

**Michael Gove, Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families**  
**Speech to the Association of School and College Leaders**  
**Sunday 7th March 2010**

Thank you, John for your kind introduction.

It's a pleasure to be here this Sunday morning and can I thank you all for coming along so early in the day – not least after a Saturday night in which all the exotic cosmopolitan temptations the Novotel Hammersmith can offer were at your disposal – I am in your debt.

And I'm in your debt for far more than just turning up to hear me speak this morning.

Because the biggest favour you've done me is not listening while I'm speaking but letting me listen to so many of you speak.

I was asked recently by the Guardian who the biggest influences on my thinking had been when it came to education. I don't know if they expected me to cite Pliny the Elder or Margaret Thatcher or any other figure which would have fixed me ever more firmly in their camp of unrepentant fogey. But I told them what I've told everyone who's asked since I took up this job. The biggest influences on me have been teachers. And specifically school leaders.

The really best thing about this job – the thing which makes me approach every week – and I mean every week – with a sense of enjoyable anticipation – is the knowledge that I'll be visiting great schools.

Nothing is so uplifting as visiting a brilliant state school – the sorts of places you lead – which run on undiluted optimism and give any visitor a hope transfusion.

And I'm particularly grateful to some of your members for the huge amount of time, and expertise, they have lent me. Can I say a special thanks here to Dr Fiona Hammans, head at Banbury School, Joan McVittie of Woodside High and Mike Griffiths of Northampton School for Boys. They, along with other great heads such as Sally Coates at Burlington Danes, Mike Wilshaw at Mossbourne Academy, Mike Crawshaw at Debenham High and Peter Barnes of Oakgrove in Milton Keynes have all helped me hugely in shaping policy and setting priorities.

And I should add, as they say in the acknowledgements sections of books, all the good ideas in what I've written are theirs, and all the mistakes are my responsibility alone.

Of course, it's invidious to name names when expressing gratitude but when it comes to school leaders who have shaped my thinking for the better one name does stand out – that of your general secretary John Dunford.

John, I have so enjoyed our chats over the last two years, and I have benefitted enormously from your wisdom and good judgement. You have always been straight, principled, a wonderful defender of everything that's good about education and a relentlessly good-humoured opponent of cant and nonsense. Under your leadership ASCL has been an undoubted force for good in the education debate and we will miss you.

But I do hope your departure from the general secretaryship does not mean your departure from the world of education. I believe we cannot afford to lose someone of your experience and wisdom from the education scene and I hope we can continue to work together in the future, for years to come.

And in thanking John I realise that I only raise the stakes for his successor. But I know that in Brian Lightman you have chosen someone with all the qualities of leadership, good judgment and good humour to ensure that the exceptionally high standards John has set are maintained.

## CELEBRATING SUCCESS

Now, Oppositions I know aren't supposed to praise anything in the current educational landscape. We're supposed to spend all our time accentuating the negative.

And indeed, as I'll go on to say, there are serious issues we need to address if we're going to tackle some of the problems we have in this country with inequality, lack of social mobility and talent going untapped.

But its important also to acknowledge success where it exists – so that we can applaud it, learn from it and see it spread more widely.

It was in that spirit of celebrating success that one of the first things I did as my party's schools spokesman was launch a campaign called Comprehensively Excellent which sought to highlight the amazing achievements of the country's top 100 state comprehensives and publicise their common features.

It was in that spirit of celebrating success that I have underlined our absolute commitment to keeping Key Stage 2 tests – so we can identify those primaries which have achieved amazing things and learn from them.

And its in that spirit of celebrating success that this week we said we would free all outstanding schools from Ofsted inspection and we would instantly allow them to acquire academy freedoms so they could then work with other, partner, schools to help raise standards across the board.

## AUTONOMY IN A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

I just want to say a little bit about that last policy announcement – and the thinking behind it – because it explains our philosophical approach to education perhaps better than anything.

