

General Secretary's Address to Annual Conference, March 2008

A new alignment for secondary schools and colleges

I have put some literary allusions into my speech this year. That means that you can count the next 45 mins towards your 5 hour quota of culture for this week.

The Association

The Association has had another good year. In spite of the fall in the number of secondary schools and colleges and the re-structuring of leadership teams, our membership continues to grow.

- We have this year produced a major book on collaboration and partnership, which will be influential both on government policy and on the practice of our members.
- We have published a major policy statement on the future of inspection, which sets out our view of the future ground for Ofsted.
- The evidence we gave to ministers in the run-up to the Children's Plan was firmly rooted in the values of our members and their schools and colleges, and we gave specific evidence on the future role of the school.
- ASCL's long held views on 14 to 19 reform were influential in broadening the diploma programme into science, humanities and languages.
- On assessment, our evidence to the Select Committee repeated what we have been saying for many years and was supported by many other organizations, including the GTCE. Surely the government will have to listen.

It has listened to ASCL on a wide range of other issues during the year. As Alan Johnson said to Annual Conference last year, "ASCL brings the perspective of school and college leaders deep into the heart of Whitehall. If you have questioned the wisdom of some government initiatives, you should have seen the ones that ASCL successfully scuppered or amended before they emerged from Sanctuary Buildings." And this year we played a big part in:

- stopping the crude 5 per cent clawback on all school budgets;
- stopping School Councils becoming statutory;
- stopping SENCOs having to be on school leadership teams;
- stopping three reports a year becoming a new statutory obligation on schools, in favour of the much better real time reporting;

But we refused to join the chorus wanting KS3 reforms to be postponed and thus helped to ensure implementation of arguably the best curriculum reform of the last 20 years (the other contenders for this accolade being hard to find!).

To ensure that ASCL remains among the most influential of organizations in education, we have this year appointed for the first time a parliamentary specialist, and already Anna Cole has been active in campaigning for changes in the education bills now going through parliament.

The association sets great store by its communications, both with our own members and with the outside world. Our media presence is considerable and our communications with members through our publications, and especially the weekly email newsletter, are the envy of many other similar organizations. We shall see further developments shortly with the enhancement of the website and more direct interaction with members who, in our annual survey, again gave us a 95 per cent satisfaction rating. (That is not, by the way, 'satisfactory' according to the Ofsted definition.)

The Children's Plan

We support the thrust of the Children's Plan. How could we do otherwise when its aim is 'to make this the best place in the world for our children to grow up'?

While I do not go in for nostalgia, I should point out that, according to research, 1976 was the happiest year ever in Britain. I might also note (but without any comment on cause and effect) that, in 1976, central government had practically no role in education.

Now, it seems that the height of happiness for many people, both adults and children, is to go shopping on a bank holiday. Perhaps that is why international surveys suggest that children in this country are among the unhappiest in the world. Or perhaps it is because of the stress and pressure caused by the high stakes nature of their testing regime.

The president has rightly raised questions about the basis on which international tests place British children so low in world rankings. We're not convinced by the Eurovision approach to something as important as children's progress; or maybe we're just bad losers. Whatever our place in the international hierarchy of educational achievement, one fact stands out repeatedly. That is the gap between children from advantaged families and the disadvantaged.

Comparisons with Finland show British performance in a bad light. What is overlooked is that Finland is a small country, with a homogeneous society, a unified school system, a strong philosophy of inclusion, early intervention for potential drop-outs, greater responsibility placed on families especially through the later start at primary school, excellent language learning, clear paths from qualifications to work and a higher staying-on rate. (I started, so I'm Finnish.) And the driver for this has been education, supported closely by other public services. So, when our performance is compared unfavourably with that of schools in Finland, let us not forget the contextual factors.

As the 19th century Lancashire HMI, William Kennedy, said in his annual report for 1869-70:

Give us better homes, better dwellings, better streets, better habits, and better food, and then we should have better schools everywhere. It is false to blame the school for not being good when the sole fault lies in the social condition of the people.

When public trust in politicians is about the same as estate agents and trust in school leaders is so high, it is perhaps hardly surprising that politicians have acted as if schools can solve all the problems of society. That they can de-stratify this most unequal of Western societies. They can't – and Ed Balls has recognized in the Children's Plan that we can only begin to deliver on his expectations if the other services play their part.

The Headspace survey provides evidence of our strong perception that many Children's Services Departments are not yet delivering. The loss of education expertise at the top level of many local authorities and the corporate way in which CSDs are now operating mean that the quality of services to secondary schools has markedly deteriorated. Secondary schools can – and do – deliver the education service largely without them. But to deliver the wider children's service and to ensure the joined-up approach that is at the core of the Children's Plan require local authorities to get their act together – and quickly.

