

ASTI Annual Convention 2024

Address by President Geraldine O'Brien

Tuesday, 2nd April 2024

Minister, distinguished guests, colleagues, friends, welcome to the 102nd ASTI Annual Convention. It's hard to believe it is almost a year since our 2023 President, the late Miriam Duggan stood at this podium and delivered a heartfelt address about the value of teaching, teachers and education which was greeted with rapturous applause.

It has been humbling to take up the mantle from Miriam Duggan - a teacher, an ASTI stalwart, and a colleague and friend to many in this room. She inspired many through the great courage she demonstrated during her illness. It was a privilege for me to serve with Miriam as Vice President of the ASTI and I benefited greatly from her intelligence, wisdom, integrity, her sense of decency and principle. Miriam worked tirelessly throughout her career of some 40 years to better the working conditions of teachers and improve educational opportunities for students. In this context, I have chosen "valuing teachers valuing education" as my theme for this address.

Valuing Education

In the context of 'Valuing Education' it would be very remiss of me to let this occasion pass without mentioning Donogh O'Malley Minister for Education from 1966 to 1968.

Shortly after O'Malley was appointed, on 10th September 1966, in his address to a dinner of the National Union of Journalists he announced that from 1969 all education up to the completion of post-primary Intermediate Certificate would be available to all families without cost. O'Malley, knew that without significant investment his vision for free post-primary education would be but a dream.

Many have said that O'Malley's extension of education, changing Ireland from a country where the majority were schooled only to the age of 14 to a country with universal secondary-school education, indirectly led to the Celtic Tiger boom of the 1990s-2000s.

Indeed, the OECD has reported that by raising employment and labour quality, the increased educational attainment in Ireland since the 1970s contributed 2.1 percentage points per annum to economic growth over the period 1994 to 2003. It is estimated that, had the educational attainment of the Irish population remained at its 1980 level, national income per head would be 20% below its current level. Valuing education really matters.

We acknowledge, that YOU Minister Foley, from the same province, on October 11th 2023 announced some €67 million funding for free schoolbooks and classroom resources for Junior Cycle students. This is estimated to be worth over €310 per student and will extend free

schoolbooks to more than 210,000 second-level students up to Junior Cycle.

As with any new initiative, schools need resources and supports to administer this new scheme, and we ask you Minister to ensure that the concerns of principals are addressed in this regard. Please know that teachers value education, and sound investment in education is always appreciated by them. I will return to the topic of investment in students' education later.

Incremental Credit and Teacher Shortage

In the midst of a chronic teacher shortage, the question must be asked - why are our teacher graduates going abroad? Is it because they do not FEEL valued?

Minister, we in the ASTI were very disappointed when we learned that, the Department of Education had not sought any funding from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to induce teachers back from countries such as Dubai or the United Arab Emirates. Currently, on returning to Ireland they must recommence their careers in Ireland at the bottom of the teachers' pay scale, irrespective of their significant experience attained in teaching diverse curricula abroad. Minister, Irish teachers

returning from jurisdictions such as Dubai must be awarded full incremental credit for their service abroad if they are to choose to stay in the teaching profession. They literally cannot afford to live here when they are put back to the point on the salary scale they were appointed to years ago.

The ASTI has long advocated for a scheme to be introduced to accommodate these teachers. Currently, no incremental credit is provided for their service, which is contrary to what happens when teachers return from teaching in EU schools for instance. Our primary-school teaching colleagues returning from jurisdictions such as Dubai are awarded incremental credit for their service abroad. Minister, second-level schools can't get teachers. Please remove these anomalies and treat our teachers fairly and equitably in their pay arrangements.

These teachers must also have access to full-time permanent positions, rather than facing the prospect of returning to part-time and/or short-term teaching jobs.

Valuing teachers is valuing education.

Teacher Workload and Extra Curricular Activities

This brings me to one of the foremost issues plaguing our profession, the unrelenting burden of teacher workload. The intensification of workload has reached unprecedented levels, placing undue stress and strain on classroom practitioners across all second-level schools. The work of teachers has changed significantly over the past 15 years and has increased exponentially over the past 5 years. The role and workload of the teacher has expanded. This has been exacerbated by initiative overload in education and by Government policies that tie teachers into bureaucratic processes, which do nothing to improve students' education. Deteriorating working conditions, overwhelming workloads and stifling bureaucracy are pushing teachers out of the profession they love. Research commissioned by the ASTI in 2018 confirmed that teachers' average working week was 40+ hours, not including supervision and substitution duties and, of course, not including time spent by teachers on extra-curricular activities.

Research from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) points to the importance of education in encouraging young people to volunteer in and with their communities and engage in extracurricular activities.

The research shows that young people who were more involved in after-school activities as children and teenagers were also more civically and

politically engaged later on in life. Irish schools have a particularly strong tradition of providing extracurricular activities, and it is clear that such provision scaffolds many young people's integration into their communities and enables them to develop, forge and maintain friendships outside their immediate peer group. Schools' extra-curricular activities such as sport and games, the arts and cultural activities, community and volunteering, wellbeing projects, and more, are part and parcel of the local fabric of life across the country. Such activities depend on dedicated and experienced teachers. However, teachers are increasingly stating that their workload, compounded by ongoing curriculum innovation, and supervision and substitution duties is such that they are no longer in a position to engage in extra-curricular activities.