I think the most important people in driving educational improvement are not ministers, inspectors or chief inspectors, 14-19 advisers, SIPs or National Challenge Advisers. They are teachers and school leaders.

The best way to help schools that are faltering, or not performing as they should, is to have great teachers, great school leaders, collaborating on driving up standards. The National Leaders of Education programme, put in place by the NCSL, embodies that principle. Good heads become great by learning from those who have already made that journey. Teachers who can, and who want to, lead learn how to from working alongside those who are already great leaders.

This culture of collaboration, of professional support, of peer review, seems to me to be crucial to ensuring the highest possible standards in all our schools and I applaud the role that ASCL members have played in the success of the scheme so far.

And I want to us to continue to work together to ensure that school leaders – and teachers – working in collaboration – drive up standards even further.

That is why I want more schools to enjoy the freedoms which academies currently enjoy – because it is by freeing school leaders from bureaucracy that we give them more space to innovate, to excel, and by excelling, to inspire others.

And for those of you who may have concerns that I am in love with one particular model of school structure and wish to impose it by relentless diktat let me make clear – my desire to see academy freedoms extended springs from precisely the opposite impulse – its because I want to see more diversity, more creativity, more professional freedom – that I want to extend autonomy.

And that autonomy has of course, as John has always wisely pointed out, to exist alongside a culture of collaboration – so that whether its through federations, trusts, chains, local partnerships or personal links, via the NLE scheme or other bonds we can establish – we ensure that the gains made by school leaders who break new ground are quickly spread.

So when we hold out the promise of academy style freedoms to more schools its with the aim – quite explicit – of allowing more and more schools to exercise that freedom – and ensuring that those who do exercise that freedom use it to help lever standards up all round.

I very much hope that as many of you as possible will contemplate acquiring academy freedoms. We propose to legislate quickly to remove the obstacles which might prevent those school leaders who wish to exercise those freedoms from doing so. We will allow all schools currently ranked as outstanding to acquire these freedoms, pre-approved as it were, and will invite other schools to submit their bids for academy status if they wish to go on that journey.

We have imposed only one condition. All schools which acquire this status should be in a relationship with another school which they use their new freedoms to support.

Academy freedoms will mean that you would have control of the money currently spent on your behalf by local government, you would have freedom to depart from the national curriculum, freedom to hire the staff you wanted and pay them more, freedom to alter terms and conditions over time to deploy staff more flexibly, freedom to develop your own relationships with service providers, with IT providers, with mental health specialists or social workers, freedom over how you allocate capital and freedom to use your reserves for the investment you believe is important.

Of course, those freedoms will still be within the context of a state system which guarantees fair admissions, which administers national tests, which provides intelligent inspection and which supports local authorities in the work they do. And within that system I can assure you a Conservative Government will be assertive in directing resources to the poorest areas and activist in supporting the very weakest schools.

In order to support those with the most challenging intake we will introduce a pupil premium - an additional sum which will be attached to every child from a disadvantaged home - which will go straight to the school and help deliver the additional support which we hope will help close the yawning gap between the opportunities currently enjoyed by the wealthiest and those available to the poorest.

I should add, in the context of the state's role, a word on the national curriculum. I believe the national curriculum should, as Mick Waters has argued in the past, be a source of collective national pride. It should encompass the best that has been thought and written. It should provide all of us with a guide to the level of knowledge that it is appropriate for children at every age to master. It should reflect what is taught at appropriate ages in other nations, so we can measure our children's achievement against theirs.

The current national curriculum is to my mind, flawed, because it concentrates far too much on how to teach and doesn't provide a proper benchmark of what should be known in order for children to advance profitably to the next level.