Although it is the responsibility of local authorities to produce a strategy for joined-up working, it is the secondary schools that are at the centre of the multi-agency leadership of the service, as Steve Munby of the NCSL has led the way in pointing out.

The media have a part to play too. Schools and wider children's services do their work in a social context that is often as unhelpful as it can be. News has too often become a form of entertainment, audiences are defrauded in the name of participation, the cult of celebrity is promoted in a base and distasteful way, and social advancement is presented as something best gained through the purchase of a lottery ticket rather than hard work. And Grange Hill has been abolished.

Never have the values of school been more important in children's lives. Never has the job of school leaders in articulating those values, day by day, week by week, been so important, as the president pointed out on Friday. For many children, school and its values, its clear boundaries and moral framework, are the only solid bedrock in their lives.

The Children's Plan has much to say about parents as 'partners in learning' with some specific proposals and some ambitious aims. Schools have an obligation to communicate well with parents and consult them, but ministers should not micro-manage schools by telling us how to do it. The parental agenda should not be about parents' councils (certainly not statutory councils), but about working with parents as co-educators. Schools

can't and shouldn't replace the role of parents. It's perhaps a sad indictment on the present age that we accept the need to help parents to play their part – to rediscover what being a parent means.

Of course it's essential that schools give parents high quality information about their children's progress. Real time reporting is a legitimate goal which will, I believe, do more than anything to bring school-parent communications to a new level. But Becta and the government must provide schools with the IT capacity to produce these reports without additional workload on staff and school leaders ... and with the government's record on major IT projects, it may take some time to put in place a fully reliable system.

A new alignment

And so we have in 2008 a new situation. Central government with high aspirations for the future of young people; local government seriously weakened but essential if the wider children's agenda is to be delivered successfully; and school and college leaders high in public esteem, increasingly strong in performance and developing new systems of communication with students and parents.

It is, I sense, time to bring the supply and demand sides of education into a new alignment – *strong autonomous schools and colleges, empowered to collaborate, held to account intelligently and involving more strongly their main stakeholders, the students and their parents.*

It is this new alignment that forms the main theme of my speech today.

Policy implementation

One of the features of the Children's Plan is that it builds on success after many years of talking up failure. The big omission in the Plan was any sense of priorities, any kind of an implementation plan, and I am pleased that the government has responded to my plea for this by promising an implementation plan shortly. The mis-fired announcement about 5 hours of culture showed how much we need such a plan.

So far ministers have avoided the temptation to stray beyond the ample agenda of the Plan into initiatives. But the announcement count, as evidenced by the number of press releases issued by the DCSF, is growing – so we are watching the situation carefully. Fortunately they have reached nowhere near the peak of activity during the Blunkett era.

Year	Number of press releases	Secretary of State
1998	598	David Blunkett
1999	605	David Blunkett
2000	605	David Blunkett
2001	429	David Blunkett, Estelle Morris
2002	246	Estelle Morris
2003	262	Estelle Morris, Charles Clarke
2004	234	Charles Clarke
2005	161	Ruth Kelly
2006	192	Ruth Kelly, Alan Johnson
2007	242	Alan Johnson, Ed Balls (DCSF)
	56	John Denham (DIUS)

Top marks for Ruth Kelly. That took some saying, especially in Brighton!

At the Labour party conference last September I attended a fringe meeting on a question on which ASCL has some long-held well-informed views: *'Top-down versus front line. Who should run our public services?'* – a critical question in the context of the new alignment I am proposing.

There are, said the Culture (then Treasury) minister, Andy Burnham, limits to top-down reform and centrally set targets. These create a climate in which there is no ownership of policy at local level and a divide between front-line staff and politicians. Ministers, he said, need to set big goals and then let staff at the front line set bottom-up targets, to which they will then be firmly committed.

A successful example of this would be: Ministers say that they want more personalized services; we make personalized learning a reality. As is happening, thanks to the work of ASCL and SSAT.

At the same meeting, Professor Anthony Giddens took this further, calling for a new contract between professionals and consumers.

The days when consultants swept magisterially round the wards, spreading fear among staff and patients alike, are gone, Giddens said. No longer should the doctor-patient relationship be encapsulated by the story of the consultant at the bedside who said *'The patient is dead.'* *'No, I'm not,'* said the patient. *'Be quiet,'* said the nurse, *'Doctor knows best.'*

Robert Hill has taken this argument further, calling for more school leader involvement in policy making, but pointing to the other side of that coin. If we want more influence over government policy, more devolution to the front line and bottom-up targets, we have to be as responsive to students and parents as we want the government to be to school and college leaders.

