

Speech: Amanda Spielman's speech at the 2019 ASCL annual conference

Good afternoon. It's great to be back with you.

I am especially honoured to be today's warm-up act for Sir Lenny Henry. From our rather different perspectives, he and I are both great advocates of arts education.

Alas, I suspect he will be far more convincing talking about arts education than I would be if I set out to be funny. So I will stick to my metaphorical knitting, and talk about the world of education in my normal vein.

Because we all know that there is plenty of serious stuff to talk about. Schools are under pressure from so many directions. Your job is hard and getting harder.

There's the money pressure – I've always acknowledged that it is a very real source of strain on schools, even though I've also said that we haven't yet seen the effects flow through into inspection outcomes. And the funding position for colleges is much worse.

There's the reduction in services from other agencies, such as local authority prevention and early help.

There are wider social problems, such as increasing gang activity, drug dealing and knife crime. We've seen people saying that the solution is not to allow schools to exclude at all, no matter how great the risk to others.

And there are failures of parenting: when I took this job I never imagined that I'd find myself standing up to talk about potty training, let alone discussing it with Piers Morgan on Good Morning Britain. Primary schools are having to deal with more and more reception-age children – and not just children with special needs – who simply aren't ready for school on that front.

I've talked about all of these publicly, because I think it is very important that schools and colleges can put their efforts into the things they do best, and that we know have great value for all children's lives, and particularly for the most disadvantaged.

And I support you wholeheartedly in your work. So I will carry on telling parents they should be making sure their children are ready to start school. I will carry on explaining to less well informed journalists that exclusions are a necessary part of keeping a school safe, and do not automatically lead to gang violence. I will carry on pressing the government to increase funding for preventative children's services, and not to expect you simply to work harder with less. And I will carry on saying that schools can't pick up all the pieces.

And the way we are developing inspection aims to recognise and value what you as leaders can and should be doing, without burdening you with impossible expectations.

[Two years ago, the first time I spoke at this conference](#), I talked about shifting Ofsted's focus back to the real substance of education: the curriculum. Last year I continued that theme, and [talked too about what we can do to help reduce workload](#), so that you and your staff can focus on the things that really make a difference. Not triple marking for Ofsted. Not creating data for Ofsted.

I've been really heartened by the response to this, from people all across education. People come up and talk to me about it at almost every event I go to. Sometimes the message that come across is one of relief, that the focus really can be on what matters most to children. Sometimes it is real excitement about the extent to which people feel it is empowering them to spend more time thinking and talking about education itself.

But I also know that any change can cause anxiety. While most people are giving us a clear message that we're going in the right direction, we need to work together to get the details right.

And much as I wish it weren't so, we do also need to counter some of the inevitable Ofsted myths that any new framework throws up. For example, a couple of weeks ago I heard about a school appointing 3 assistant principals, one each for intent, implementation and impact. That sounds worryingly like doing things 'just for Ofsted'.

Today, and in keeping with the theme of this year's conference, I'm going to talk about how I think Ofsted and school leaders ought to work together, in the best interests of children. About how we've worked with ASCL and others to develop the framework, and about what we're learning from that consultation so far. I'll talk a bit more about how we intend inspection to look and feel, and about the importance of the professional dialogue that flows through inspection. And I'll also cover the practical plans we have to contribute to professional development in the sector.

Working with ASCL

First, I'd like to thank Geoff and his team, for the positive and constructive way they work with us.

We know that Ofsted will never be adored by those on the receiving end of inspection, and nor should we be. But our inspections do need to be broadly supported and respected by teachers and leaders, and to have value beyond the grades that come out of our visits.

And we know that when inspection works as it should, it is a valuable form of CPD. It encourages conversations about what you want your pupils to learn, and how you're making that happen. For us to continue developing inspection towards that ideal we need the input of leaders, and so far ASCL has risen to the challenge. Geoff and team have consistently provided considered and

thought-provoking ideas, as well as telling us when we are off beam. That feedback has made our proposals better.

But it's not just in the work on inspection practice that I've seen ASCL providing sector-wide leadership. The [Ethical Leadership Commission](#), led by Carolyn Roberts, has been a real step forward in addressing the ethical challenges in school and college leadership, and how to respond to them. It recognises that in your work you face dilemmas where there are no easy answers: the interests of one child, or come to that one adult, don't necessarily line up neatly with those of another child.

