

Address by Rt Hon Ed Balls MP, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families at ATL Conference in Liverpool on Monday 6 April 2009

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It's a great pleasure to be here addressing my first ATL annual conference.

And having gone in just 12 months from being a novice to a veteran – the third longest serving Secretary of State since 1997 – may I also say it's a great relief to be here too.

I know that this is a conference that's renowned for its passion, its expertise and its rigour.

That was very clear to me during the meeting that I've just had with some of your delegates over lunch.

We talked about a number of issues that I know are of concern to you:

- from workload and compliance with your statutory rights;
- to the curriculum;
- and – this comes as no surprise – the testing and assessment system.

I know that these issues are reflected in your conference agenda and resolutions.

And I will also address them all in my speech today.

But what shone through brightest of all in that discussion – indeed in all of the discussions that I've had with ATL members since I began this job – has been the moral purpose that:

- got you into teaching in the first place;
- drives you in what you do every day;
- and has brought you here to Liverpool this week.

And by that I mean your shared belief that:

- every child has potential and can succeed with the right help and support;
- and that no barrier should ever be allowed to hold any child back and stop them from fulfilling their potential.

There's no better example of that moral purpose than your General Secretary, Mary Bousted.

Mary is renowned for:

- her passion for education;
- her determination to help every child succeed;

- and her commitment to breaking down all of the barriers to learning that children and young people face.

She has long campaigned on important issues like ending child poverty.

And it is symbolic of Mary's leadership that ATL chose to table a motion at last year's Trades Union Congress challenging us to do more to break the link between disadvantage and attainment in rural areas.

Nor that she – rightly in my view – was nominated by her peers to take a seat on the TUC executive committee.

But as well as Mary's national leadership, it has also been very clear to me in all of my discussions with ATL members around the country that the same passion and commitment stretches across the whole association.

So let me thank all ATL members for all the invaluable guidance and leadership that you have provided over the past 18 months – in particular as we were drawing up our Children's Plan and have since begun to:

- help you unlock the talents and promote the health and happiness of all children, and not just some;
- back parents as they meet their responsibilities to bring up their children;
- and build a culture of prevention and early intervention in which everyone plays their part so that we can tackle all the barriers to learning.

And Mary is right – schools and colleges, health workers, social services, youth offending teams, housing officers and, yes, parents too must all take their responsibilities seriously.

I've said many times that I don't want teachers to be social workers, housing officers or parents for that matter.

But you are often the first professionals to spot problems and need others to then do their bit.

That's why, following our consultation, we've now introduced new legislation to strengthen Children's Trusts in every area.

They will give schools a seat at the table – and I want you to go there, bang your fists on the table and make yourselves heard.

Because it is only by giving you all the support you need that we can help every child to succeed.

And let me say as Children's Secretary, like many of you I read with horror this morning in our newspapers reports about the barbaric attack in Doncaster on Saturday.

We were all deeply shocked by what we read.

But at the same time, I refuse to ... use cases like this to demonise every young person or talk about Britain being broken.

The vast majority of our young people work hard, play by the rules, are volunteering in record numbers and are good citizens.

And it is wrong to smear them for political advantage.

But while we know that we have more to do to until:

- every child arrives in reception ready to learn and is secure in the basics when they leave primary school;
- every young person gets the qualifications and skills they need;
- every school is a good school;
- and deprivation isn't a barrier to any child or young person achieving their potential.

So we are also in no doubt whatsoever that we start from a position of real strength.

Since 1997, there have been dramatic improvements for children and for teachers too.

Today:

- we have almost 3,000 SureStart children's centres compared to none in 1997;
- over 100,000 more children now leave primary school secure in English and maths at level 4 than a decade ago;
- almost half of young people now achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths compared to just over a third in 1997;
- the number of secondary schools below our basic benchmark of at least 30% of pupils getting five good GCSEs including English and maths has gone from over half in 1997 to one in seven today;
- and there have been huge improvements in the standing, support and rewards for teachers.

It is only because of this track-record of progress that we are confident that we can go further.

My priorities for you are to:

- continue to improve standards so that every child can fulfil their potential;
- and also break the link between disadvantage and attainment that has scarred our country for too long.

That's it.