In our espousal of school councils and student voice, our surveys of parent and student opinion for self-evaluation, our willingness to move to real-time reporting, and much more, secondary school and college leaders have shown how they have moved from the high-sided bunkers in which many of our predecessors worked to modern leadership that is sensitive to the needs and views of our stakeholders. Many schools and colleges are already doing excellent work in this field. More will need to step up their game to meet the increased expectations in this area.

But we cannot do everything at once. As change agents themselves, ASCL members cannot be accused of resisting change. But we do resent too much change, too quickly, with no time for proper evaluation and no time for reflection. Like Edward Bear, who went bump, bump, bump downstairs and said that there must be a better way, if only he had time to think of it, school and college leaders need time for reflection.

Funding

One area where we want change is the funding system, which remains incoherent and unfair.

Too many of that long list of DCSF press releases use up funding which ought to be in core front line budgets. Too little of that funding reaches schools and colleges.

The review of the funding formula currently being undertaken by the DCSF must be prepared to investigate the uncomfortable areas, to think the previously unthinkable. What do we mean by a basic entitlement? What is the basic level of educational provision that we can afford? What are the additional educational needs that can be addressed by additional funding? And – the central long-term question in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – why cannot secondary schools and colleges be funded directly, with no more than a small funding agency between central government and the front line, and the facility for local top-up?

All student deprivation and achievement data is now available by postcode and held nationally. The unfairness of funding similar students differently, simply because they happen to live in different local authority areas, could be ended.

A start must be made on 14 to 19 funding. We are moving towards a more coherent curriculum and universal participation from 14 to 19. Now we need a more coherent funding system 14-19. The diplomas have highlighted the different levels of funding available for 14 year olds in 150 different local authorities. These differences are neither educationally sensible nor socially just.

Yes, change will bring winners and losers, but this association has always argued for fairness and transparency and, where there is to be change, a sufficiently long transition period.

All of this will be much easier on a rising tide of funding. The prime minister has promised that *step by step we will raise investment in state school pupils to today's level for private schools - £8000 per pupil per year.*

We shall hold him to that promise – on a realistic timescale.

Diplomas

In 1990, I was chair of SHA education committee and campaigning for a unified, coherent system of 14 to 19 qualifications. At the same time a young researcher at IPPR wrote that:

A divided education system cannot meet the demands of social justice or economic necessity. Education and training are not polar opposites, but different types of learning that merge into

each other. The essence of an educational foundation for life is that it combines intellectual and practical study.

In 2008, that youthful commentator is now a more seasoned Foreign Secretary and our education committee is still campaigning for a coherent, unified system of post-14 qualifications.

This time last year I said that there were four ways in which the success of the diplomas could be assured: selector universities recognizing the diplomas; independent schools offering them; a clear path from diploma to work; and GCSEs and A levels brought into the diploma system.

The government has increased the chance of the first two points, and to a certain extent the fourth, with its three new diplomas. We supported them in that. But it should have gone further and brought GCSEs and A levels into the centre of the diploma system by creating a general diploma, with main courses, functional skills and an extended project under the diploma umbrella and in the same structure as the other 14 diplomas.

International evidence supports our case. Countries like Sweden and Korea, with successful vocational systems, which we should be aiming to emulate, have a single qualifications system combining academic and vocational strands. Scotland and Wales are heading in this direction. England must follow, eradicating from our culture the long-standing and totally unhelpful distinction between vocational and academic.

There is huge uncertainty among ASCL members as to whether, even in partnerships, they can deliver 17 diplomas, each at three levels – that's 51 different courses – plus a wide range of GCSEs, perhaps some NVQs and a good choice of A levels.

The secretary of state has said that it will be for the market to decide whether A levels survive. But markets, as we know, are callous beasts, favouring the strong and finishing off the weak. They can display a ruthlessness which isn't always in the best interest of new ideas being nurtured and then given their own legs. Gradually, over the next year or two, I believe that ministers will come to recognise that this is a high-wire strategy. You can't put the future of children on a high wire and hope that some don't fall off.

