

[Amanda Spielman's speech at the 2022 ASCL Annual Conference](#)

Good morning and thank you for welcoming me to your conference.

I was going to start by saying how happy I was to be with you in person, but unfortunately it's been my week to catch COVID. I hope I'll have better luck next year, if you'll have me back. For now, you get me on Zoom – how very 2021!

But lifting COVID rules does mean you have to a lot less to navigate in the shifting sands of restrictions, regulations and guidelines, as you have done over the last 2 years. I do hope we are now free of the COVID restriction cycle, if not free of COVID itself!

As leaders, your challenges have certainly not vanished, but they are evolving. Restoring confidence, reducing anxiety, and re-establishing standards. These are among the new challenges for schools and colleges.

I'm sure that you're already rising to meet them, as you have everything that the pandemic has thrown your way so far. Thank you, as ever, for the determination and talent you and your staff show every day.

As we move into the spring, confidence is going to be key. For you and your colleagues, there are decisions to be made about how best to bridge the gaps in pupils' learning; and how to manage this cohort of children through the rest of their education, so their disrupted schooling doesn't hold back their progress and attainment.

But there is also the need to restore confidence outside the school gates. There are still parents who are hesitating about their children returning to school. We know that attendance is a stubborn problem in some quarters. It's rightly a priority for government – and I know you will also feel it keenly. Particularly because persistent absence is often a bigger issue for the very children who most need the structure and support of school.

Our recent report on ['Securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence'](#) looked at what we were seeing on inspection. It considered some of the root causes of absence – as well as how you've been getting a grip on the problem.

Many of our findings weren't surprising. The causes of persistent absence now are often no different to pre-pandemic – but they have been exacerbated.

Children whose parents are struggling financially, or with domestic violence or substance abuse, have always been prone to absenteeism – and often this is about their parents' attitudes and actions, rather than their own. We know these problems grew through the pandemic, so unsurprisingly, we're now seeing more children failing to make a consistent return to the classroom.

And there are others whose anxiety has grown through a period when they have missed social contact. Some may have come to believe they are better off away from their peers – learning remotely in the privacy of their bedrooms – and in some instances this skewed perception may have been reinforced by their parents.

Some parents have health concerns for themselves or family members and wait in hope for a highly unlikely zero-COVID future. Others, having seen that remote education is possible, have a more relaxed attitude to absence, whether long-term or to enable family holidays in term time. They have seen that other people's children are away from school and so expect the same latitude.

Families whose children have special educational needs struggled more than most, when regular support services were curtailed. Some of those children found comfort in learning at home, going at their own pace. So it's understandable that some parents are reluctant now to let that go. It's an absolute priority that SEND services support children to take part fully in school life.

And I think to some degree, the disruption we've seen over the last 2 years, has fractured the social contract around education. For years that contract has been clear – parents have a responsibility to get their children to school, with minimum absences, and in return schools do their level best to educate and look after those children.

Now's the time to remake that contract. Our research did find that schools with strong, proven attendance strategies before the pandemic were, unsurprisingly, proving adept at managing absence through COVID turbulence.

They listen to families and children, understand and empathise – but are still consistent in their expectations. That approach helps tackle absenteeism and I hope it will also halt the increase we've seen in withdrawals.

Because I am concerned by the recent increase in the number of children being home educated. There will always be parents who do a fantastic job educating their children at home. But it remains the case that we take a very liberal attitude to home education in this country, compared to many other nations.

We need to recognise that home education is very hard. Most parents aren't equipped to do it and if they are motivated by their own or their child's anxiety, rather than a deeply-held desire to home-educate – the outcomes for their child are unlikely to be great.

And we should also remember that sadly a small number of parents have darker motivations for taking their children away from their teacher's sight.

It's tragic that Arthur Labinjo-Hughes never returned to school after lockdown. He was supposedly being educated at home.

So, I'm very pleased at the recent announcement by the government that it will be starting a register for home-educated children – so we know who they

are, where they are, and who is taking responsibility for their education. We have been calling for this for a long time. We all know that no single piece of legislation can prevent tragedy, but this does feel like an important foundation.

There is always a tension, when talking about school attendance, between the statutory and the discretionary; between children being in school because they have to be there and children really doing their best to learn. Teachers often talk about their desire to inspire the next generation, which is admirable – teaching is a profession best served by motivated people, enjoying what they do. And of course enthusiasm is infectious.