I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that it's a short list.

But everything we do help us to achieve them.

We published our new 'Breaking the Link' evidence report last month.

It showed that over the past 10 years:

- faster progress has been made by the most deprived areas;
- faster progress has also been made by the most deprived schools;
- and the attainment gap has narrowed at the individual pupil level too.

But it also showed that:

- a free school meals pupil is still less than half as likely to succeed at every Key Stage than a non free school meals pupil;
- and that while 70% of free school meal primary pupils are in schools in areas where more than 20% of pupils are eligible for free school meals; over a quarter of all free school meal pupils are in secondary schools with below average levels of deprivation.

So breaking the link really is everybody's business – and that means schools in urban areas, in rural areas, in disadvantaged areas but also those in relatively affluent areas too.

That's why like Mary, when some people say that it just isn't possible to raise standards in some school in some communities.

Or when they say that this is all you can expect from young people from around here.

I say that's totally unacceptable.

Of course it's harder in some schools and in some areas.

But your track-record of success and the many examples of schools succeeding in the most challenging circumstances are the reasons why I don't think we should be prepared to accept these excuses.

And that's why we are committed to:

- intensifying our focus on personalised learning and tracking the progress of every child;
- ensuring that the accountability system recognises and rewards all of the work that schools do to help children and young people achieve their potential;
- and providing the extra support that's needed to ensure that every school is a good school.

And this is what we are doing:

- with our one-to-one tuition and catch-up programmes and the greater focus that schools can now place on progress in Years 7 and 8;

- by ensuring that our best school and college leaders get the rewards they deserve and the accountability system focuses on stretching the brightest pupils, giving extra support to those who have fallen behind or have special educational needs and encouraging schools to collaborate.
- and by building on the success of London Challenge by investing £400m in our National Challenge programme to help all schools get above our benchmark of at least 30% of pupils achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths.

A few weeks ago, Mary laid down her own challenge to me.

She said when I came here to your conference: “whatever you do, don’t just come here and read out a list of policies”.

Mary, I have to say, where did you get that idea from?

And is it already too late?

But you are right.

Because while I do believe that the new legislation that we’re introducing to:

- ensure that schools can commission all the support they need through Children’s Trusts;
- give more support to schools to tackle bad behaviour;
- provide stronger powers to intervene where schools need more support;
- and put in place lighter touch inspections for successful schools;

is vital.

We are only legislating to do those things because they support excellent teaching and learning in our classrooms.

And as we look at what more we can do to help achieve my two priorities, I am clear that we have to start by supporting the people who make the biggest difference of all – our great teachers.

Ten years ago, many schools were badly dilapidated and working as a teacher wasn’t always seen by the public as the high status profession it should be.

But that has changed.

Over the past decade, over 3,000 schools have been built, rebuilt or refurbished.

Teachers are now amongst the most valued and trusted figures in our society – certainly much more so than politicians.

And we now have the best generation of teachers we’ve ever had.

In fact, I believe the teachers working in schools in our country are the best in the world.

But I want you to remain the best – and you can't do that by standing still.

So we have to do more.

The National Agreement was a big step forward for teachers, for teaching assistants and for children and young people – because it's about both raising standards and tackling workloads.

It was also a great achievement for the Social Partnership – with ATL a leading member – and it has made a real difference in most schools.

But we must continue to bear down on unnecessary burdens, ensure that you receive your statutory rights and provide you with the support you need that allows you to focus on your core job of teaching and learning.

As Mary often says to me, these aren't optional extras – they're statutory provisions.

And we can't expect you to continue to improve standards or narrow the attainment gap if you've not received a proper induction, if you're not being managed properly or if you spend your time doing things that don't make the most of your professional expertise.

That is why we're now legislating for a new system of warning notices for governing bodies that do not comply with statutory pay and conditions requirements.

And Mary played a leading role in the discussions that led to these new arrangements.

As well as ensuring compliance with your statutory rights, we also want to make sure you get consistently excellent training and professional development.

That was why we announced last year that we would make teaching into a Masters level profession.

I mentioned our new Masters in Teaching and Learning programme to a group of teachers I spoke to in New York a fortnight ago.

At first, they didn't seem too enthusiastic.