We support the diplomas and want them to succeed, but there are important steps that need to be taken to ensure this success:

- *Level 1 diplomas must be sufficiently practical.*
- *Level 1 and level 2 must be able to be co-taught, at least in the first half.* It will be very difficult to resource if they can't.
- *The diploma structure must be simplified.* There needs to be some commonality between courses in order to avoid premature specialization.
- *The diplomas must foster good learning styles.* With the greatest of respect to many of the diploma designers, many of them know as much about modern learning styles as I know about producing widgets. So teachers should be more involved in the design of the diplomas.
- *Schools and colleges must be adequately funded to deliver the diplomas, especially in the early years when only a small number may be opting for them.*
- *Logistical difficulties must be taken into account* – transport and timetabling. Not much chance of any school in a diploma partnership fulfilling the government's aim of becoming carbon neutral. And many are concerned about the knock-on effect on the timetable for 11 to 14 year olds.
- *We need high quality information* to enable us to market the qualification to young people and their parents.
- *There must be greater clarity about what each diploma leads to* – the path from qualification to work.
- *The priority that we shall have to give to timetabling and resourcing the diploma must not reduce the room for innovation elsewhere in the school or college.*
- *The accountability structure must be changed to promote partnership working.*

ASCL is in favour of the diploma concept. We believe that the three new diplomas – science, humanities and languages – are an important step towards the kind of coherent, unified system that we seek. It is from this stance that we call on the secretary of state to take the next step and create a general diploma as an umbrella for all qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 3. Unless the diploma is the only game in town, there is a real possibility that the words of Alan Johnson at this conference last year will come to fruition – “it could all go horribly wrong”.

The letter I received recently from Ed Balls is helpful in acknowledging our concerns and we look forward to working with him in the future to make the diplomas work – for schools and colleges, for universities and employers, but most of all for the young people themselves.

Curriculum changes

The introduction of the diploma is a big enough job for schools and colleges. But, at the same time, GCSEs are changing, A levels are changing and there is a revolution at key stage 3. Only the sacred cows – the national tests and the league tables – are not being sacrificed.

Few reforms have been as popular with school leaders as those at key stage 3, with the long overdue slimming of the curriculum and flexibility appearing for the first time in 20 years in what we teach 11 to 14 year olds. Space for more breadth, if that's what a school wants, or more depth, a more local slant on the curriculum, stronger links between subjects, more time to use properly assessment for learning – the opportunity to personalize the learning experience in whatever way the school thinks best.

But the ink hadn't dried on the announcement before ministers were beginning to fill the available space – more time for catch up and stretch (which is actually individualized, not personalized, learning), more time for sport, action to develop community cohesion, and then, as was entirely predictable, the very first time that a major social issue cropped up – which happened to be obesity – more compulsion – compulsory cooking to fill some of the recently vacated key stage 3 time. If the curriculum sometimes feels like the Grand National, then the government fell at the first fence. And that was before five hours culture a week – their Becher's Brook moment.

Assessment

This has been the year when the skids have really been put under our assessment system; when the volume of the chorus, of which ASCL was one of the founder members, saying that our assessment system is damaging and unsustainable, has grown from a few voices to what is surely an irresistible force. Everyone who gave evidence to the Select Committee inquiry into assessment – except the government – stated that the system is not fit for purpose; indeed, that it is no longer clear what the purpose is.

Influential voices such as Sir Peter Williams, chair of the latest government inquiry into maths teaching, and chair of ACME (Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education), which told the Select Committee:

Continual testing and practice for tests has resulted in a narrow and impoverished maths curriculum.

An Ofsted report on poetry in schools said much the same about the teaching of poetry.

Good teachers try very hard not to let testing get in the way of learning, but in a world where *assessment for accountability takes precedence over assessment for learning*, that is not easy.

This association has some well-known concerns about the latest development in assessment – the single level tests. While we support the principle of single level tests and of genuinely when-ready testing, we are concerned that testing for accountability will lead to far too many tests and we have registered our strongest reservations about the way in which the results of the single level tests are to be used – indeed, are already being used – for targets and accountability.

Two levels progress may be a reasonable target for children at key stage 2, which is four years long, and for bright children at key stage 3, as the evidence suggests. They might even be a good aspirational target. But as an accountability target, they will create a perverse incentive to concentrate on the bright, not support the weak, who may be miles away from two levels progress by 14. And they will provide a clear own goal for the government as the headlines scream *'70 per cent fail to meet government maths target at age 14'*.

Can I be heretical for a moment and ask *'who actually cares about key stage 3 results?'* apart from the people who compile them and weak Ofsted inspectors who aren't looking beneath the statistics at the real achievements of the school.

Or, if we move to a genuine 14 to 19 phase in education, perhaps assessment at 14 will be made more meaningful and then *who will want a big external national exam at 16?*

What is certain is that we don't need a high cost, high accountability, low recognition system at both 14 and 16, either now or in the future.