Any institution without unlimited funding will sometimes have to make hard choices about resource allocation. Even with unlimited funding you'd have to make tough decisions about things like exclusions. You have a lot of responsibility and autonomy, and an ethical framework should help.

Inspection also involves balances and trade-offs. Every week, inspectors have to make difficult assessments, knowing the influence of the grades they give. To give one recent example, we have been criticised because we graded a school as Good, despite finding evidence of off-rolling.

For some people, that phrase, off-rolling, is enough to damn the school and everyone in it. But the school was and is a good school. Teaching is good, outcomes are good, behaviour is good. The small number of off-rolled pupils were in good alternative provision, supported by the council and other local schools. We graded leadership and management as requires improvement, but the school as good overall. We didn't make ourselves popular with that decision, but ethical leadership is about difficult but right decisions, even when they are unpopular. And off-rolling remains something that should not happen: that school has changed its practice.

For me, effective and ethical leadership comes down to a relentless focus on the substance of education, and in doing so, acting with integrity. These are the qualities we want to reward on inspection.

Consultation responses

With several weeks to go before [our consultation closes](#), we have already had over 5,000 responses. A very large majority is positive about our plans to create a quality of education judgement, and therefore to remove the outcomes judgement. This is central to putting the curriculum, the substance of education, back at the heart of professional dialogue in schools and colleges. It's been great to hear that these conversations are emerging, even before the first inspections under this new framework.

There has also been a generally positive reaction to our proposal not to consider internally created pupil performance or progress data. It is clear that the generation of data, whether it's for inspection, staff performance management, or to provide grade predictions for SLT, has got to an unsustainable level. Too many people feel they are working long hours to provide data that they don't think gives a useful picture of what children have learned, or that helps them to teach better. And it's forcing many of

them out of the profession altogether.

As I've said quite a few times before, I do understand that Ofsted has played its part in the growth of this industry. And I'm determined it has to end. There are of course exceptions, but in most cases the kind of assessment data that may be absolutely right for you to collect and use to improve curriculum and teaching, shouldn't be expected to carry the weight of inspection judgements. And if we spent too much of our limited time on inspection trying to verify and validate data, we'd have little left for the really important conversations about the intent, implementation and impact of the curriculum. And in fact I know many of you have already taken steps to reduce the amount of data collected in your schools.

But we have had some concerns fed back to us on this point, and I do want to address them. The first concern is that if Ofsted doesn't look at in-year data, we will put more weight on historic published results, perhaps to the detriment of the improving schools. This isn't right.

Remember, we are proposing to take out the outcomes judgement, so that historic performance data will already carry less weight. If your previous results were disappointing, but you've already started to make your curriculum more coherent, to increase your teachers' subject knowledge, and to assess and refine your curriculum and teaching as you go, that may be more important than what happened a year ago.

The second point I've heard on this is that inspection methods such as lesson observation and book scrutiny are no more reliable and valid than internal data. We have been doing some research work here, and we will have more to say about reliability when we confirm our plans. But there is perhaps a misunderstanding here – the point of these kinds of activities is to see whether the school's aims and intentions are being translated effectively into practice: does it all come together as it should? And it must be right that inspectors spend plenty of time in classrooms with teachers and pupils.

Inspections under the new framework will use conversations with school and subject leaders to assess curriculum intent. And they will use lesson visits, work scrutiny and conversations with pupils, teachers and parents to check whether what is being taught flows from and matches that intent. Of course, no single inspection activity on its own can ever be totally reliable. But based on our research and our pilots I am confident that a combination of all these inspection activities will produce valid and reliable judgements of the quality of education.

As I said earlier, it is important that inspections have the confidence of those of you on the receiving end, and we'd welcome further feedback on these points. I want us to work together to get it right.

On-site preparation

And it's in this spirit that we made our proposals about doing the preparation for inspection on site.

Currently, inspectors prepare before they arrive at a school. We're proposing that from September this preparation takes place at the school the afternoon before the inspection starts, so that the lead inspector and leaders can prepare collaboratively.

This came about in response to feedback from you that off-site preparation can be too data-driven. And this is not entirely surprising, since our main source of information before inspection is test and exam results.

So the point of on-site preparation is to allow for better communication, giving leaders the chance to inform inspection planning with their own knowledge of their school's strengths and weaknesses. As a former primary school head said to me: "If there's a conversation going on about my school, I'd rather be part of it so that I can put things in context." We know that on-site planning can provide more time to establish a good professional relationship between school leaders and the lead inspector.

