

ASTI Submission to DES Statement of Strategy 2019-2021

December 2018

Introduction

The ASTI welcomes the opportunity to take part in the consultation on the next Departmental Statement of Strategy and recognises that this consultation is an important aspect of a democratic and transparent policy formation process. This consultation process is also important from the point of view of the Department in that it creates a space for dialogue with teachers and their representative organisations after almost a decade of austerity. As the economy begins to grow again, Government strategy must explicitly focus on repairing the damage inflicted on schools by austerity policies. Investment in education must become the focus of education policy in the next Strategy.

Creating meaningful dialogue with teachers

As education increasingly becomes the nexus between many strands of government policy – the national skills strategy, child protection, public health promotion, social inclusion, etc., there is a danger of ignoring the voice of the education professional in the public discourse. Teachers' perception that their voice was ignored in the formation of policy on the Framework for Junior Cycle created a deep sense of alienation across the profession which has not abated as teachers continue to experience challenges in teaching the new curriculum. Coupled with salary cuts of up to 20%, unequal pay structures for teachers recruited after 2011, larger classes, reduced promotional opportunities, this sense of marginalisation had damaged the morale of the teaching profession and its attractiveness as a career. The ASTI strongly believes that this malaise in the profession is a significant contributory factor to current problems in teacher supply. Workload has emerged as a major contributory factor to teachers' low morale. (1) Teachers feel overwhelmed by the 'innovation overload' which is frequently perceived as not relevant to their core work of classroom teaching. Concrete steps need to be taken to rebuild morale and enhance teachers' job satisfaction. A commitment to tackling workload and initiative overload would send an important signal to the profession that the Department is concerned about the well-being and morale of the profession. In this regard, the ASTI appreciates the acknowledgement of the impact of continuous change on the profession in the Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Joe Mc Hugh, to 2018 the NAPD annual conference.

1. Improve the learning experience and the success of learners

The curriculum provides the context for students' learning experiences. Teachers are reluctant to engage in curriculum change if they perceive that the latter is at odds with their own experiential knowledge of what works best in the classroom. This professional response of teachers is sometimes unfairly described as 'resistance' to change. The latter charge also misrepresents the nature of teaching which is about creating relationships in the classroom which build students' motivation to learn and enable them to make progress in their learning. Teachers care about standards in education not just because they are an important dimension of quality in education but also because they want students to reach their potential. There is a growing perception among teachers that the new subject specifications in the Framework for Junior Cycle may not support the standards which teachers believe students should strive for. The Department must listen to the experience of teachers if schools are to improve the learning experience of students. Teachers are consistently

stating that they have insufficient time to engage in the collaborative practices that underpin the Framework for Junior Cycle. (2)

Students' learning experiences are also influenced by the quality of the physical environment in their schools. In a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills, the ASTI presented an analysis of deficiencies in current school accommodation. (3) In addition, year-on-year commissioned research by the ASTI confirms that many schools have significant infrastructural deficits. (4) Teachers and school principals have highlighted over-crowded classrooms; inadequate number of science laboratories; lack of rooms for resource teaching and other forms of personalised learning support; inadequate PE facilities, especially in relation to showering and changing areas; non-existent social and circulating space for students. Stresses on school accommodation have frequently resulted in school libraries assembly hall/social spaces being converted to classrooms. It is of note that the 2016 ESRI report on broadband in schools concluded that while the deployment of high-quality broadband connectivity has eliminated one of the biggest barriers constraining ICT integration in schools, other infrastructural deficits remain. These include school organisational issues, including the requirement for teachers to move between classrooms, classroom design issues and availability of ICT hardware in classrooms. (5) After a decade of austerity, the Department must ensure that its capital investment programme address the deficiencies in current school accommodation.

2. Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

The introduction of the new Resource Allocation Model for students with additional and special educational needs in September 2017 was welcomed by the ASTI as representing a more transparent and effective resourcing model. However, it has very clearly emerged that teachers found the expectations placed on teachers are unworkable and impractical. There has been a groundswell of concern among ASTI members on this issue.

As regards improving the progress of students at risk of educational disadvantage, the ASTI again puts on record for the Department its view that the DEIS model must be supplemented by "*tapering of funding*" approach based on the DEIS model as recommended by the 2015 ESRI evaluation of the DEIS programme. (6) At second level in particular, the DEIS model of targeting areas of high levels of deprivation results in many students' needs outside such areas being unacknowledged and unmet, given that the majority of educationally disadvantaged young people do not live in DEIS-designated areas.

