

Education Secretary speech at ASCL Conference

13.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

In a wide-ranging address at the ASCL conference in Liverpool today, the Education Secretary set out her vision for a new era of education.

Good morning, everyone.

It's great to be back here with you.

It's been quite the year since we last met...

A year in which I've spent lots of time in your schools and colleges, seeing your wonderful staff and listening to you.

I've been speaking to parents and carers too, grandparents, uncles, aunts, nursery teachers, children's social care workers, speech and language professionals,

I've met with my fellow Members of Parliament, local leaders, the Chancellor, the Prime Minister.

And do you know what we've all been talking about?

Children, childhood, young people, and opportunity.

Because, ladies and gentlemen, education is back at the forefront of national life.

The nation is talking about our schools. And that debate is certainly heated - you can trust me on that.

But why wouldn't it be?

At stake is not only the future of our schools - but the future of our country too.

Because to build a better Britain, first we must look to our schools, to our colleges.

First, we must look to you - our leaders in education.

That is your great power and your great responsibility.

Jo - this morning you spoke about the importance of your colleagues who lead our schools and colleges...

'who refuse to accept that destinies are set in stone'...

'who believe in the power of education to change lives and to build a fairer, better society.'

I believe it too.

For shaping young lives, there is no job more important, no task more urgent.

Last month I went to a school in Peterborough to launch our new schools white paper.

After a wonderful singing performance from their students and in front of education staff and campaigners from across the country, I set out this government's vision for schools.

But, colleagues, this was not a white paper written alone.

It's the result of those conversations, the insights, ideas, expertise, lived experiences of countless children and young people, professionals and parents too.

We have a white paper written in partnership... and now we must deliver it in partnership.

Pepe - I want to thank you and all your members for your help on this white paper.

You've been an invaluable source of support and scrutiny - we couldn't have done it without you.

Thank you so very much.

But we can't stop now. We must continue with that spirit of collaboration in the months and years to come, to seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver opportunity for every child.

Forward together.

Now really is the time. Childhood is changing beyond all recognition, and a little girl growing up in the last decade had just so much to contend with.

Her support was stripped away... and you've seen the impact down the line in your classrooms.

The Sure Start centre round the corner, that closed long ago, so her parents couldn't get the right advice during her early years.

And if there wasn't space at the local nursery, then she didn't get the early support for learning.

She reaches school, already behind - on numbers and letters, but also maybe in other ways.

Still in nappies, perhaps. Unable to hold a knife and fork, possibly.

She moves through primary in the teeth of a cost-of-living crisis.

Her parents work all the hours God sends, but small disasters knock them back... the boiler packs up... the car breaks down, so sometimes the family budget doesn't stretch far enough, and she arrives in the classroom with no breakfast in her tummy, unable to concentrate on her times tables that morning.

And then our child, she reaches her teenage years with a smartphone in her pocket, a source of tremendous information and connection.

But disinformation too. Disconnection from her local community, sports teams, youth centres, distraction and disruption in your lessons and for her, the constant buzz of comparison and competition, the slide towards an always-online, ultra-globalised childhood, swarming with the dark voices of online hate.

I know that schools, teachers, parents and carers worry about social media, we worry about the impact on our children's education - their learning, focus, sleep, mental health.

There are opportunities to seize with technology, but we must get the balance right.

So this government has launched a consultation on children's digital wellbeing, and the Prime Minister has already announced new legal powers so that we can act on the findings immediately.

So I urge you to respond, because this girl and her friends need our support and guidance, now more than ever.

Has any generation had to fight so hard for a slice of certainty, a clear path forward?

The fight has made her more compassionate, more tolerant, more enterprising.

But she can feel her sense of community falling, her worries rising. She struggles on, helped by heroic school staff.

She starts to think about what comes next, but she finds that the same tech that keeps her glued to her phone has now taken away the good entry-level jobs too.

I tell you about this child, who has no name but could be any one of the hundreds in your schools...

I tell you about her not to wallow in doom and gloom. Never.

The tenacity and invention of this generation, it gives me such hope.

Rather, it's to show you why we need change, and why that change must be broad because the headwinds she faces, so many of them blow in from outside your school.

So we are doing what only the state can do... [political content removed]

We are changing the weather for that girl, for her generation and for the generations to come...

No school is an island - and no government should treat you as such.

Not anymore.

We're stepping up and rebuilding the services around you.

That girl growing up now, under this Labour government her parents can go to their local Best Start Family Hub to get the right parenting support.

She can go to a nursery at the end of her road, for 30-hours of government-funded childcare a week.

She gets early speech and language support too, so now when she reaches school, there's no need to catch up.

Free breakfast clubs, free school meals, ending the two-child limit, child poverty builds up barriers to learning... but together we are pulling them down.

Fighting child poverty is the moral mission of this government and delivering the largest ever reduction in child poverty in a single parliament will be one of our proudest achievements.

Investment in children and in their futures.

So that girl is finally able to give her all in your lessons because she's no longer coming to school

unsettled or unhappy or unfed.