We've been doing pilots all through the autumn and spring terms. And what they're showing is that many schools welcome the on-site prep. It makes the first day of inspection feel less like a cliff edge.

Similarly, our proposals for a 2-day section 8 inspection are designed to make more time to develop an understanding between inspectors and staff. There will be more time for conversation about the strengths of the school, how weaknesses will be addressed. And more time for staff at all levels to talk to inspectors about what they're seeing in lessons and in children's work. To provide that all important context. I am confident from our piloting that this allows more time for constructive professional dialogue between inspectors, leaders and teachers. More time for inspection to be done with you rather than to you.

We'll continue to run pilots through the rest of this term and the summer term –more than 200 in total – and use them to tweak the model. Every HMI will take part in at least one of these pilots. And we've heard the feedback about longer section 8 inspections in smaller schools.

Professional dialogue and middle leader secondments

I've spoken a lot about the importance of collaboration and discussion on inspection. And what makes that possible is the shared experiences of inspectors and school leaders. Ofsted is part of the education system, not separate from it. As you know, many of our inspectors are serving school leaders, and we plan to start a secondment programme early next year to involve even more of you.

Our plan is for one-year secondments to Ofsted for middle leaders. They will get access to our training and development, and through inspection gain insight into what all different types of schools are doing. We will get their expertise and up to date experiences of running a school. After 12 months they will go back to their school, hopefully having gained hugely from the experience and benefiting the school in turn.

We will pilot this approach with our current trained Ofsted Inspectors so that we can see how well it works. But in time, we'd like these secondments to be open to any school leader who has had some whole school responsibility. We see this as forming part of the development journey of talented school leaders who are on a trajectory to headship or beyond. After the pilot, we hope to open the scheme more widely.

We are determined to be a force for improvement in education and we believe this scheme will help by widening our recruitment net and sharing our training. And of course we will benefit enormously from the direct experience that school leaders have. It really is an exciting time for people to join us.

Subject reviews

The work that Ofsted is most known for, our inspection work, should help school leaders and governors with their own improvement plan, by providing evidence and recommendations on how to get better. But that's not all it does.

The body of evidence we gather and the collective experience of our inspectors also provide us with a great deal of insight into issues across education and social care. I've always believed that we should use our insight to influence public debates. And so we put a great deal of effort into our research reports, making sure they are properly informed by evidence.

[This week's report into knife crime](#) is a case in point. The report was informed by careful research over many months with schools, parents and children across London. And we were very pleased that it received some positive attention, despite the ins and outs of the Brexit votes taking over a lot of the news agenda. It gave us a chance to rebut the harmful narrative that somehow school exclusions are directly responsible for gang violence.

[Research has similarly informed the new framework](#), alongside the accumulated experience of years of inspection. This work has shown us that up until quite recently, the conversation about curriculum and pedagogy has often been too generic. We have occasionally lost sight of the crucial differences between the subjects we teach, their long and proud history as academic disciplines, and the implications that has for the curriculum and teaching.

So starting next year, initially in a small range of subjects, we intend to publish a series of subject reviews, based on what we are seeing on inspection under the new framework. This will be complemented by a detailed look at what the research says in those areas. I very much hope these reports will contribute to the resurgence in the importance of subject disciplines that I see already underway across the country.

Supporting heads

So we want to see our reports and research provoking thoughtful and

constructive debate, informed by the evidence. However, I know some of the debates schools have to navigate can be challenging.

All schools are required to help prepare children for life in modern Britain, including through teaching about tolerance and respect for people who may be different from them. I know the vast majority of schools feel confident doing this, and do it well.

I am pleased to see the progress being made on the live issue relating to equalities teaching in one part of the city we're in today. The dialogue being taken forward between parents and the school is a very welcome step towards reaching a resolution. All parties need to ensure the children can remain in school, receiving the education they deserve.

It is through calm and considered dialogue, undertaken in a constructive spirit on all sides, that we make progress. The voices and experiences of children are often the first casualties in arguments between adults. So I am encouraged by the latest developments.

Conclusion

In my time at Ofsted so far, I've done all I can to create a national conversation about substance and integrity in education. ASCL and many of you in this room have been important voices in that conversation. We are all part of the same education system and we are all working towards the same aim, which is the best possible standard of schooling for this country's children.

So, on that note, I would like to thank you all for the work that you do every day, in the interests of the children you teach. And I look forward to another year of strong collaborative work on the issues that matter to all of us. I know we are at our best when we are joined in substance and integrity. Thank you.