3. Help those delivering education services to continually improve

As stated above, the teaching profession is under significant stress due to excessive workload which is leading to job dissatisfaction and a deterioration of wellbeing. There is now a real concern among teachers that teaching is losing its attractiveness as a profession. Voices external to the profession have also adverted to this concern. A strategy aimed at helping those delivering education services to continually improve must therefore address some of the root problems of malaise and low morale in

the profession. Increased access to CPD and other 'upskilling' responses will not in themselves address the former.

What is needed is a more systematic response to the key factors negatively impacting on the profession, namely, unequal pay, excessive workload, and innovation overload, under-investment in schools, high student-teacher ratios and deteriorating wellbeing. The Teaching Council's policy document on teacher learning succinctly states that *"teachers' well-being is vital if they are to effectively lead learning, and support and facilitate students in this endeavour"*. (7) The ASTI notes that a Primary Education Forum has been established to address workload and innovation overload in primary schools. It strongly recommends that a similar Forum be convened for second-level education to facilitate meaningful dialogue with the profession on similar issues.

4. Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community

Schools are at the heart of the local community. They are trusted social institutions which are held in high esteem by Irish society. The ethos of Irish schools of promoting the holistic development of young people ensures that schools have multiple 'bridges' with their local communities. Schools' extra-curricular activities such as sport and games, the arts and cultural activities, community and volunteering, wellbeing and mental health, etc., are part and parcel of the local fabric of life across the country. Such activities depend on dedicated and experienced teachers. However, increasingly, the ASTI is hearing teachers state that their workload, compounded by ongoing curriculum innovation and concomitant SLAR meetings, and their supervision and substitution duties is such that they are no longer in a position to engage in extra-curricular activities. This is an extremely worrying development and one which is likely to impact negatively on schools' capacity to sustain its bridges with the wider community.

5. Improve national planning and support services

While considerable progress has been made on national planning and support services in recent years, a number of gaps and challenges are now evident at second level. In particular the ASTI must put on record its concern that the new model of allocation of resources for students with special educational needs, introduced in September 2017, has not been accompanied by a national training programme for teachers. Teachers are profoundly uneasy with the requirement that they engage in individualised planning process which include regular reviews of learning targets as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment, target setting, intervention and review without having access to any induction or training programmes. (8) The level of concern among teachers on this issue has resulted in the ASTI issuing advice to its members – in common with the TUI - not to create or devise IEPs or their equivalents. Existing arrangements for the teaching of current and future students with special education needs will not be impacted by this advice as members will continue to engage in their normal classroom planning. What is now needed is a national training programme for all teachers to ensure that they have the skills and understandings to fully support students with special educational needs in an inclusive school culture.

A further deficiency in planning for the new SEN allocation model was the stipulation in Circular 0014/2017 that co-ordination time be kept to a minimum. This stipulation fails to comprehend the complexity of the curriculum at second level wherein individual students have multiple subject teachers during the academic year as well as engaging with pastoral care teams, guidance and counselling services, etc. The ASTI is resolutely of the view that the effective implementation of the new model depends on schools being able to dedicate adequate time to whole-school coordination and communication.

Another area where gaps are emerging is the rollout of the inservice training for the Framework for Junior Cycle. Recent ASTI research has demonstrated a high level of dissatisfaction among teachers with aspects of this programme. Chief among the concerns were the lack of acknowledgement of the challenges which teachers were actually experiencing in implementing the revised subject specifications. This apparent 'gap' between the practitioners and the programme providers is a matter of concern.

Notes

1. RED C (2018) *Teachers' Work: Work Demands and Work Intensity*, ASTI
2. ASTI (2019) *Teachers' Experience of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle*, ASTI
3. ASTI (2018) *ASTI Submission on School Accommodation to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills, July 2018* ASTI
4. Since 2012, ASTI has commissioned RED C consultancy to conduct research on schools, including impact of austerity budgets on school services; trends in teacher workload; impact of curriculum change; newly qualified teachers; student wellbeing. See <https://www.asti.ie/publications/other/>
5. ESRI (2016) *Teaching and Learning in Second-Level Schools at the Advent of High-Speed Broadband*, Research Series 51, ESRI
6. ESRI (2015) *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS*, Research Series No. 39 ESRI
7. Teaching Council (2016) *Cosán: A framework for teachers' learning* (p.18), Teaching Council
8. Department of Education and Skills (2017) *Circular to the Management Authorities of all Post Primary Schools: Secondary, Community and Comprehensive Schools and the Chief Executive Officers of the Education and Training Boards Special Education Teaching Allocation, Circular 0014/2017*, Department of Education and Skills