

Education Secretary addresses NAHT Conference

Good morning and thank you Paul for those kind words.

I am delighted to have been appointed Education Secretary by the Prime Minister.

To me, this office is the most important in Government. Every day that I am able to work with you to help our children and young people is a privilege and a huge responsibility.

So I would like to take this opportunity to thank the National Association of Headteachers and Paul, in particular, for your work during and before this pandemic.

I'd also like to say thank you to all of you, in this room, or watching remotely, for everything you have done throughout the disruption. You have gone above and beyond to support children, families and communities in the most challenging of circumstances.

I know that some of these challenges continue. But you have never stopped helping your staff deliver an excellent education that gives young people the tools they'll need to get on in life.

Thank you.

I know better than most how much difference your work can make. I was born in Baghdad in 1967 and fled with my family from Saddam Hussein's regime in the decade after.

Had we stayed, I have no doubt that I would have been sent to fight on the frontline in the 1980s Iran-Iraq War. Instead, we came to this country.

I'm not going to stand before you and say it was easy... I couldn't speak English! In any other country, I might have been left behind, forgotten about, my future vanishing before I'd even finished school.

But here, in this country, my teachers never gave up on me.

Every day, they challenged me to do better and supported me along the way, so that I was able to make the best of the opportunities in front of me.

That is my story.

There are children in classrooms today who will grow up with their own tales to tell, and I want to work with you to make sure that these stories end in opportunity, not a closed door.

You may be teaching a future Education Secretary, I want them to have the

same opportunity that I enjoyed.

I will listen to you and work with you to make sure we do right by children and learners.

And I will also be honest with you.

This will not always be an easy journey for us, I know that leadership can be a lonely place at times.

There will have been sleepless nights, worrying about the children in your schools... I know all about sleepless nights, having just worked as Vaccines Minister.

It is a different set of challenges that I am focused on now, though.

You won't be surprised to know that as a former Children and Families Minister for me, that starts in the earliest years of a child's life. And I can tell you that we are committed to improving services in those first, critical 1001 days, championing family hubs, and helping parents provide the best home-learning environment for their children.

This is so important because high-quality education at this stage can really boost children's outcomes later in life, and that's particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

One of the reasons that I was able to succeed at school as an 11 year old without English, is because as well as fantastic teachers, I had parents at home who were always urging me on and who understood the value of education. That makes a world of difference.

It's not a given, though, and I feel very strongly that I have a responsibility to stand up for every child, especially those who may not have the same advantages I did.

What does this mean in practice?

It means my job.... our job... and I don't just mean government here, I'm including you too!... is to ensure every child, from whatever background, has the opportunity to realise their potential.

Our job is to continue to make our schools the very best in the world, with the very best teachers.

And to get the very best teachers, we need to make sure they get the very best training. Which is why we have delivered the Early Career Framework and why we are rolling out a suite of National Professional Qualifications – supporting teachers and leaders right across the country as part of a fundamental overhaul of how we train teachers. This country will be looked up to around the world as one of the best places a teacher can learn and master their craft.

Our job is to make sure that we have a skilled and agile workforce, who can

help us power through the aftermath of the pandemic.

So that means no easing up on our plans to ensure any child who fell behind during the pandemic makes up their lost learning, as we build on the recovery programmes already in place.

Programmes like tutoring... One-to-one tutoring is no longer going to be something that the children of wealthy parents can fall back on, but the right of every child. And we'll be seeing around one hundred million hours... one hundred million hours... of tutoring in this parliament.

I spoke about some of these issues at our annual conference earlier this week but I'm mindful that not everyone will have been following all the conference speeches to the letter...

So let me confirm that we'll also be bringing forward a Schools White Paper to ensure we have brilliant teachers at every stage; high standards in every classroom and strong schools with excellent leaders and robust systems.

We must end illiteracy and innumeracy and make sure that no child leaves primary school unable to read or without a grasp of mathematics, and then we'll continue a relentless focus on literacy and numeracy throughout secondary school.

We'll also be making sure our excellent teachers get the recognition they deserve. The Prime Minister announced in his Conference address on Wednesday that those who are in the early years of their careers will be eligible for salary boosts of up to £3,000 tax-free to teach maths, physics, chemistry and computing.

This will boost the number of teachers in subjects that are facing the greatest shortfall. It will also build on our groundbreaking teacher recruitment and retention reforms.

We have already started to transform how young people gain the skills they need for a meaningful and satisfying job with our T level and apprenticeship programmes. I want these to be just as highly thought of, just as famous, as A levels. They have put employers in the driving seat and will mean more highly-skilled people join the workforce which is going to help kickstart the economy and bring down unemployment.

But perhaps one of the most crucial commitments, certainly as far as I'm concerned, is that we do far more for vulnerable children and make sure they have the support they need to succeed.

For me, this is about children with SEND, or those who are looked after, getting as many opportunities as their peers.

It is about acknowledging that we must close the disadvantage gap and do the best by every single child by focusing on the outcomes for every single child.

And that means mental health must be better understood and support provided

where it's needed. I want us to put wellbeing at the centre of everything we do in schools alongside a drive for rigorous standards and high performance.

But of course we can't do this if children are not at school, so another key priority for me will be getting to the root of what is causing children to be persistently absent and then tackling it head on. Because the children who lose out the most from not being in school are likely to be the ones who can cope least, the vulnerable, the disadvantaged... You can't help them if they aren't there.

I will be tireless in pursuing all these issues, to deliver a world-class education for all children, because it is the only way we can escape the quicksand of disadvantage.

For all these reasons, we will continue to invest record sums in our children's education.

I am not going to provide a running commentary on the spending review but I want to make one thing absolutely clear, I will not stop making the case for investing in children and young people.

These are my priorities and this is what I want us to deliver for the next generation.

And if the challenge is 'how'? My answer is 'people'.

The answer is 'you'... the headteachers and leaders, working with us to give children the best education possible.

Let us summon the same spirit of determination that you showed in responding to Covid, and rise together to this challenge, so we can leave a legacy that endures for decades to come.

Thank you.