But enthusiasm and motivation need to be channelled in the right way. I'm sure you are all constantly thinking about the way your school and your subject leads construct and teach the curriculum. A curriculum that will engage your pupils, build their knowledge and develop their skills, and in doing so, leave them with that love of learning.

That's the goal. And it was the starting point for our inspection framework. Getting to the heart of what education is about seems to me to be the right philosophy for an education inspectorate. Pedagogy is incredibly important, and without good teaching, children's learning is seriously hampered. But the curriculum is the substance – the rock on which good teaching is built. So that's where we focus our attention on inspection.

And here I must say – I am so pleased that we are back out inspecting. That's not a line I deliver in hope of a warm round of applause! But I absolutely mean it.

There are many reasons why I believe that inspection is fit for these times: safeguarding – of course; keeping parents informed – obviously; informing intervention decisions – that's important; and assessing the education received by this generation, which has dealt with so much – that's vital.

But there's something else as well. When we began this framework, I spoke repeatedly about the power of professional conversations between school leaders and inspectors. Discussing the curriculum is a great way to marshal arguments and test your approach. We describe ourselves as a force for improvement – and that can often be framed in terms of our judgements and responses to them. But there is something more fundamental at the core of inspection: that professional dialogue.

And that's true now more than ever. COVID has not had a single impact on education; it's affected schools and pupils in many different ways. A less flexible system of inspection that relied more heavily on data and test scores, would struggle to adapt to the reality that we've all been living through.

Bridging learning gaps; your curriculum has had to be adjusted to fit your student's needs; the way you manage your schools is often different to pre-pandemic times; and many of the metrics that might have been obvious measures of success a couple of years ago, are either not available right now, or

aren't enough by themselves to judge a school in the current climate.

I've said it before, but it's worth repeating, as clearly as I can: our inspections are about substance, not about compliance. Your theme at this conference fits so well here. We are looking for ambitious leadership, not schooling-by-numbers.

And while I'm warming to this theme, let me add that I have always been acutely aware of the workload and well-being of teachers and leaders. And that has been thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic.

So please, don't overload your teams with preparatory work "for Ofsted". Just don't do it.

And don't run 'mocksteds'. They are a waste of precious time.

Ambitious leadership is surely about substance and integrity. It's about doing the right thing for children and learners. If you do that, we'll see that. You really don't need to do anything extra on our account.

I believe much of the strength in the inspection framework lies in the conversations that we have with you. Understanding the adjustments you have had to make; appreciating the context in different schools; dealing in nuance, not in absolutes.

And here I must give credit to ASCL. Our dealings with you throughout the pandemic have been constructive and considered. You didn't call for knee-jerk changes to the way we inspect, or the framework we use.

Instead you've recognised that stability in rocky times is a good thing – and that doesn't just apply to your pupils. So we've not moved the goalposts on the way we inspect; the framework stays the same. But we have done our best to put fair play at the heart of the game.

So we extended the transition arrangements to recognise that curriculum thinking takes time, particularly when the aim is so important. Working out how to bring pupils up to speed after 2 disrupted years shouldn't be rushed.

And fairness also means recognising when a school is facing overwhelming difficulties – and the inspection should be put on hold. We rebalanced our deferral policy to take proper account of COVID impact. And we have been taking great care to assess every deferral request on its merits.

In the first half of this term, the great majority of deferral requests were agreed.

And it's also worth saying that getting on for three quarters of schools didn't want a deferral at all – despite us explicitly asking if they needed one.

It simply wasn't the case that schools in general didn't want, or couldn't cope with their inspection. Some did want time to focus on their immediate challenges – but most chose to go ahead.

So we think we are meeting schools where they are and we're showing flexibility in the timing of inspections and in the way inspectors take current challenges into account.

And since restarting inspections we've seen the grade profile across schools stay pretty consistent with the pre-pandemic profile. Many schools have improved and they've been recognised for doing so. Despite some anxiety around the outstanding grade – and it's rightly a high bar – schools are retaining it and new schools are reaching it.

Which is as it should be.

I hope that gives you confidence that we are doing our best to work with schools and colleges – we never want to work against you. We do understand what you're going through and we do appreciate the pressures.

But this cohort of children has had their education disrupted in a way that hasn't been seen since the second world war. We should be giving them the best possible experience now. That falls to you, more than anyone, of course – but there is a part we have to play as well.

