



ASCL'S MANIFESTO FOR THE 2024 GENERAL ELECTION



INTRODUCTION



In September 2021, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) published [*A Great Education for Every Child: The ASCL Blueprint for a Fairer Education System*](#). The Blueprint set out a long-term vision for how we can ensure all children and young people, particularly the most disadvantaged, can flourish and thrive in our education system.

Much has happened in the intervening two years. We have gained a clearer sense of the wide-ranging and ongoing impact of the pandemic on both the pupils and the staff in our schools and colleges. We have lived through one of the most turbulent political periods in living memory. We are experiencing a cost-of-living crisis which is highlighting more starkly than ever the social and economic inequality in our society. And we are in the middle of a period of industrial unrest, with far-reaching consequences across the public sector and beyond.

While we have seen progress on some of the changes we call for in the Blueprint, most of the problems we highlighted with the current education system remain – with many having become even more challenging and entrenched.

The next government will come to power at one of the most difficult moments in recent history. It will need to deal with multiple, inter-connected challenges, and to plot a course towards a more positive future.

Education, as ever, is key to that aim. In recent years, the government has too often appeared to see education as a drain on our resources, and those working in education as difficult individuals to be managed and contained.

This has to change. The next government must seize the opportunity to see education as an investment, and all those who work in it as key partners in the path to a better, happier, more equal and more prosperous future.

This document sets out a roadmap to that destination. We would urge all political parties to engage with its recommendations, and to commit to enacting them if they are granted the opportunity to do so.

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION

It's easy to get carried away by 'big ideas' in education. We all have our own experiences and memories of school. Many of us have children or grandchildren at school now. Most people have deeply held views about what school or college should be like.

This is important. It's helpful and healthy that we, as a society, are passionate about educating our children and young people. And we want and need politicians who have a strong, positive vision for our education system.

But we also need to be realistic about where we are, as a country, in 2023. A decade of austerity, followed by the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, has decimated our public services. We need to rebuild those services from the ground up, to provide firm foundations for future change. At a time when national spending is constrained, it's imperative that government's time, energy and resources are focused on areas where they will make the biggest difference, and address the biggest challenges.

There is a thriving educational research community that can support that work. It's also essential that policymakers listen to the experience of leaders, teachers, support staff, pupils and families 'on the ground' about the greatest challenges they face. Only by doing this can we collectively develop policies and encourage practices which will address those challenges, and set a strong, ethical course for the future.

ASCL's 24,000 members – all serving leaders in primary, secondary, specialist and post-16 education across the UK – tell us that the biggest challenges they currently face are as follows:

1 | A recruitment and retention crisis

A sufficient supply of high-quality leaders, teachers and support staff in our schools and colleges is essential if we are to maintain or improve current educational standards and enable children and young people to develop the knowledge and skills to which they are entitled – and which we need as a nation. This foundational aspect of our education system – one of the key responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Education – is crumbling.

The number of people wanting to become teachers is falling at an alarming rate. The government has missed its target for people undertaking Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in every year but one over the last decade. In 2022/23 only 71% of the overall target was met. For the first time in recent years the target for primary teachers was missed, and at secondary the picture is now disastrous. Just 59% of the secondary ITT places were filled this year, with five subjects recruiting less than 40% of their target (business studies, computing, design and technology, modern foreign languages and physics). This is despite the fact this cohort will be the first to benefit from the new £30,000 starting salary. Special school staffing is in crisis, with schools having to rely heavily on temporary staff, and teaching assistants leading classes.

There has been a decline in teachers' real-term pay for more than a decade, in excess of most other public sector workers. This gap is particularly stark for experienced teachers and for leaders, as their pay has grown more slowly than that of newly qualified teachers¹. While the 6.5% pay increase for 2023/24 is welcome, it goes nowhere near reversing this decade-long decline. And the situation is particularly acute in colleges. The gap in the median salary between staff in schools and staff in colleges is currently over £7000 and – depending on the extent to which college staff pay is able to keep pace with the uplift to school staff pay in 2023/24 – is likely to become even wider.²

1 As at third quarter 2022, school leaders' pay was 33% lower than it was in real terms in August 2010, based on RPI. RPI is the most appropriate inflation measure for pay as it includes mortgage costs, and housing costs are the biggest outlay for wage earners.