All the while, the focus in the classroom returns to teaching and learning.

That is where your true power lies.

Not a food bank. Not social services.

Teaching and learning.

I'm backing school leaders.

And when young people leave school... I'm backing college leaders...

to guide them further along their path to opportunity.

New V Levels to sit alongside A Levels and T Levels.

Supporting you to grow into new technical excellence colleges.

And recognising the importance of your staff, working with you to develop a career-long pathway of professional development, because your development as professionals is the engine of opportunity for our young people.

But rebuilding the foundations of childhood support is not enough.

There may have been a time when public services could work well in isolation, when childcare, healthcare, nurseries, primaries, secondaries, colleges could keep themselves to themselves and still provide a decent service.

But the world has moved on.

The complexity of modern childhood demands a system of support that is joined up, no gaps to fall into.

Colleagues, the changes you have seen in your classrooms over the past decade...

the poverty, the additional need, the technology, this is a new era of childhood... and it calls for a new era of education.

An end to policy in parts.

Instead, a village around the child... every child... with schools as the beating heart of that support.

And yes it's about every child... but it's also about the next chapter in our country's story.

Because if we have every young person leaving education ready to contribute, to the economy, to society, to the world that awaits them, it's the whole country that reaps the rewards.

This, in the purest sense, is in our national interest.

So our reforms begin today, but they take us into the 2030s and beyond, our schools at the centre of a strong and confident nation, a modern Britain, with opportunity for all.

And that means in every classroom, high standards and inclusion, working as one, each

strengthening the other, schools filled with the sounds of sport, music and drama, collaborative to their core.

Colleagues, I am ambitious for every child. And I mean every child.

I mean that girl we talked about before, who might come from a low-income home, but who has just as much right to academic excellence as any other child.

She is yet to benefit from the high standards that exist in some schools and she remains the symbol of a disadvantage gap that is still far too wide.

And the boy who lives two doors down, who has special educational needs, he's had to get in a taxi every morning, off to a school far away to have his needs met.

He doesn't know that girl from his street, nor the other kids in his neighbourhood, because he doesn't go to school with any of them.

During the weekends and at holidays, he has no local friends to play with.

Even this faraway support, his parents had to fight tooth and nail to secure for him.

And yet still, he achieves far below what we all know he's capable of, just like the girl on his street.

But the futures of those two young neighbours are intertwined, because we can't bring down the attainment gap without reforming the SEND system.

The boundaries of disadvantage are just too blurry.

Achievement can't be just for some, it has to be for all.

Colleagues, this is a generational challenge that I'm asking you to rise to, but the solutions already exist.

To take these children from sidelined to included...

To upgrade their school days from narrow to broad...

To see them no longer withdrawn but engaging...

It's about spreading what already works, because there are stories of success for children who don't fit the conventional mould.

I've spoken about them time and again.

Winyates Primary in Peterborough.

Tanfield School in County Durham.

Chantry Academy in Ipswich.

Morpeth School in Tower Hamlets.

The excellence in some of our schools, for some of our children...

that was the basis for my vision for all our schools, and for all our children.

And now, with this white paper, the time has come to deliver that vision...

from high standards here and there, to high standards everywhere.

That's the heart and soul of our white paper, policies not conjured from the Whitehall sky, but powered by what is already working across the country that you deliver.

Like our Unlocking Reading CPD programme, the new statutory reading test for year 8 and the National Year of Reading, all spring from the strong culture of reading in schools like Beech Grove Primary.

Our plans to stretch and challenge all children build on the successes at schools like Heanor Gate Spencer Academy, where students are supported to dream bigger through visits, mentoring, debate clubs, STEM programmes, AI-based tools.

And our AI Tutoring Programme will bring together teachers, pupils and tech experts to co-create AI tutoring tools that are safe by-design and plugged into the curriculum.

To half the disadvantage gap our white paper draws on what works at schools like Oakdene Primary Academy, the way they use their pupil premium funding is changing lives in that school, and now it will change lives in other schools as well.

Together we can spread that excellence to build a new future...

A future in which children grow up together, go to their local school together, achieve and thrive together.

That's what's best for children with SEND, and for the whole class.

The white paper outlines a new system of support as standard, layered to meet different needs.

Universal for all.

And where needs are greater, targeted support through Individual Support Plans.

Then specialist provision too for children who need it.

There will always be a role for our wonderful special schools, and they will always be a valued source of expertise for the wider system, right at the centre of our plans for spreading excellence, now and into the future.

Colleagues, our white paper supports you to set up an inclusion base in your schools for children with complex needs, just like the one at Becontree Primary School that I told you about last year.

I told you about the father whose daughter used that inclusion base, seeing her do well in a mainstream school gave him faith that one day she'll go on to live a good life, get a great job, be an active citizen.

And now it's about giving that same opportunity to more and more children with SEND.

We've got to work together on this, because that's the only way we will succeed in our shared mission, especially for guiding young people through tricky transitions, as a young lady called Carys shows.

I first met Carys at a roundtable last July - and I've met her a couple of times since.