And it's probably worth adding an aside here for those of you who run, or work in MATs. We have just restarted our MAT summary evaluations and I want to explain our thinking. We're doing a small number of evaluations to fine tune our understanding of this very diverse sector – in which trusts come in very different shapes and sizes. We want to share effective practice and really tell the story of what's happening in the academy system as it grows and changes.

What we're not doing is grading or judging MATs, or trying to impose a model for the way trusts should work. We want to understand more about the full spectrum of trusts and what they bring to education. So if we come to your trust, that's what we have in mind.

I've talked about building confidence to support attendance. But building confidence is a theme that runs throughout your work right now.

After 2 years without external exams, there is an understandable lack of confidence among pupils and, I'm sure, teachers too, about what is likely to happen this year. I've heard the very positive messages from government that exams will go ahead and I'm pleased about that. They provide focus and motivation for learning and study; they give young people the chance to show what they have learned; and of course, they open the door to the next level of education and the world of work.

You're making the decisions about how best to get your pupils to where they need to be. For children approaching exams, decisions have already been made about what will and won't be tested. But clearly adjustments are having to be made in all year groups – nobody can reasonably expect children to cover all the ground that was lost, at breakneck speed. Cramming doesn't lead to long-term learning, so you will be making the content and sequencing decisions about what must stay in the curriculum and where it can be abridged.

We've been publishing [curriculum research reviews](#) drawing on research evidence to lay out the principles of good curriculum in each subject. Many of the reports are already on our website, with more to follow in the next few months. I think they've already been viewed around 400,000 times so far.

For most children, I'm confident that good curriculum decisions, combined with good teaching and the daily structure of school will be enough to bring them up to where they need to be. I've regularly made the point that when it comes to catch up, most children will get what they need in their usual classrooms with their usual teachers. That will leave space for the more targeted interventions – whether it's tutoring or other supplementary effort – for those who need some extra help.

Which may well include children with SEND. But it would be a shame if a laudable desire to help these children led to us thinking about them as an entirely separate group. Of course, children with the most complex needs, need specialist support, but many children with SEND are best served by as normal a school experience as possible – with the same high-quality curriculum and great teaching as their classmates, plus a little extra help where they need it.

As we look forward to the SEND Green Paper, I hope that good education is very clearly affirmed as the keystone that supports a reformed system.

I firmly believe that reducing anxiety and rebuilding confidence will be a theme for the rest of this school year. As we all watch the terrible scenes unfolding in Ukraine, it's a stark reminder that COVID has no monopoly on creating fear and concern. I would echo the comments from the Secretary of State yesterday and by your general secretary just now, about the terrible impact of the Russian invasion on the lives of all Ukrainians. And of course, particularly on the children – who suffer so much and whose future is so uncertain.

And as we saw earlier in the pandemic, children here know what's going on in the world; they absorb information – not all of it accurate – and they also share their concerns with their friends. Once again you will need to help them understand world events that are outside their control, while minimising their anxieties. It is sadly something that you are well-practiced at doing.

We mustn't forget that the school day is an incredible force for good. There is rightly a huge emphasis on the mental health of our children and the long-term impact of the last 2 years.

Some children will undoubtedly need specialist support to recover their balance. But wellbeing – in the main – is an outcome, not a standalone activity. It flows from normality and certainty, and the reassurance to be found in good education and the wider school experience.

So it's so heartening to see the return of activities like sport, drama and music. To see children having the chance to go on trips and visits. These are often characterised as extra-curricular, but that really understates their importance as a fundamental part of school life. And they represent a return

towards normality and away from limitation; towards confidence and away from anxiety.

As I travel around, I meet a lot of teachers and leaders – and it's always a pleasure! I know how much you are looking forward to leaving COVID management behind. I absolutely recognise that there are mixed views about the relaxation of restrictions in schools, but they point to a future where the emphasis is not on managing absences and isolation, but on doing the work that you trained for and love.

You are still grappling with a lot – and I will never play down the pressure that you and your staff are under. But I really want to believe that we are in the endgame now. I do hope that soon, you will be able to concentrate, without distraction, on what you do best. I know that's what you want, and it's definitely in the best interests of the children and young people you teach, support and watch over.

My thanks, as always, go to you and the staff you lead. I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference.