

Education Secretary addresses Confederation of School Trusts Annual Conference

I am delighted to have the chance to join you all today and add my voice to yours on why I believe 'truly civic' is such a timely theme.

But before I do, there are a couple of things I would like to say first.

I am sure I speak for all of us when I say we are united by the horror of what is being done to our fellow sovereign state Ukraine.

I have been humbled by how schools and communities across the country are opening their arms to welcome those who have had to flee their homeland.

And that leads me on to another, even bigger thank you for the way you have handled the past two years.

I can honestly say I am in awe, in awe, of how you have kept young people learning during the pandemic. So thank you, a massive thank you for your dedication and your professionalism.

Although covid has now moved from pandemic to endemic, people's worries about the cost of living continue to present challenges for all of us.

But there is much room for hope and optimism.

I'd like to spend my time with you today to explain why I think we are turning a corner.

Although the pandemic has been hugely disruptive across all our schools we are returning to normal.

Our plans for recovery are working.

Thanks to the hard work of teachers and staff, primary pupils are making up their lost learning in maths and reading.

Our GCSE and A Level students are sitting exams for the first time in two years.

Our national tutoring programme is set to become mainstream, giving bespoke help to all children who need it, when they need it.

Over 1.5 million courses of tuition have been started since November 2020. And with time still left, I urge you all to register so we can see this number rise even further.

We are building on the success of Oak National Academy's work in the

pandemic. We are establishing a new arms-length national curriculum body to co-create packages of free, adaptable, digital curriculum resources and video lessons.

The schools' budget has had a substantial £7 billion cash increase which will enable schools to make sure every child is supported to reach their potential. This will bring the total funding to £56bn by 2024-25.

This £7bn is money that will help schools increase teachers' pay, including by delivering on our manifesto pledge of a £30,000 starting salary.

My job as Education Secretary is to make sure that every child, wherever they are from, has the same chance to get on in life. Everything I do is driven by a clear duty to make excellence the expectation, not the exception, for every child right across our nation.

This is why we published the Schools White Paper, that sets out ambitions for all children across the country.

This is also why we commissioned the recently completed Independent Care Review and published the SEND and Alternative Provision Green Paper to make sure that our ambitions extend to every child, especially the most vulnerable.

I know from experience – whether in business or leading the vaccine rollout – that the hardest thing to do with any complex system is to scale it successfully.

But I also know this is exactly what our best trusts already do. And the Government can support you – our very best leaders – to scale what works and deliver on our vision of opportunity for all.

I want to build an inclusive education and care system in which all children, young people and adults – no matter their circumstances – have great options for high quality education and training at every stage of their lives.

I set out in the Schools White Paper that I envision strong trusts playing a leading role in achieving our shared ambitions for children.

Let me be clear: I know that strong trusts deliver transformative benefits for children, especially disadvantaged children. You are my champions and I need you to succeed in our shared endeavour.

For our part, in Government, we will take a holistic approach to this, considering the role of commissioning, regulation and inspection – through the Review of Regulation and Commissioning, which I'll say a bit more about shortly.

And as part of this, by now you will all be aware of the Schools Bill.

It's something I am hugely proud of. Why?

Because at its heart, this Bill will support our shared ambition to help

children, parents and teachers benefit from the strong trusts that you run.

Our Bill includes proposals to safeguard schools' characteristics so that more and more schools feel confident joining great trusts.

It will also propose base line requirements for trusts to meet.

Because the reality is – and the Confederation of School Trusts has rightly raised this concern before – that we don't want those who are failing, to damage the excellent reputation that you have all worked so hard to build.

But let me be clear: this is not about the Department for Education telling you how to run your trusts.

I believe – this Government believes – that you know best how to deliver excellence. It is not something that can be achieved by a list of standards, or a piece of regulation.

There has been some concern about the scope of our Bill, especially with regard to Academy Trusts.

Specifically, I know some people are concerned about Clause 1 and the possible centralisation of power over academies.

I hear those concerns. So let me say again; I will NOT impose any new burdens that would restrict the very freedoms that enable you to be such a success.

I'm here to listen to you. I want to get this right. We need to get this right.

Let us not lose sight of why we all want to empower strong trusts. I have always said that I will be the evidence-led Secretary of State and the evidence tells me that every day that a child is not in a strong trust is a missed opportunity to improve their life chances.

I am a man on a mission, my friends, and I know you are with me on this mission.

And I need your help to go further. Standards in some areas of our country are still too low, so we need our best leaders and trusts (that means you) to drive change and level up opportunity.

Because children in our education system now, and the many more that will follow in years to come, depend on it.

So, I am committed to working with you so we get this right. Indeed, I need your help to get this right. I look forward to working together to ensure we continue to deliver effectively, to secure the best outcomes for children across the country.

To make this happen, I want to work with you all on a review of the way we will regulate and commission the school system.

The White Paper and the Schools Bill recognise that the current regulatory system for trusts wasn't designed for a fully trust-led system comprising thousands of schools across the country.

Let's put a more positive spin on it: you have become a victim of your own success! It is because of the increase in the number, and size, and quality of academy trusts and the many benefits you bring to pupils, parents and staff alike that we are now in a position to put the trust system on a permanent statutory footing.

We will be working closely with all partners on the review, bringing clarity and consistency for children, parents and trusts.

As I will never tire of saying, you are our allies on this journey.

I do not believe that we can regulate for excellence. The Department for Education's job is to create a climate that supports you to run excellent schools for the pupils you serve, not to impose a model on you from Whitehall.

My job, and yours too, is to make sure we support one another and work together. If we do that, my friends, we will achieve something truly special.

We know how brilliant you are, and that many of you already show your civic duty by helping schools outside your own academy trust so that other pupils in the wider community can benefit.

I share your view of the role of education in society, and of trusts as a new form of civic institution, with a responsibility to advance education for the wider public benefit. And I know trusts take this civic responsibility seriously, acting as a force for good within their communities and for the children they educate.

We have seen this especially during the challenges of the past two years, with trusts playing a vital role in supporting their staff and schools during the changing reality we all faced.

We also know how strong families of schools weathered the Covid storms more effectively than standalone schools, and I saw up-close the Herculean efforts to keep schools open through the new year's Omicron wave.

Many trusts came together with others including local authorities, to support vulnerable children and families during this time, again displaying their civic duty.

Again, levelling up is our civic duty in action. It is a collective response that says no, we are not going to just accept that some areas of the country are routinely left behind.

We must spread brilliance and opportunity, so that it extends equally from the most prosperous county towns to our most rural and isolated spots, and to our most vibrant cities.

We need schools, trusts, local authorities and faith bodies to all work together to build strong and inclusive families of schools in every region.

I began by mentioning Ukraine. It is a terrifying example of what happens when individual rights and freedoms are under attack.

I also said the subject of being truly civic has never been more timely.

I would like to thank the CST, Leora and her team, for reminding us of something that people can all too easily take for granted.

We are living in a country of opportunity, where individuals have more chance to fulfil their potential than ever before.

It is a tolerant and generous country, I would go so far as to call it the best country in the world, and we must continue to cherish the rights and freedoms that underpin it.

I urge you, colleagues and friends, to work with me to deliver opportunity for all.

You are my best allies on this journey, and we shall together make our education system a shining civic example.

Thank you.