Minister, when the bucket is full, the bucket is full and nothing further can be added to the bucket until something is removed. We must all advocate for measures to alleviate this burden, ensuring that teachers have the time and resources necessary to deliver a quality holistic education to our students. Teachers' workload and work intensity are impacting negatively on teaching and learning, teacher wellbeing and teacher attrition. As a matter of urgency, we need a reduction in the

Croke Park and Haddington Road hours and an opt-out scheme for supervision and substitution work.

Valuing teachers will give us the education system we want and need.

Ireland's high performing education system

The OECD Programme for International Assessment (PISA) study provides overwhelming evidence that second-level teachers in Ireland rose to the enormous challenges presented by the global pandemic, ensuring students' education was prioritised and protected.

The study – undertaken in 2022 and published in December 2023 – shows that 15-year-olds in Ireland rank first out of 37 OECD countries in reading literacy. Ireland ranks 7th out of 37 countries when it comes to performance in maths and 8th for science.

Second-level schools in Ireland are consistently striving to provide a high-quality and highly equitable education service to young people despite serious underfunding and under-resourcing.

This latest OECD PISA report is the first large-scale study of student performance since the pandemic. Prior to this, PISA was last carried out in 2018. While internationally many countries saw an unprecedented drop in performance between the 2022 and 2018 studies, in Ireland

performance in reading remained stable and increased in science. A decline in performance in maths for Ireland was much less than the OECD country-average.

Ireland is one of 10 countries highlighted in the PISA report for high levels of equity for students. This means that parents can be assured of a high-quality education for their students regardless of socio-economic status and type of school. Teachers in Ireland place a premium value on fairness and equality for their students.

In March 2020, teachers transformed how they worked almost overnight so as to ensure their students' education was shielded and supported in-so-far-as possible. When schools re-opened, teachers prioritised making up for the disruption of school closures and helping students to get their school lives back on track. For many teachers, the pandemic years were the most difficult and traumatic of their careers to date. Students also experienced significant disturbance and stress at a particularly important stage in their lives, however supported by their teachers they demonstrated extraordinary resilience and tolerance and we are immensely proud of them. These efforts are borne out by Ireland's scores in PISA 2022.

Speaking of the pandemic, Minister, I also wish to acknowledge your baptism of fire, entering office during a once-in-a-century global pandemic. Minister, together with the other stakeholders in education – the students, parents, and management bodies – we all worked for the common good. I wish to acknowledge your role and that of our own General Secretary Kieran Christie in those processes.

The OECD PISA 2022 report affirms the work of all those in education during the pandemic. However, it comes against the backdrop of Ireland's abysmal record for funding of education. Another OECD report Education at a Glance 2023 ranks Ireland in last place out of 36 OECD countries for investment in education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) a ranking we have held for many years. In 2020, the year analysed in the latest Education at a Glance report, Ireland invested 1% of GDP in second-level education compared to the OECD average of 2% and the EU average of 1.9%.

School communities go to extraordinary lengths to ensure access to inclusive, high-quality education. The Government must support this by adequately funding schools. Under-investment in second-level education is a very real threat to our high-quality education service.

AI

Donogh O'Malley's era was that of the textbook, copy and the blackboard. In contrast Minister Foley your era is that of the digital pen, the interactive whiteboard and AI.

The irruption of digital technology continued over the last 2 years with the sudden visibility of generative AI applications such as ChatGPT. For educators, AI challenges a number of educational activities such as traditional models of homework assignments and assessments.

The use of AI and digital technologies in education may hold significant promise. Enhanced educational objectives may become a reality with the support of technology, provided that teachers and learners are given the right conditions to use such technologies. In our 2024 RedC survey on digital technologies, teachers were broadly positive about AI and education. However, approximately one quarter of all teachers surveyed identified access to computer devices and technical support/maintenance as poor. One in four teachers have daily problems with computer room availability while around one in seven experience daily issues with technical assistance and internet connectivity/ speed.

The ASTI survey also found that 91% of teachers want the Department of Education to provide guidance on the use of AI in schools. We welcome the Minister's statement yesterday that the Department intends to do this. The Department must play a pro-active role in ensuring there is a plan in

place for the development and use of AI in education. This plan must include consideration of all potential consequences for students - their development as human beings, their right to safety and privacy, and more. The impact on teachers must also be prioritised including protecting the relational nature of teaching, teachers' workload and work intensity, access to quality CPD, teachers' right to safety and privacy, and the safeguarding of intellectual property created by teachers for and in the classroom. Finally, the resources must be put into schools including equipment, professional development and technical support, if education in Ireland is to keep step with the rest of the world.

Senior Cycle

In December 2023, I expressed my dismay at the shock announcement by Minister Foley that the 2024 Leaving Certificate oral exams would take place during students' Easter break.

