. And we must remind them that the argument for BSF (Building Schools for the Future) remains as strong as ever. We must not see the language of replacement descend to refurbishment then to refreshment – and for those at the end of the queue, tea and biscuits if you are lucky. The early

rounds of prioritisation for the waves of BSF was not based on a condition survey, so there are still plenty of secondary schools buildings in grave need of replacing. The leaders of those schools have looked on in envy at wave 1 schools. As they wait for their turn to come, they fear that all they will get is a wave goodbye to the dream of a new building.

This is the time to remind our political masters most strongly that the state education service is for everyone. And to create additional opportunities for everyone means that the education of the most disadvantaged in our society must be especially well funded.

There are almost as many disadvantaged children in areas of relative advantage as in disadvantaged areas. But rarely does any extra funding ever gets through to provide the additional support they need.

In the mid-1990s this association called for better funding for schools and colleges serving disadvantaged communities. The present government has put very substantial funds into numerous projects aimed at challenging schools, from excellence in cities to the national challenge, but the funds have not always been well targeted. It is good that all parties are now looking at variations of a pupil premium for disadvantage.

ASCL has long campaigned for a national funding entitlement for young people, so that students in Hertfordshire, Herefordshire and Haringey are equitably funded. Post-16 funding in recent years has shown that, contrary to the cries of local authorities, a national formula can be made to work.

As the number of academies grows, so too does the case for a national formula, not least because there may be local areas where there are no community or foundation secondary schools left to provide local comparators against which to set academy funding levels.

The best opportunity to introduce a fairer national funding formula was around 2003, but the government blew its chance by trying to make too many separate changes at once without modelling what would happen at the level of the individual school. At a time of tighter funding, it won't be as easy to move to a national funding entitlement and a pupil premium, but it remains just as important to do so, but the phasing in period will have to be longer. If you never start on a journey, you will never reach your destination, so start soon.

Efficiencies yes, we must all play our part but we call on government to preserve a real terms increase for the coming 3-year spending round if schools and colleges and universities are to maintain all that is expected of them.

Conclusion

It has been, and I'm sure, will continue to be a great year to be your president; to be helping to lead our association through, as they say, interesting times.

Leadership is often the most fun (and the most challenging) in times of change:

for ASCL – a general secretary
for the country – a general election

In offering just one piece of advice to government seeking to inspire school and college leaders during the coming year, it would be this. We have the skills, you have provided the resources and there are plenty of opportunities for leadership, innovative or otherwise, so please trust us to deliver the outcomes that together we seek.

- Trust us, the professionals, to make decisions on professional matters
- Trust us, the professionals, to strive for continuous improvement and to recognise genuine improvement when we see it
- Trust us, the professionals, to work together for the common good of our wider communities

Friends and colleagues at the frontline, you are doing a great job for our young people, a great job for our country's future. Long may you enjoy it.

...and finally, for those of you who have nothing better to do than read speeches, you may discover that there are four words which do not feature at all in this one.

- Outstanding
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Inadequate

Thank you.

John Morgan
ASCL President
March 2010