



Max Colson

Thank you so much. It's astonishing, it's so different from when I went to school. iSing Pop didn't exist then but what fantastic talent we've just seen. I was thinking we're watching future singers, dancers, entertainers, actors, actresses and it was wonderful to see them all. And it's fantastic to be here, thank you so much for inviting me, it's a really pleasurable way to start the day.

As Education Secretary, I often get asked, 'What does education mean? Is it a particular skill? Is it a subject or is something else?' and I think we saw the 'something else' in the room today. And there is one unifying factor, as well, it's something, an education enables you to do something that you couldn't beforehand. We were hearing about the class who learned seven songs and dances; something they learned in a week, something you learned that you couldn't do beforehand.

So, preparing for this speech gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own schooling, which was always in faith schools. It was a different faith, a different denomination, Catholic schools. I remember starting school aged four and it was a Catholic school called St Mary's in St Helens, which is just outside Liverpool, and it was a terrifying experience. I think it is always quite a terrifying experience to start school, not least because it was run by nuns and they were dressed in black robes, and they absolutely terrified me. Through their kindness I eventually overcome my fears and I began to flourish at the school. And I learned an early lesson which is not to judge by appearance.

Overcoming fear is a valuable life skill and one that I use, I must say, every day in the world of politics. And indeed I'm using it right now addressing the Annual Conference of a church – a clear demonstration that I've learned to do something that I didn't used to do. That's the power of education, even if those nuns might say I'm addressing the wrong denomination!

You know what, I'm very grateful to St Mary's, I'm very grateful to all my schools and I'm going to name them because I don't actually know if any of them know that I went to them: St Mary's in Haydock was the first one, then I went to Holy Family & St Michael's in Pontefract in Yorkshire, back to St Agnes in Knowsley where I grew up for most of my childhood and then St Augustine's was my senior school, St Augustine of Canterbury in Knowsley as well. They basically all of them, because all of the teachers, all of those faith schools which were fantastic schools, they got me where I am today, but they also instilled faith in me and it's a core part of who I am today.

And faith is something I feel very safe addressing in this church, I'm sure everyone can understand it; and you could see it shining through, actually, in the early part of the day and the introduction. And I want you to know how much I really value the role the Church of England plays in educating our children. Its reputation for excellence in schools speaks for itself and you are one of my Department's most valued partners. You provide over a fifth of state-funded schools, a quarter of all primary schools and are the largest provider of Academy trusts. Your schools are more likely to be 'good' or 'outstanding' than those without a religious character. There are Anglican colleges in every continent of the world, bar Antarctica (a potential growth opportunity perhaps!). You are transforming lives and you should be really proud of the work you do; and on behalf of the children you teach, I am eternally grateful.

Put simply, without the Church of England, pupils across the country will be learning less and doing worse. And a big part of that is that you have used the Academy trust model. This is the structure that we think is going to make the biggest difference for our children. And we know it only works if focused on improving quality all the time; always striving for excellence.

And I can promise you that I will work tirelessly to support quality teaching and spread best practice. I'm taking forward the Review of Regulation and Commissioning so that we can do this to help improve outcomes for all of our children. And that's why I also want more schools to be in high quality trusts. To support you, we will protect your schools so that when they become Academies they retain a statutory freedoms and protections that apply to church schools. It means working in each area to shape the right plan at the right pace that builds the quality that our pupils need.

In the past 10 years we've made huge strides to give every child the chance in life that they deserve and you are all central to that success. Today, 88% of schools are rated Ofsted 'good' or 'outstanding', compared to 68% when we took office in 2010. And since 2010, in just eight years we've brought the UK up the Pisa rankings – the international rankings – from 25th to 14th in reading; and 28th to 18th in maths. And your schools and our children have played a massive part in this, but to really flourish we must go further still.

I'm determined to ensure that more children meet our expected standards of reading, writing and maths. And it may not be very welcome to everyone, but I do agree with the Prime Minister on some kind of maths to 18. We use maths every day in our lives from grocery shopping to buying financial products and mortgages, to understanding good debt from bad debt; and we must equip children to deal with life's complexities. But to make all of this add up, there has to be great teachers. Many of you would have heard me praise my apprenticeship, which provided me a great start to my working life at the age of 16. But that journey began with a school teacher called Mr Ashcroft. He would stay late to teach me and another girl technical drawing and engineering; and that allowed me to get 10 O-levels, as they were then, at a school where most children struggled to achieve four or five. And all that was thanks to one teacher at one school, helping me to realise my one opportunity that I found in Knowsley.

I want every child to be inspired by a teacher like Mr Ashcroft. That's why we've put in place a world class teacher development system. That includes the delivery of 150,000 fully funded national professional qualifications by 2024. And I want all school leaders to think about NPQs can benefit both their staff and pupils. And I know the Church of England is a much valued provider of these. We also know they're hugely popular so we want to enable more of our teachers to be able to do them.

I'm going to talk about something which is less pleasant for a moment. For our teachers to have an impact, they need to be in school. I understand the pressures that most people, all of us, are facing including our teachers as we struggle with some of the economic challenges due to the war in Ukraine and the Pandemic. Inflation is eating away at all of our pay cheques.

On top of my in-tray when I first got this job in October, I got a joint letter from the four major teaching unions and I was asked to get an extra £2 billion for next year and the year after to support our schools with increased costs and to fund the pay rises that we had agreed to. We were one of the very few Departments to be given that money in the Autumn Statement, and yes we did get the £2 billion that was asked for both years. The unions asked and we delivered. And that uplift means we will be funding schools in real terms to the highest level ever in history: £58.8 billion. It may not have been smart for me to use my political capital in the first few weeks, but I hope it does go to show my personal commitment to our schools.

And I know from speaking to thousands of teachers, many in your schools, that there is much, much more that we need to do. My promise to you is I will always listen. Saying 'my door is always open' is a cliché but it is true. I'm a very open person, people will find that and say that about me. My ask of all of you is that you now work with me to keep as many schools open and as many children in school as possible during the disruptive strike-action.

I began by saying how much my education had helped me in my life and in my career and I'd like to finish by sharing these three things I've learned throughout that career: first, is you don't get very far without acting on what you know works; second, you won't achieve much without a visionary leader; and finally, you'll barely get out of the starting blocks without working together and most importantly collaborating with others. I'm very much looking forward to collaborating with all of you to make sure we have a world class education system, flourishing for all our children. Thank you.

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