Fortunately the pilot of the single level tests has been extended to 2011, so there is plenty of time to sort out the very considerable technical problems that inevitably have occurred and to ensure that a more sensible measure of progress than the simplistic 'two levels' is introduced.

By 2011, we shall have the technology to have downloadable when-ready tests and then, at last, our external assessment system can take its proper place as a supportive adjunct to teaching. But let's not forget that assessment is about more than tests.

Better still, the ASCL proposal for chartered assessors will by 2011 hopefully be well on the way to being the normal method of assessment for the diplomas and will trickle down from there into key stage 3.

Intelligent accountability

The number of pupils making 'two levels progress' has been added to the existing range of accountability measures. As I said last year, this measure is completely unacceptable. With its new perverse incentives, it represents neither intelligent accountability nor a necessary stimulus.

In January I was asked to write an article for the *Independent* newspaper supplement on league tables. By chance, I found that I had written an article on the same topic for the same newspaper in the same month six years earlier. In the meantime, Wales has abolished league tables and seems none the worse for it. Their world hasn't crumbled, and the songs in the valleys perhaps even sound a little sweeter to English ears. Meanwhile, England has added columns for science, MFL take-up soon, and levels 7/8 in KS3 tables.

We may have an ally in Ed Balls who answered criticism about England slipping down the OECD charts for reading and maths by saying that '*League tables can be very misleading*'. Who are we to argue?

There are lies, damn lies and statistics – and league tables come into all three categories.

When the government is encouraging schools and colleges to work together in partnership, league tables are a toxic influence from the era of market-based policy making.

But it is absolutely right that information on exam results should be made public. Surely the web is the best place for this, with a facility for students and parents to interrogate and extract the information they need. The information should also be in all school prospectuses in a standard format.

CVA (Contextual Value Added) has been a contribution to intelligent accountability, but not in the way that the statistics are used. They should always come with a health warning: *The misuse of CVA can seriously distort the performance of your school*. As Bristol University researchers have recently pointed out, it is simply not true that a school with a score of 1003 is better than a school with 997 and CVA should not be used in ways that suggest that it is. All that can be stated with certainty is that both schools are performing around the average. If the confidence intervals are included, as they should be, 48 per cent of English secondary schools are not significantly different from the average. 26 per cent are significantly better and 26 per cent significantly worse. Any ranking exercise based on CVA is false, except to indicate that some schools have significantly positive performance, some significantly negative and about half around the expected level. That is intelligent accountability.

But raw results are worse. There are 638 schools below the government's ever increasing floor target, now 30 per cent, and these schools are especially under the cosh. When CVA has been adopted as a sophisticated accountability measure, why does the government persist in using raw results to define the schools most in need of improvement? The 250 schools whose names are rolling down the screen behind me all have results under 30 per cent, but CVA over 1000, which makes their performance above average. Many more have 1000 well within their confidence interval.

The Chinese have found a great way to add value that could perhaps be adopted cheaply and without additional leadership time – the added value machine. [Slide of VA machine, from the Shenzhen subway]

... a thought which brings me to Ofsted, on which ASCL produced a policy paper on the future of inspection in November. We propose that the best 25 per cent or so of schools should have no more than a paper check on their performance. Ofsted has something similar in mind. So far, so good. But Ofsted is alas suggesting that it might visit schools graded Satisfactory once a year.

Now I know that this may be a far cry from the evocative, but chilling, account of school inspection in the recently televised *Lark Rise to Candleford*. Her Majesty's Inspector came once a year and

hearts might be heard thumping when at last came the sound of the wheels crunching on gravel and two top hats and the top of a whip appeared outside the upper panes of the large end window. Her Majesty's Inspector was an elderly clergyman, a little man with an immense paunch and tiny grey eyes like gimlets. He had a reputation for being 'strict', but that was a mild way of describing his autocratic demeanour and scathing judgement. ... He may have been a great scholar, a good priest and a good friend to people of his own class. One thing is certain. He did not care for, or understand, children.

But at least he hadn't got a CVA score to misinterpret!

In *Lark Rise* they knew when the inspector was coming, so that they could round up the children and make sure that they were in school. Ofsted, we are told, is considering doing inspections with no notice at all – a horrible surprise, a bit like a birthday Gorillagram with a clipboard. Two or three days' notice is the minimum necessary to ensure that the school can assemble its case. Without those few days, heads will be on constant alert, file on desk ready for the crunch on the gravel and the knock on the door (they do still knock, don't they?), and stress levels will escalate.