But I quickly discovered that was because their experience was of paying for post-graduate courses themselves and being dragged away from their schools to study.

That's not how we're going to do it here.

It will be primarily classroom based.

And we will cover the costs to both teachers and schools.

Mary has been closely involved in the discussions about how the details of how the programme should be rolled out.

And because of those discussions:

- the entitlement for teachers starting work this September to be the first to study for the qualification will go ahead as planned;
- but we will take the time we need to get it right so the programmes will not begin until next year.

It is important that we get this right both for young people and for the profession.

And I would like to thank Mary for her commitment to helping us to do so.

So compliance;

and excellent training and professional development.

These are important ways that we can support you as you do your jobs.

And on pay where we have a tough but fair three-year pay deal, for the government to renege and break that agreement now – as the Tories have said they would today – would betray the thousands of professionals who are teaching our children and delivering rising standards in classrooms around the country.

But while I disagreed with a number of the recommendations made by Select Committee last week – and in particular with the Opposition’s minority report that called for us to scrap the National Curriculum entirely; the Select Committee report was right about one thing.

You can only use your professional judgment and skills to their best effect if you have the space and flexibility in the curriculum to do so – and this is the second area I want to talk about.

We’ve already overhauled the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum to:

- allow you to place greater focus on personalised learning and the progress of every child;
- provide you with more space in the curriculum;
- and give you the flexibility to use more teacher assessment.

But in doing so, we’ve also been clear that:

- there are still core subjects that all children must learn;
- head teachers and teachers must still be able to secure the progress of every child and their school as a whole;
- and parents must still receive the information they need too.

ATL has been instrumental as we reformed both the curriculum and the testing and assessment system.

It is an area of particular passion and expertise for your General Secretary.

And because you told us that you wanted further space and flexibility in the curriculum, we also scrapped compulsory Key Stage 3 National Tests last year.

Although many schools – three quarters of them – have now decided to do them this year alongside their own teacher assessments.

We're also committed to slimming down the Key Stage 2 curriculum.

That was why in the Children's Plan, we asked Sir Jim Rose to carry out a root and branch review of the primary curriculum – including by looking at the content of the programmes of study for the existing 10 compulsory National Curriculum subjects while also making room for languages to also become compulsory.

But the idea that primary school children will learn how to use Twitter and about social networking instead of learning about the Victorians and the Tudors is just complete nonsense.

It's right that independent reviews like Sir Jim's are carried out at arms-length from Ministers.

But in the end, we are accountable.

So let me put the record straight now.

Sir Jim will recommend that one of the 6 new areas of learning should be called 'historical, geographical and social understanding'.

And we will accept his recommendation so that history will remain a central part of the primary curriculum.

Children will be taught the broad chronology of major events in Britain and the wider world – from ancient civilisations through the Romans, the War of the Roses, the industrial revolution and the world wars to the modern day.

In addition, they will study a minimum of two periods of history in depth, as well as learning about the movement and settlement of people during different periods and the effects of major economic, technological and scientific developments.

This is in line with the views of the Historical Association, who have been directly involved in drafting the new programme of study.

Teachers know the importance of teaching children these areas and they will continue to do so.

And let me also say, it's a complete nonsense to suggest that it's an either-or choice between learning history on the one hand; and learning ICT on the other.

Of course children should also learn about new technology.

In my experience, the earlier they do so, the better.

And I'm confident that Sir Jim's review won't just give primary heads and teachers more freedom to decide what to teach and when; it will also underline our trust and confidence in your professional judgment of how children can be best taught to enjoy learning and make good progress.

The modern world and the way in which we learn and absorb knowledge has changed radically – and it continues to change.

We need to prepare our children and young people not just with knowledge, but also with the skills to find information.

And in the same way, we have a duty to ensure our children learn about history we also have a duty to make sure they are not left in the technological dark ages.

I believe that good teachers are more than capable on ensuring the two things run alongside each other.

Sir Jim's final report will be published at the end of the month.

And then at the beginning of next month, we will publish our expert group's report on testing and our Schools White Paper.

They will set out a series of reforms that are vital to delivering the two priorities I spoke about earlier.

I know that Key Stage 2 National Tests are particularly controversial.