2 A recent Institute for Fiscal Studies [report](#) on college teacher pay includes more detail on these disparities.

Teacher and leader workload and working hours remain a persistent problem, and this is the most cited reason for people leaving the profession before retirement. The DfE's own research into this issue – their Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders report – showed that:

- full-time leaders work on average 57.5 hours per week, and teachers 51.9
- part-time leaders work on average 48.8 hours per week, and teachers 37.3
- four in ten leaders work at least 60 hours per week

We know that moving into and staying in school and college leadership is increasingly unattractive due to the poor pay differentials, less favourable working conditions and disincentives to work until retirement age. This is compounded by the extreme pressure and lack of job security associated with our high-stakes accountability system. The retention rate after five years for new headteachers under the age of 50 is 84% in primary schools and just 75% in secondary schools.³

We also know that entry to, and progression within, teaching and leadership continues to be more challenging for people with certain protected characteristics. Recent research⁴ from the National Foundation for Educational Research, for example, found that the under-representation of people from ethnic minority backgrounds, most pronounced at senior leadership and headship levels, is largely driven by disparities in the early career stages, particularly Initial Teacher Training.




Addressing the recruitment and retention crisis in education must be a top priority of any incoming government. Failing to do so will render any other plans for education impossible.

2 | A widening disadvantage gap

When we published our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System* in 2021, we were moving from a period in which the attainment gap between richer and poorer children and young people was narrowing, albeit glacially slowly, into one in which this positive direction of travel had stopped. Since then, we have started to go backwards.

[Analysis](#) by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) released in December 2022 showed that the attainment gap at age 16 between poor children and their wealthier peers had increased by the largest annual amount since comparable statistics have been available. Much of the reduction in the disadvantage gap over the last decade has now been reversed. Based on GCSE results from 2021, disadvantaged students, on average, achieved 1.34 grades lower than their peers.

Children living in persistent poverty (defined by EPI as those who have been eligible for free school meals for 80% or more of their school lives) fare even worse. They achieve, on average 1.7 grades lower than their peers. This gap is now at its highest level since reformed GCSEs were introduced in 2017. And the number of children in this group – living in persistent poverty – has also grown significantly, from 22.1% of disadvantaged pupils in 2019 to 27.6% in 2021 – a rise of over 9,000 pupils in Year 11 alone.



The difference in attainment between richer and poorer children – and the fact that this gap is now widening – is a blight on our society. Any government committed to improving social equity – or 'levelling up' – must find ways to reverse this trend as soon as possible.

3 Data from www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-leadership-in-england-2010-to-2020-characteristics-and-trends

4 [Racial equality in the teacher workforce - NFER](#)


3 | Ever-expanding expectations on schools and colleges

The near collapse of many of the services designed to support vulnerable children and young people, coupled with the growing number of children living in poverty and the increasingly complex needs of pupils, is making it increasingly difficult for schools and colleges to do their job. Our members tell us that their institutions have become the 'fourth emergency service', or the 'last civic institution standing'.

ASCL recently published the bleak results of a survey showing the deplorable state of our under-resourced children's support services. This survey of 1,120 headteachers in state-funded schools and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland found that:

- 99% said children's mental health services were inadequate
- 96% said children's social care services were inadequate
- 93% said local authority educational psychology services were inadequate
- 81% said local authority attendance support services were inadequate
- 64% said police support services were inadequate
- 53% said external support for careers advice and guidance was inadequate

Schools and colleges are left to pick up the pieces. They are providing additional mental health and counselling support, employing more pastoral and attendance support staff, employing their own educational psychologists, and providing support such as food banks and uniforms for children living in poverty. And they are doing so with no additional resources.



The ever-expanding expectations on schools and colleges are having a profound impact on their ability to focus on their core purpose – education. The next government must commit to rebuilding the support services children and young people desperately need – particularly post pandemic – so that schools and colleges can focus on teaching and learning.

We would strongly encourage all parties, as they firm up their election manifestos and their plans for government, to focus relentlessly on policies which will help to tackle these three major issues.

WHAT SHOULD THE NEXT GOVERNMENT DO?

Building on our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System*, and our more recent policy work, ASCL would advise any incoming government to commit to the following policies, in order to tackle the challenges outlined above. As these challenges are inter-connected, many of our proposed policies would help to address more than one challenge, but we have grouped them for ease.