One of the stated aims of the 2005 inspection framework was to integrate external inspection with internal self-evaluation, as ASCL had proposed over many years. This has been done and the inspection process is much better for it. But it is still an unnecessarily confrontational experience for some schools and colleges. ASCL wants to see inspection, self-review and the single conversation as part of a quality assurance system that is a shared professional dialogue with the leaders of the school or college.

One of the aspects highlighted in the ASCL paper is the judgement on leadership. The basis for this should be changed to take into account the journey that the school or college has made under its current leadership and not only the particular circumstances at the time of the inspection.

Research carried out by ASCL has demonstrated that it is much easier to obtain an 'Outstanding' grade for leadership if a school serves a favoured socio-economic area. In our analysis of reports where 'Outstanding' judgements were recorded for leadership in 2005-06, 81 per cent were in schools where the socio-economic circumstances were advantaged.

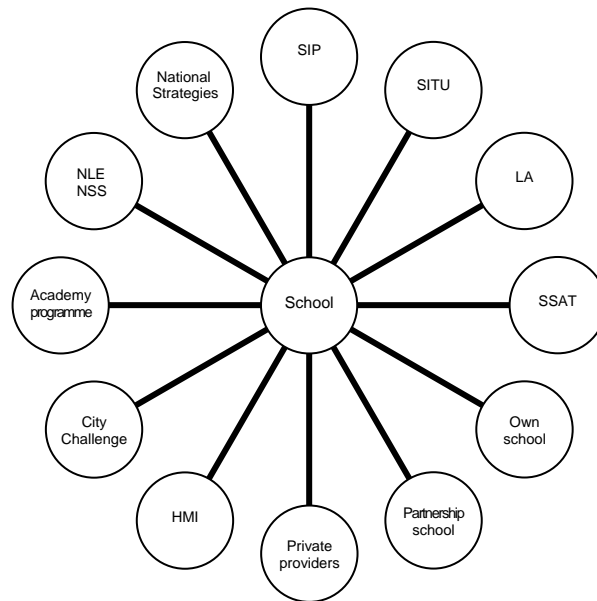
I know from my own past research that it was ever thus with HMI and Ofsted, which have too often failed to give due credit to leaders of schools and colleges in challenging socio-economic circumstances. This must be addressed – and urgently – before more of our members in these schools and colleges are demotivated and seek leafier pastures in which to be judged.

More than one commentator has referred to this kind of negative impact on people who might otherwise apply for headships as part of the collateral damage of educational reform.

Support for schools

Perhaps the most lethal missile causing this collateral damage is the way in which pressure and support are out of balance. There is pressure aplenty and it is clear where it comes from – Ofsted, league tables, accountability, etc – all targeted at the school or college and its leadership.

But we need a more strategic approach to support for schools in difficulty. There are far too many players in this game, from the school improvement partner to the local authority to the National Strategies. School support has become contested territory.



There is no single place in which these arrangements are set out clearly and ASCL members whose schools are in need of support find the situation deeply confusing, as they come under pressure from several agencies at the same time. I have written in the March edition of *Leader*, published this week, about this support jungle and a copy of the article is appended to the printed copy of this speech, so I won't repeat it all here.

The system needs to focus on the long-term health of the school, instead of a quick fix. The principles for a new, more strategic, approach are clear and are set out in *Achieving more together*.

The starting point should be the school itself and its self-evaluation process, as summarised in the SEF.

The conclusion of *Achieving more together* is that partnership working improves inputs, outputs and outcomes and ASCL is in no doubt that the centre of the school support strategy should be partnership working. Partnership raises expectations and shows how things can be done differently.

The local authority must commission, not provide, the support arrangement and should always delegate its school improvement funding to the partnership leaders. National Strategies should delegate its funding to partnerships in the same way.

The partnership can then use these resources to bring in support from advanced skills teachers, temporary additional staff, consultants or whoever is most suited to help.

Collaboration and partnership

Instead of academies and trust schools being seen, as they have been by some people, only as forms of greater independence for secondary schools, they are now becoming part of the partnership structure, joining the local family of schools.

This association sets an example of partnership working. ASCL is a committed member of the social partnership, delivering successful workforce reform and a lot more with our partner unions, the government and local authorities. We are partners with a range of commercial companies that bring benefits to our members and support us in our research work. With SSAT we continue to carry out significant research and dissemination. We work closely too with NCSL, HAS (soon to be re-named School Leaders Scotland), HMC, GSA, the National Governors' Association, the Association of Colleges, the Sixth Form Colleges Forum and the GTC – all valued partners in helping us to stay at the forefront of the education reform agenda.