I've always been very clear that the current assessment system is not set in stone.

But I've also been clear that it would be a retrograde step to return to the days where the real achievements of schools were hidden from parents and communities.

That view is reinforced by our understanding of what parents want.

We are publishing a new survey today showing that a large majority – around three quarters of them in fact – value the information currently provided by Key Stage 2 National Tests.

As I said, our expert group will report at the beginning of next month.

But I can assure you that I have heard what Mary has said about Key Stage 2 National Tests and also about single level tests.

She has always been a critical friend to us.

And I am committed to working with her and with you to get this right because that's the right thing for us to do.

I also agree with Mary on something else.

I don't think that boycotting next year's Key Stage 2 tests would be the right thing to do.

And to those who say that a boycott is the right approach, I have to say that course of action would not only be irresponsible and disruptive to pupils and parents; but it also risks doing real damage to the standing of the profession.

As Mary has said, the right thing to do is to look at the expert group's report and then to consider what further reforms are needed to the testing and accountability system.

And most important of all, the real issue that we should be discussing is our new Report Card.

I believe that our new Report Card is a real opportunity to revolutionise the whole schools accountability system.

Because while league tables provide clear information about performance for parents and allow them to compare local schools, they also:

- rely solely on a single, one-off measure that inevitably increases the pressure on head teachers, teachers and pupils to perform;
- focus only on the performance of the average child and not whether schools are also stretching their most gifted and talented pupils or helping those who have fallen behind catch-up;
- report only on academic performance and ignore the vital contribution that schools make to children's wider development;
- and they also don't recognise how well schools are collaborating with other local schools or working hard to support the wider community .

With our Report Card, we can for the first time ensure that our accountability system properly reflects all of the things that our great schools are about:

- improving standards;
- supporting the progress of every pupil;
- and tackling all the barriers to the progress and well being of children.

There are still some big issues that we need to think about:

- how can the Report Card present information so that it is easy to understand and as compelling as a place in a league table?
- how can we make sure that the contribution that you all make to tackling all the barriers to learning outside school is recognised without making you responsible for them?
- and – of course – how can we best ensure that parents get the information they value at Key Stage 2?

But we are determined to work with you in the run-up to our White Paper and then as we consult on it to ensure that we get this right.

Let me end by making one final point about the wider debate in education at the moment.

Some people say that:

- my refusal to accept underperformance and excuses;
- my commitment to focussing our Academies programme on the most disadvantaged areas;

- my determination to modernise the curriculum and qualifications;
- my guarantee that every school can be a good school through National Challenge;
- and my determination to reform the accountability system with our new Report Card;

are all about centralising our education system.

As I hope I've made clear today, that's just not true.

As I have said, it is:

- strong local leadership;
- great school leaders;
- excellent teachers;
- and strong parent voice;

that make the biggest difference of all, not me pulling levers from Whitehall.

And my job is to support you in what you do.

But it's also the case that where:

- underperformance has become entrenched;
- disadvantage is used as an excuse;
- and young people are being left to fail;

I make no apologies about saying that I will step in and demand improvement.

Because the alternative philosophy is to stand back, wait for free market forces to work so that parents vote with their feet and less successful schools slowly wither and decline, leaving many young people to a second-class education – that is just not acceptable.

And when my opponents say that:

- I shouldn't be legislating to raise the education leaving age to 18 so that all young people can get the skills they need to succeed at work;
- I shouldn't be enforcing the admissions code so that parents choose schools and not the other way around;
- I shouldn't keep our promises on pay, terms and conditions;
- and it's wrong for us to step in to ensure that a good education isn't just a privilege of a few but a right for all;

I say that means failing children, young people and parents.

And that's not what a government should be about.

The responsibility on government is to:

- keep on investing in schools;
- continue to back our head teachers and teachers;
- provide extra support to those schools that need it;
- challenge all Local Authorities to do all that they can to support school improvement;
- and to back local leadership by strengthening local Children's Trusts.

That is what we need to do to help every child and young person fulfil their potential.

It is a great responsibility.

I take it extremely seriously.

That is what our moral purpose dictates.

And I look forward to working with you in the months and years to come so that we can deliver a world-class education system where not just some children but all children can fulfil their potential.

Thank you.