1 | To address the recruitment and retention crisis

a Provide much-needed investment to improve teacher and leader pay

- Commit to an annual uplift in the pay of all staff working in our schools and colleges which addresses the decade-long erosion of their real-terms pay and at least keeps pace with inflation. This should apply to all points within all pay ranges, be equitable across schools and colleges, and be fully funded by central government at an institutional level.⁵
- Review the teacher and leader pay framework to ensure:
 - it is competitive at all levels
 - differentials between levels sufficiently incentivise those with the right potential to come forward into leadership positions
 - it sufficiently compensates for the inability of schools to fully compete with other employers when it comes to flexible working opportunities
 - a fixed timeframe for implementation is agreed with statutory consultees
- Broaden the scope of the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document (STPCD) to include all school leaders, including Business Leaders, to ensure that they are remunerated in the same way as other leadership colleagues. The STPCD should also cover roles common in multi-academy trusts (MATs), including CEOs, and require MATs and academies to use the Document as a benchmark in their pay setting.

b Introduce other incentives and remove barriers to joining and remaining in teaching and leadership

- Introduce tailored student loan repayment arrangements for all teachers and leaders. This should range from no repayment for teachers in certain shortage subjects to a sliding scale of repayment rates depending on subject, phase, sector, whether the teacher or leader is in a hard-to-recruit area, and how long they stay in the profession.
- Address the negative impact of the annual allowance and lifetime allowance tax charges in the Teachers' and Local Government Pension Schemes, in order to reduce the incentive for experienced school and college leaders to retire early. The increase in the annual allowance threshold from 2023-24 is welcome, but what is required is that only growth in the accrued benefits contributes to the annual allowance calculation, with the effect of inflation removed. Likewise, the recent scrapping of the Lifetime Allowance tax charge must be guaranteed within both pension schemes.
- Undertake a review of recent changes to the Initial Teacher Training market which have led to the closure of a number of providers and left many potential teachers unable to access training in their local area

5 See [ASCL's submission of evidence to the STRB 33rd remit](#) for more detail on what this uplift would need to look like.

c Take meaningful action to reduce teacher and leader workload and improve wellbeing

- Consider ways in which teacher contact time could be reduced, to reduce workload and provide greater capacity for teacher professional development and learning.
- Ensure that school and college leaders are protected from excessive working hours by agreeing national standards around maximum working hours and guaranteed minimum leave periods.
- Set up an expert group to explore tangible ways in which technology might meaningfully reduce the workload of teachers, leaders and other staff.

d Reduce the pressure of accountability on leaders and teachers

- Reform the inspection system by replacing graded judgements with a narrative description of the school or college's strengths and weaknesses; assuring safeguarding compliance through light-touch annual audits; making the inspection process more transparent; and other actions to focus inspection on support rather than punishment.⁶
- Replace the school and college performance tables with an 'accountability dashboard' or 'balanced scorecard', to reflect the breadth of outcomes parents and young people care about.
- Provide clarity on the status of the current ambition that all schools should be part of multi-academy trusts. Review mechanisms which compel schools down this route in a blunt way, particularly the power for DfE Regional Directors to issue any school with two consecutive Ofsted judgements of less than 'good' with an academy order. Review the role and remit of the Regional Directors and their teams, to focus this more closely on providing and promoting tailored support to help schools develop, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of serving leaders.

e Promote professionalism, equality, diversity and inclusion in the school and college workforce

- Work with grassroots organisations, unions and other groups to collect, monitor and understand how well people with protected characteristics are represented across all staff in our schools and colleges.
- Actively support trustees, governors and leaders to introduce policies and approaches which encourage people with protected characteristics to enter and progress within their organisations – including policies which support returners from maternity leave and staff wishing to work flexibly.
- Value teachers as professionals and experts, and work with the profession to develop and support varied career pathways for school and college staff, including for teachers who wish to remain in the classroom and deepen their expertise.

2 | To narrow the disadvantage gap

a Improve school and college funding and how this is distributed

- Develop the national funding formulae into a clear, consistent approach to 0-19 funding, based on a detailed analysis of what every child and young person needs to succeed. This needs to be both sufficient overall and appropriately distributed to properly reflect the varying levels of disadvantage in different communities, and particularly needs to address the persistent underfunding of post-16 education.⁷
- Provide three-year funding settlements to schools and colleges, including special schools and alternative provision, to enable them to plan and spend their budgets with more confidence.
- Reform the pupil premium to provide funding for disadvantaged 16 to 19 year-olds which matches that for younger pupils, and to weight it towards pupils in persistent poverty.
- Extend the criteria for free school meal eligibility to all families in receipt of universal credit, and introduce a system of auto-enrolment for all eligible children and young people.
- Invest in the school and college estate – expand the school and college rebuilding programme to ensure all children and young people are learning in a safe and conducive environment (including a phased removal of asbestos from school and college buildings), and fund schools and colleges to retrofit their buildings to meet net zero targets.