She lives with a physical disability, but staff at her secondary school understood her needs and she did really well.

She then moved to a big sixth form of 4,000 students, and at first the idea made her very nervous.

She was afraid her needs wouldn't be understood. But the college didn't wait for September to get to know her.

The study support team met Carys early to talk through her needs, and that early preparation meant provisions could be made and rooms could be adapted - well ahead of time.

A combination of the right support and teaching excellence meant Carys achieved and thrived at college.

She got 4 A*s in her A Levels, then she got her degree from Oxford, her master's from Liverpool, and now she's studying for her PhD in Psychology.

High standards and inclusion in action. She's part of our FLARE group too.

And FLARE brings together children and young people with SEND to share their experiences... and to power change.

Colleagues, you are at the centre of this change. And you know that change of this scale won't happen overnight.

Lasting, meaningful change - the kind that transforms lives... it takes time and it takes dedication and good old fashioned hard work.

You're no stranger to that, I know. But I am here to support you. I've already told you about the broad support we're bringing - the services that will crisscross childhood.

And with this white paper we're going further. I'm backing you.

And at a time when extremely tough decisions have to be made, the Chancellor is backing you too.

£1.6 billion for an inclusive mainstream fund to hardwire inclusion into your schools - and nurseries and colleges too.

£3.7 billion to develop inclusion bases, improve accessibility and create new special school places.

£200 million to train your staff to deliver excellence for children with SEND.

And when your pupils need extra help - you'll no longer have to wait for forms to be filled or battles to be won.

Experts will be at hand.

And in time, you'll be able to draw on a bank of professionals, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, occupational therapists, backed by £1.8 billion of funding.

And this will bolster your budgets over time.

Pepe - you recently went on the Today Programme and set the record straight.

You said that the system has been 'taking money into the wrong places, into the wrong hands.'

Funding that only flows after a battle for an EHCP is funding that takes too long to arrive in schools.

Instead, just give headteachers the resources up front - so they can support young people, sooner rather than later.

Well, we've heard you, and that is exactly what we're doing.

'This is the future', you told listeners.

And so to you, Pepe, and to your members here today and to your colleagues across the country...

I say: let's build that future together. Forward together.

I see so much excellence to spread - in the schools and colleges I visit, in the leaders I meet.

I know how valuable you are to our society, in one of the most demanding roles in our public services.

I want to protect that expertise and to strengthen it further. I want to secure school leadership as a stronghold of high performance.

That's why I'm creating the Excellence in Leadership Programme - giving leaders the right support.

It'll include a new evidence-based mentoring framework, and more support, so that thousands of you can get the space to reflect, build resilience, and grow as leaders.

There is so much excellence to celebrate.

But I must be straight with you, it's no longer good enough for a school to be excellent alone, high walls in the name of high standards do more harm than good.

We need a system in which schools work together to solve problems.

We will support you, of course we will, and protect standards too.

But we need a self-improving system powered by your expertise...

Your experience...

Your passion for teaching and learning.

A system in which what works is not kept secret, but rather set free in one school after another, growing as it goes.

I know ASCL's vision is for all schools working in strong partnerships.

And that's my vision too.

Over the past 20 years, school trusts have shown that with the right approach, rooted in the communities they serve...

they are the most effective way to power collaboration.

That's why the white paper signals that all schools will move to joining or forming strong school trusts.

For our children not yet benefiting, we want to make quick progress, especially in removing the barriers to local authorities setting up trusts.

That spirit of collaboration will strengthen everything we do, especially at key stage three - that vital time when too many children spin their wheels.

So colleagues, our new RISE Key Stage Three Alliance is coming, and it will bring together and spread the very best of what schools are doing to give every year 7 a flying start.

Communities of support and learning - that's the future.

Forward together.

Because, colleagues, we're all here for that same reason.

Whether you lead a big school trust, or you're a teaching assistant in a small local school, whether it's your job to shape the curriculum or keep the lights on, we all want the same thing, to see every child get the opportunity to succeed.

No matter their background, no matter their needs, no matter where they were born or how much their parents earn.

Not long ago I heard about a boy called Joshua, who lives down in Brighton.

He has autism, but he'll be the first to tell you that's not what defines him.

Joshua struggled at his first school.

But then he went to West Blatchington Primary - part of The Pioneer Academy Trust - and got the right support, first in the school's inclusion base, and then in mainstream classrooms.

He's gone from struggling with school to being there all day, every day.

Joshua is now doing well in a mainstream secondary.

He's a proud member of the Scouts and knows he belongs in his community.

What he said about his school really stuck with me.

"West Blatch changed my life and for that I'm eternally grateful."

That's what it's all about, that's what we're all fighting for.

Colleagues, the chance for change comes rarely.

I don't have to tell you how difficult it can be to publish a white paper.

There won't be another one along soon. This is it.

And now I need you to get behind it, to do right by the children we serve, and become the generation

of leaders who deliver, at long last, an education system fit for every child.

Thank you.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-speech-at-ascl-conference>