We have been strongly championing the partnership agenda and it is good to see that, through many different types of partnership, successful schools are supporting schools in difficulties and thus raising standards for all. *Achieving more together* will act as a catalyst for further collaboration, a menu for those partnerships to be successful and a checklist for the government to put in place the policies in which partnership working can thrive.

That is the best way forward for the school and college system.

Leadership

And it is the way forward for school and college leadership, not only leading our own institutions, but being co-leaders of the education service in the area. As Ben Page told ASCL conference last year, we are the success story of the past decade.

Why? Because we do what successful leaders do – communicate well, establish and maintain a clear ethos rooted in values, listen to our stakeholders, focus on what matters most, raise aspirations, distribute leadership, invest in people, and smile. And the best of us are courageous and take risks, remembering the dictum: *It is better to plead forgiveness than ask permission.*

So much better than the usual American management approach, as described by Winston Churchill:

The US always does the right thing, after exhausting all the other options.

Leadership is the *sine qua non* of school improvement. As Professor Ken Leithwood puts it:

As far as we are aware, there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning round its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership.

As well as the optimism that we have to show in our leadership if we are to inspire others to achieve great things, we have to remove bad practice, being prepared to deal with under-performance, in our own school and in our collaboratives, preferably before the complaints come rolling in, and very speedily if they do. It means demanding of our partners in other institutions the same high standards as we try to uphold with our own staff and students.

And, in spite of all the social difficulties I outlined earlier, we have to address the biggest challenge of all – closing the attainment gap. This is a task that can only be done by schools, and schools and colleges, working in partnership, supported by well coordinated local services. It is a mammoth leadership task, for which there is no magic solution, only hard graft and the exercise of the very best leadership.

Conclusion

I have tried to set out the scenario for the future in which we can achieve progress on narrowing the gap, supporting schools in difficulties, and on our other challenges. The future is here already in many places:

Strong autonomous schools and colleges, empowered to collaborate, held to account intelligently and involving more strongly their main stakeholders, the students and their parents.

Just as we demand less top-down prescription from the government and more bottom-up targets set by the institution, and policies more conducive to collaboration than competition, so we are rising to the challenge of being more responsive and drawing students and parents more into the target-setting and policy-making process at institution and partnership level.

Many schools and colleges are well on the way to doing these things already and I am confident that we have reached the point where we can demand of the government the policies that will help us to lead strong, autonomous institutions, empowered to collaborate.

We support the Children's Plan because it goes with the grain of what we came into school and college leadership to achieve, but the Plan needs to be backed by a realistic and manageable reform programme. It is the members of this association through which much of the Plan will be implemented and led. That places an immense responsibility on school and college leaders, but it is one that we accept – provided that we are freed from some of the regulatory constraints under which we work and which reduce our flexibility and frustrate our creativity.

Every one of us wants to invent a better future for young people and to lead the way in creating it.

General Secretary's article published in *Leader*, March 2008

We need a better support strategy for schools

An ASCL member used his private email to tell me about the 'support' his school is receiving. It was too risky, he thought, to use his work email. The school is under an Ofsted Notice to Improve, which imposes one set of issues to address, and also under SITU, the School Improvement and Targets Unit of the DCSF, which creates an entirely different set of targets and, incidentally, takes no account of other government policies, such as inclusion and *Every Child Matters*. Under SITU it is not every child that matters; it is the SITU targets that matter. The head reports that his key middle managers are wilting under the pressure and looking for easier jobs. He himself is answering to five different people – SITU, the school improvement partner (SIP), the local authority, Ofsted and the governors. This is typical of the situation that the system imposes on schools in need of improvement.

Another member wrote to tell me that her school had a 'Satisfactory' Ofsted report with 'Good' capacity to improve. But the local authority (LA) has put the school on its 'Causing Concern' list and is pushing the school into failure with its aggressive and unsupportive approach. Significantly, perhaps, in this LA the highest level experience of secondary leadership among LA staff is as head of department.

Support for schools in difficulty is a muddle, with no overall support strategy and a particularly confusing picture for the staff of the school being 'supported'.

I have been saying for at least three years that the DCSF needs to develop a clearer, more strategic approach to support for schools in difficulty. No action has been taken by the Department, so I shall present a paper to them at the next meeting of the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) consultative group and try to set the ball rolling.

