

Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

5 October 2022

Dear Secretary of State

We are writing to express our dismay at some of the comments you made in your speech at the party conference yesterday, and our concern at what they might presage.

We spent a constructive, we thought, two days at the conference – speaking at a number of fringe events, sometimes alongside one of your ministerial team. At all of those events we highlighted the major challenges currently affecting our schools and colleges. These are the inter-related issues of a severe and worsening lack of funding, a rapidly growing staff recruitment and retention crisis, and the impact of our high-stakes accountability system.

Our 22,000 members, who lead schools and colleges across the UK, are currently extremely worried about their ability to keep their institutions afloat in light of these severe challenges. They are doing everything they can – often at the expense of their own health and wellbeing after a gruelling two and a half years – to continue to provide the high-quality education and support our children and young people deserve.

In this context, we were frankly appalled to hear you talk about people leading and working in our schools and colleges as “hanging on to mediocrity”, and claim that education needs “constant attention and constant pressure” in order to “drive it forward”.

We recognise, of course, that there are some schools and colleges which are performing less well than others. And we share your ambition for all children and young people to be given every opportunity to achieve their potential. This is what drives us and our members.

However, we completely reject your premise that any school or college is “hanging on to mediocrity”. As you rightly recognised in your speech, the vast majority of schools – close to 90%, in fact – are currently rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding. Schools rated as less than good, according to [recent research](#) by the Education Policy Institute and University College London, often face a combination of ‘unusually challenging circumstances’, including high teacher turnover, high pupil mobility, more disadvantaged pupils, being located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and having higher levels of pupils with SEND. These are not schools which are choosing to be ‘mediocre’; they are schools battling against the odds to do the very best they can for some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

We also strongly refute your suggestion that the answer to improving outcomes in these schools lies in “constant pressure” from government. On the contrary, the extreme pressure already felt by leaders, teachers and support staff is one of the main drivers of the current exodus of staff from our schools and colleges. In a recent survey, ASCL members listed the following factors as reasons they are considering leaving school or college leadership:

- exhaustion / fatigue (68%)
- unsustainable workload / working hours (67%)
- salary (59%)
- lack of recognition / respect from government (57%)
- stress (53%)
- wellbeing (52%)
- accountability measures (50%)
- government education policy (50%)
- pressure from funding restraints (49%)

Self-evidently, this is not a problem to which the answer is 'more pressure from government'. Rather than raising the stakes even higher, and taking cheap shots at a profession already on its knees, your Department should be moving heaven and earth to provide schools and colleges with the funding they need to keep their doors open, the support they need to provide education and care to children and young people with increasingly complex needs, and a functioning pipeline of teachers to staff their organisations. Anything else is mere posturing.

We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss these concerns with you as soon as possible.

Geoff Barton
General Secretary

Evelyn Forde
ASCL President 2022/2023