6 See ASCL's discussion paper on [The Future of Inspection](#) for more detail on these proposals.

7 See ASCL's paper on [The True Cost of Education](#) for an evidence-based approach to how sufficient funding for schools might be calculated.

b Implement and build on current plans to reform the SEND system

- Ensure all policies related to SEND are based on the principle that effective provision for pupils with SEND is central to successful school and college development, rather than an afterthought.
- Address the inadequacy of SEND funding, investing in a way that eradicates historic debt and supports the system to thrive. (At the moment funding allocated to high needs is disappearing into the black hole of deficit recovery and is not getting to the frontline where it can make a difference and meet need.)
- Replace the notional SEND budget (the proportion of a school's core revenue budget which is 'notionally' set aside for meeting the needs of pupils with SEND, but which bears no relation to the actual needs of pupils in a school) with an agile funding model which responds rapidly to meet the current and sometimes fluctuating needs of pupils.
- Create funding transparency across schools, families and local authorities, empowering these stakeholders to work effectively together to ensure the needs of all children are met (and seen to be met) in a consistent way.

c Implement an incremental programme of curriculum and assessment reform, to ensure these are fit for purpose for all children and young people

- Establish an independent curriculum and assessment review body, along similar lines to the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) on teacher pay and conditions. This body should be tasked with considering the learning we need to prioritise in our schools and colleges, what long-term changes may be needed to the curriculum, and how learning should be assessed. It should provide advice to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State on all curriculum and assessment-related matters.
- Make a slimmed-down, high-quality national curriculum a mandatory entitlement for pupils in all state schools, including academies, up to the age of 16 (with an agreed amount of specialism permitted from Year 9 or 10) in order to set a truly national expectation for the core education children and young people are entitled to receive.
- Champion inclusive curriculum design that enables representation and access to all.
- Reverse the current plan to de-fund the majority of BTECs and other applied general qualifications, which currently provide well-established pathways for young people, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, into further and higher education and careers.
- Introduce a new, high-quality universal 'passport' qualification in literacy and numeracy, to enable all school leavers to demonstrate their competence in these crucial subjects, and to eliminate the need for the endless cycle of GCSE English and maths resits.⁸
- Reform accountability measures at all key stages to incentivise schools and colleges to ensure all pupils follow a broad, rich curriculum, including the arts and technology.
- Work with schools, colleges, exam boards and other organisations to develop a national strategy on the effective and beneficial use of technology in education, including artificial intelligence.

d Work with industry to rapidly scale up the number of high-quality apprenticeships available to young people

- Ringfence a significant proportion of the apprenticeship levy for young people under the age of 25.
- Increase the funding rate for providers of apprenticeships to reflect the high cost of providing off-the-job training for apprentices.
- Review the curriculum and assessment requirements for apprenticeships, to ensure all apprentices benefit from high-quality training, and end-point assessment arrangements are appropriate.

8 See [ASCL's proposals for the 2022 schools white paper – Paper 3: Curriculum reform](#) – for more detail on our literacy and numeracy 'passport' proposal.

3 | To enable schools and colleges to focus on teaching and learning

a Take meaningful action to end child poverty

- Develop and implement a comprehensive national strategy to end the scandal of almost 30% of children in the UK living in poverty.

b Re-invest in children's services, and clarify where the responsibilities of schools and colleges beyond education begin and end

- Urgently rebuild capacity in child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS); children's social care; local authority educational family, psychology and attendance support services; police support services; and careers advice and guidance services.
- Set up a cross-government task force to agree a multi-agency strategy for supporting vulnerable children – to reduce the burden of this essential work on schools and colleges.
- Clarify what the expectations on schools and colleges are in providing wider support to children and young people, alongside other agencies, and ensure they are sufficiently resourced to provide all services they are expected to deliver.

Conclusion

The political, economic and health challenges of the last few years have taken a major toll on our children and young people. The impact has fallen unequally, with those living in poverty bearing a particularly heavy burden.

Schools and colleges are at the frontline of dealing with the fallout, doing their best to provide the education and support their pupils need with dwindling resources and significant impact on the health and wellbeing of their staff.

This must change. We cannot continue to run our education system, and the people within it, into the ground.

We urge all parties to commit to rebuilding the education system, and to implementing the proposals set out in this document. ASCL will do everything in its power to support the incoming government to enact the changes we so urgently need.





The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association for all school and college leaders. We are proud to support and represent over 24,000 school and college leaders of primary, secondary, specialist and post-16 education from across the UK. Our members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people, in both the state and independent sectors.

We work to shape national education policy, provide advice and support to our members and deliver first-class professional development.

We speak on behalf of members and act on behalf of children and young people.

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