I want to reconstruct the national curriculum - and I want that process to be a deeply enjoyable, richly collaborative exercise in which all those who care about learning and have a passion for knowledge help us enhance the intellectual life of the nation. I want teachers, school leaders and others who give the academic life of our country vibrancy a chance to all play their part. I have been inspired doing this job by the passion for their subject shown by teachers across many disciplines and in many different schools and colleges. I have seen that love - whether of history or chemistry - drama or dance - communicated with infectious enthusiasm at meetings of teachers - whether those organised by the Princes Teaching Institute or the National Union of Teachers. And I want to ensure, therefore, that our national curriculum embodies that passion for knowledge, that love of subject, that attachment to learning in each specific field - so we can guarantee an inheritance of excellence.

But again - to be clear - while I think we need to collaborate on a new curriculum I also believe that it is through allowing autonomy that new breakthroughs in how and what to teach can be made.

Which is why I envisage the national curriculum acting as a common resource, an agreed benchmark, a source of celebration. But not a straitjacket. We will allow schools which have academy freedoms to depart from it. They will have to justify that departure to their parents - but the freedom will be theirs. And earning the autonomy to enjoy greater curriculum freedom appears to me to be a great incentive helping to spur improvement across the board.

#### AUTONOMY FOR ALL – TRUSTING PROFESSIONALS TO LEAD

Of course, some of you may not want, ever, to go down the academy route. Your relationship with your local authority may be so good that it wouldn't be appropriate for you. The national curriculum may provide you with all the resources you need. The greater flexibilities over resources and staffing may not be for you.

But, whether you choose to acquire academy status or not, we have a duty to reduce to an absolute minimum the bureaucracy, interference and red tape which holds you back.

And I promise - a Conservative Government will lift the burden.

We will reform Ofsted.

We will end the current reliance on grading schools by their compliance with eighteen tick-box categories some of which have nothing to do with education.

Instead schools will be inspected on just four criteria – quality of leadership, quality of teaching, safety of pupils and achievement of pupils.

We will end the current over-reliance on measuring by data and damning with blanket judgements and make inspection more about observing classroom practice, celebrating what works and offering suggestions for improvement.

I know John, that you and ASCL have long argued for a more coherent approach towards accountability and support – our proposals are influenced by your thinking.

Which is why we will end the practice of limiting judgements whereby clerical errors in one specific area can damn an otherwise wholly successful or outstanding school.

And we will expect you to review and evaluate rigorously what you do all the time, but we will ditch the current self-evaluation process – which is not about self-evaluation at all but about filling out a SEF form which prompts you to evaluate your school by someone else's criteria – a process which is enormously time-consuming and expensive.

Your time should be spent on teaching and leading – not bureaucracy.

The rise in bureaucracy over the last decade has been astounding – and a constant complaint from the heads I meet.

There are 76% more admin staff in schools today than when Labour came to power. Last year you received 4,000 pages of guidance from the Department – more words than the King James Bible or all the Harry Potter books put together. And its not as if the prose style is exactly gracefully Jacobean or J.K Rowling either.

And on top of the regulation there are now 37 different statutory policies you, and your governors, have to write out, approve and follow.

The Department have increasingly sought to limit your freedom to exclude pupils and guidance has obfuscated rights on search powers and use of force – when absolute clarity is needed if professionals are to have the confidence to act. The Government have done nothing to halt the epidemic of false and malicious allegations made against school staff – one recent poll found that 59 per cent of headteachers have had false allegations made against them or their staff within the last three years.

And successive Ministers have refused to let state schools adopt qualifications like the IGCSE that are now widely used in the independent sector. While, at the same time, forcing all schools and colleges to offer all diplomas – which must be the single most complex qualification developed in the history of education.

If the Government seek to enforce their “entitlement” to every diploma line all of you will be forced into multiple partnerships not of your own making, whether or not this is in the best interests of your school or your students. The diploma programme – alongside BSF – has given local authorities more control over you than they've had for a generation.

And the funding system for schools has grown byzantine in its complexity. Not only are the underlying formulas impossible to understand for anyone without a PHD in statistics, but there have been literally hundreds of pilots, pathfinders and programmes that have offered the promise of extra funding for groups of schools before the tap was suddenly turned off. Remember Beacon Schools? Education Action Zones? Excellence in Cities? ASCL has said that this is a very inefficient way to fund disadvantage. I agree. And I know the problems caused for you by these time-limited tranches of funding.