It was always understood by teachers and students that the holding of oral exams at Easter during the Covid pandemic was due to a public health emergency and we have consistently advocated a return to the pre-pandemic status quo.

Student representatives had also appealed to the Minister to revert to pre-pandemic arrangements. The ASTI welcomed the call from the ISSU that oral examinations revert to term time and we concur with their statement that the Easter Break is an important time for students to take a break. The ASTI has been consistent in its position that, rather than alleviate pressure on students, the holding of oral examinations at Easter time increases pressure. It increases pressure particularly for those students taking more than one oral in this very short period.

The ASTI was given a commitment that research commissioned by the State Exams Commission would form the basis of any decision in relation to the 2024 orals. Despite all this, an announcement was made without consultation with the teacher unions, and in the absence of the publication of the commissioned research. No education-based reason has been presented for this decision.

The Easter break is an important time for students to take a step back and take stock of where they are in their preparations for the Leaving Certificate Examinations. Students deserve to have their expected break at Easter before they gear up for their final written examinations in June.

In the context of the Minister's plans for the re-development of the Senior Cycle, this decision was extremely ill-judged. International research demonstrates that effective curriculum change requires

collaboration and consultation with teachers as well as teachers' trust in the change process. Teachers as practitioners in their classrooms are agents of change. Those of us who are more seasoned practitioners have spent our careers implementing curricular and many other changes. Teachers know what works best in their subject area and what works best for students going through the system who are navigating complex lives both within and outside of their school days.

We are all aware of the reputation of the Leaving Cert worldwide. This deserved reputation is based on a high-quality education system characterised by a broad curriculum, external assessment, and a strong focus in schools on the holistic wellbeing of students. In any change process, we must maintain this.

Teachers are the professional practitioners. As demonstrated by PISA 2022, they have their students' best interests at heart.

In 2022, Minister Foley you set out an ambitious programme for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle, guided by the vision of a Senior Cycle that delivers "equity and excellence for all."

You stated that you (I'm quoting from your statement) 'looked forward to working collaboratively with our partners across the education sector to achieve our shared vision of excellence and equity, and enriching our students' experience, in line with Senior Cycle Redevelopment.'

While there is much to welcome about these long-awaited changes, teachers continue to have serious concerns about aspects of your proposals and their potential impact on teaching and learning. I wish to acknowledge that you have to date addressed some of our concerns in a meaningful way, displaying objectivity and good judgement.

Notwithstanding this, the ASTI has a number of outstanding concerns including depth of treatment of subject specifications and the impact of the advancement of AI on the assessment of additional components.

Science teachers and university lecturers have flagged significant concerns over the fairness of planned reforms for students attending less affluent schools. In the case of physics, chemistry and biology, for example, students will be required to conduct research investigations in science laboratories.

Lecturers have questioned the availability of adequate laboratory equipment and resources in schools for all students undertaking these projects. They have warned of a widening of the social divide within schools, and also between fee-charging schools that have additional sources of income and DEIS schools that cater for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It will require massive levels of investment to bring laboratories up to the required standard across ALL schools to

ensure equity of opportunity in education so that all children and young people are supported to fulfil their potential.

It is also vital, that ALL schools are funded properly so that all Leaving Certificate candidates can perform to the best of their ability.

One of the reasons the Leaving Certificate has had such high levels of public trust is down to the perception that it is fair. Students – at least on the day of assessment – are on a level playing field.

Áine Hyland talks about the achievement gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged students and the fact that while the gap continues to exist, it has narrowed substantially in recent decades. This is borne out by OECD studies which demonstrate that Ireland has a high school completion rate and a high transfer rate to further education. Of course, much more needs to be done. One factor which, according to Emeritus Professor Hyland, has helped to narrow the achievement gap has been the fact that students have access to the same curriculum, this includes their teachers' access to the same information about depth of treatment and assessment, regardless of the type of school they are teaching in and the social class and background of students attending the school. In other words, ensuring access to the same syllabus details, guidelines and information handbooks, sample exam papers, and marking scheme - all of

these contribute to providing students with a level playing field, to providing students with equality of access.

Any change, redevelopment, revision of Senior Cycle curriculum must increase, not reduce, equity for students. Change can have unintended consequences.

Investing in education is not only about funding, it is about valuing and respecting pedagogical expertise and involving teachers in decision-making processes. Susan Hopgood, president of Education International offers some advice for those shaping education policies: “The future rests with our teachers. Stand with us”. Ensure teachers are “central figures in dialogues and decisions”.

Listening to teachers is valuing education.

Conclusion

In the era of acronyms such as CBAs and AACs I’ll conclude instead with 5 Rs:

Recognise that teachers value education and have their students’ best interest at heart.

Resource schools properly so that teachers can do their jobs to the very best of their ability and students can thrive.

Reduce teachers’ workload.

Redouble efforts to recruit and retain the best in teaching.

Respect the concerns raised by classroom teachers on curriculum change. Everyone in this room wants improvement and progress, let's get it right.

Thank you.