Support for schools in difficulty currently occurs in the following ways, from:

1. the school improvement partner, whose role is 'support and challenge';
2. the local authority, which has statutory responsibility for the quality of education in its schools, under the terms of *Guidance on schools causing concern*, which arose from the Education and Inspections Act 2006;
3. National Strategies, which employs staff to work with schools causing concern;
4. the School Improvement and Targets Unit (SITU) of the DCSF;
5. City Challenge in London, Manchester and the Black Country;
6. National Leaders of Education (NLE) and their National Support Schools (NSS), brokered by the NCSL;
7. twinning schools under the academy programme;
8. HMI, when the school is in special measures;
9. the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), through the Raising Achievement Transforming Learning (RATL) project, for example;
10. private providers.

Schools requiring support in specific areas may also look to their own resources or those of other schools in their partnership(s).

School support has become contested territory and there is no single place in which all these arrangements are set out clearly.

It is apparent from the emails I receive from members in receipt of 'support', such as the two quoted above, that school support is a very top-down process, in which various things are 'done to' the school.

However, a focus on the long-term health of the school, instead of a quick fix, would indicate a different approach. The principles for this are clear and are given in the ASCL book, *Achieving more together* by Robert Hill (2008).

The starting point should be the school itself and its self-evaluation process, as summarised in the SEF. This should identify the school's strengths and weaknesses and be the basis for the head's conversation with the SIP. If they agree that certain areas of the school need external help, the head and the SIP need a clear map of where to go for support.

The first place to seek support may be the school itself. If, say, the science department is under-performing, does the school have a leader – a member of the senior leadership team or the head of another department – who can work with the head of science?

More likely, the school will want to go outside for help and benefit from an external stimulus, so the next place to look is the local family of schools. If there is a healthy local

partnership between schools, heads can broker these arrangements themselves, using resources that should be brought to the partnership by the local authority.

If adequate support cannot be found in the school itself or in other schools with which it is in partnership, the head and the SIP must look elsewhere. For this to happen efficiently, there needs to be a clear map of available support, which can be brokered by an effective LA acting in its role as commissioner of services to schools.

Part of the muddle occurs when local authorities seek to provide this support from their own staff instead of commissioning the best people from elsewhere.

Where the school's problems are more serious, the course of action is set out in *Guidance on schools causing concern*. Yet this does not give the whole picture and is already out of date.

If a school is in special measures, the LA approaches the NCSL in order to find the most appropriate national leader of education (NLE) and national support school (NSS). The LA works with the NCSL to commission the required support. This is proving to be a particularly effective scheme, mainly for schools in special measures. It is not clear how the recently announced twinning arrangement under the academies programme, which is almost identical to the NLE/NSS scheme, is related to it.

The NCSL's London Leadership Strategy – part of the London Challenge – has worked extremely effectively by pairing successful schools with 'keys to success' schools, with achievement being raised in both schools during the course of the partnership.

The conclusion of *Achieving more together* is that partnership working improves inputs, outputs and outcomes and ASCL is in no doubt that the centre of the school support strategy should be partnership working. Development is more effective if staff in a school have a clear link with another school, exposing them to new perspectives and more effective ways of working. Partnership raises expectations and shows how things can be done differently.

So, instead of the contested territory of the current school improvement initiatives, in which each agency is under pressure to justify its own existence as much as to improve the school in need of support, the emphasis should be on establishing well resourced partnerships.

The local authority would normally commission the arrangement and should always delegate its school improvement funding to the partnership leaders.

Using this model, which has been demonstrated to work in many places and different situations, I suggest that the national strategies should also devolve all its resources to school partnerships in exchange for the partnership showing that it has a strategy for staff support and raising student achievement. The partnership can then use these resources to commission support from advanced skills teachers, temporary additional staff, consultants or whoever is most suited to help.

Under this pattern, the role of the local authority changes from providing support to brokering and commissioning, and promoting effective partnership working between its schools. The model may be different for primary schools, but the level of expertise in secondary school leadership in most local authorities is such that this is the only way that they can make effective use of their school improvement resources.

In relation to the SIP, the local authority should be using the SIP to monitor the progress of the school and provide challenge where necessary. Other 'link advisers' are not needed, unless that is what the partnership decides that it needs.

With partnership at the centre of school improvement, as *Achieving more together* has shown it to be, the muddle of school support can be clarified, SITU and the National Strategies can monitor progress at a distance, holding the partnership to account for the improvement.

The SIP can do the regular monitoring, calling in Ofsted when s/he thinks that the school has reached the next level of achievement – a far cry from the more frequent inspections proposed recently by the chief inspector.

And ASCL members at the centre of these situations will not feel that they have to contact me from their private email address.