Huge amounts of money have been wasted on these initiatives – the National Strategies alone have cost £4.5 billion – that's £150,000 for every primary in the country and £640,000 for every secondary. Yet there's been no proper independent academic evaluation of their impact – and a recent Ofsted report gave a damning verdict on their value.

You'd think it would now be obvious that all this fiddling and interference has done far more harm than good. Yet, incredibly, the Government don't seem to think they've interfered enough. If the current Children, Schools and Families bill becomes law – something we'll do everything in our power to avoid – schools will be legally responsible for implementing 38 pupil guarantees and 26 parent guarantees.

I agree with ASCL that these guarantees are so vaguely defined: “that every pupil should go to a healthy school”; that “every child should have access to high-quality cultural activities” and so on that no school – however good – can be certain to avoid legal challenge. And they want to introduce a “Licence to Teach” that appears to be a hugely bureaucratic mechanism for giving the Government control over performance management. ASCL’s challenge to the government that this should not be introduced unless it can be demonstrated as value for money is absolutely right.

Instead of this proliferating torrent of bureaucracy which only undermines the status and autonomy of professionals we need to change course and reinforce the authority and prestige of the teaching professions.

I want us, as a nation, over the course of a generation, to be able to match those countries such as Finland and Singapore where teaching is seen as the most prized destination for the most accomplished graduates.

That is why I am so keen on curriculum reform - to affirm that teachers and school leaders are the guardians of the intellectual life of the nation.

That is why I am so keen on structural reform - so that teachers and school leaders can increasingly shape the educational system in a more creative and dynamic fashion - setting up great new schools like the Knowledge is Power Programme Charter Schools in America and creating a culture of democratic excellence.

And that is why I am so keen on reforms to improve discipline and pupil behaviour - because crucial to getting, and keeping, the best teachers is making sure they know they will be safe. That is why I have placed such an emphasis on policies to improve discipline, policies that will remove the regulatory restrictions on the exercise of appropriate authority, policies that give school leaders the confidence to take control.

We will give teachers the freedom to physically restrain disruptive pupils, use search powers, give same day detentions and, if necessary, exclude the persistently disruptive free of the restrictions which currently apply. And we will allow schools to make signing a home-school contract a condition of entry.

## A COMPREHENSIVE REFORM PACKAGE

In return for the autonomy I envisage granting I know that accountability will be sharper but I promise you that it will be – to use an ASCL phrase – more intelligent.

We live in an age when taxpayers expect to know more about how every pound is spent and parents have a right to know more and more about how their child is taught.

That is why we want to reform league tables, so they contain more information, move away from a narrow focus on C/D grade boundaries and give vocational subjects their proper due by reforming the system of equivalence which prevails at the moment.

And that is why I want to see a lively and engaged debate - based on rigorous evidence of what works - between politicians, professionals and parents - on how we can continue to drive improvement.

I am confident that the profession is ready to rise to that challenge. Because one of the things that most heartens me about visiting schools and colleges today is the enthusiasm and energy of teachers who, whatever is thrown at them, love their work, enjoy being with the young people they’re teaching and are hopeful for their future.

I know that the ceaseless pace of change which politicians sometimes insist on can be wearying, but what I hope you'll appreciate is distinctive about the comprehensive package of reform we're envisaging is that it's about allowing you to become freer from political interference, not applying the tourniquet ever more tightly.

Because ultimately, whatever politicians say or do we can only improve education through partnership. You are the people who are responsible for implementing policy. You are the individuals who have to balance budgets, shape timetables, choose exam boards, deal with the troublemakers, support the troubled and celebrate the successful. You are the people who make our schools work and the people who can make them work even better. Which is why this chance to talk – and to listen – is so important and now that I have talked for so long we can all move on to the best part of this morning – where I listen!