

ASTI Annual Convention 2021

General Secretary's Report

Kieran Christie

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Convention,

We have experienced and continue to experience a period of time like none of us have ever experienced before. And when it has passed, we all fervently hope we will never again see a time like this. I believe that the first thing any of us have to acknowledge is the enormous amount of sickness and death that this horrible virus has visited upon us all, the citizens of this nation and globally too. Few of us have not been touched in some way with the havoc it has wreaked.

As I sat down to compose my thoughts for this speech it became immediately obvious that I would have to trim my sails in terms of the number and variety of topics I could address in the allocated time. ASTI activity in the past year has ranged across an enormous selection of issues, many of which were unique to the pandemic and have never been faced before. For our part, we in the ASTI have stepped up to the challenges that have been posed in our sector. We have sought to balance the paramount importance of keeping school communities safe while protecting the right of our teachers to teach and their students to learn. It has been a difficult balancing act.

I want to pay tribute today to our members who have steadfastly endured all the travails that have come their way. Whether it was remote teaching or massively reconfigured classrooms and schools, the challenges they have faced have been enormous and they deserve the gratitude of the nation for all their efforts.

ASTI Interventions

At certain moments, ASTI has made some key interventions. We made these to ensure that the situation we all find ourselves remains on the right side of tolerability. These have included the important intervention last summer regarding the necessity for a proper indemnity to be put in place to allow our members to engage in the Calculated Grades process with some sense of security.

Again, we led the way last summer when we insisted on mask wearing by all within our schools to protect school communities. Our key intervention in January in ensuring that schools would remain shut while the numbers of confirmed cases in the community ran into the thousands was vital. Latterly, the reversal we achieved of the arrangements for Oral Examinations that are

now on-going, by insisting that students and their teachers have the protection of masks, was widely appreciated by our members. We have variously won important concessions regarding school attendance by medically Very High Risk, High Risk and Pregnant teachers which were important. And of course, our withdrawal from the discussions on the Examinations in 2021 to ensure that the established Leaving Certificate should be protected insofar as possible could have repercussions that long exceed the pandemic.

We have done more in other crucial areas as well. We led the way last year in insisting and ensuring that substantial increased investment in the day to day running of our schools would be necessary if a successful and sustained reopening could be maintained. We have now ensured that the additional teaching allocation and related supports that we negotiated and were provided to schools in the context of COVID-19 will be continued in 2021/22. These include additional teachers and substitution support and an additional allocation in terms of guidance provision is also to be provided.

The Lead Worker Representative (LWR) will also continue to receive protected time to carry out their very important and necessary role.

When it comes to Examinations 2021, we negotiated a substantial increase in the Examination Aide days of support available to schools including a number of days reservable for schools' principals. I think it is acknowledged that all members of the school community have been under enormous pressure and the strain has been particularly acute for school leaders.

COVID-19 has provoked an unprecedented health, social and economic crisis in Ireland and worldwide. Historically, pandemics have forced human beings to move on from the past and imagine a whole new world. This one is likely to be no different.

Investment in Education

In education, the impact on students, staff and schools has been profound. While teachers adapted fast to support their learners and their communities, without training or resources and with professionalism that was demonstrably second to none, inequalities in our society were laid bare for all to see.

Whether it was broadband access or poverty to name just two factors, the cultural milieu that was exposed was far from desired.

The ASTI has been highlighting and fighting against these existing inequalities and fractures for years.

Any sterile arguments that previously were used to underpin a reluctance in some quarters to invest in education are now redundant. As always, it will have to be an education led recovery.

The fundamental flaws in the way we have been managing our public services – especially education – must be addressed. Ireland’s place at the bottom of the pile on the list of OECD countries in terms of investment in education is well known.

The policies that undermined equality in education and drove many teachers from the profession must never be re-enacted. There must be no cutbacks when all this is over. Expansion and investment must be the only items on the agenda. Government must rise to the challenge. A new social contract must emerge that reshapes our society.

I am of the view that the increased level of investment currently in our schools, related to Covid-19, can only be a baseline. Society now appreciates like never before the value of education and what schools contribute to society. We will have to rebuild and in doing so, we must harness this societal appreciation of what we do in terms of the national conversation and ensure that the underinvestment that has characterised public policy in relation to our schools is banished to oblivion.

Supports for Students

The young people of Ireland have suffered an extremely traumatic experience over a sustained period of time. They must be properly supported as education begins to pick up the pieces and normal teaching and learning resumes. Unlike many precedents from before, schools must not be left alone and expected to work miracles. The system must be provided with the additional funding, resources and staffing to support young people in education recovery. They deserve no less. In our 2021 RED C survey published last week, members told us that smaller classes, access to youth mental health services, and augmented guidance counselling must be prioritised if students’ wellbeing and learning is to thrive.

Convention, when I look over the agenda for our Annual Convention, like many other years, it strikes me that ASTI is a union that rightly sees itself at the heart of debate on all the key issues affecting our members and our schools. This year we have motions on overcrowded classrooms and class sizes, Senior Cycle, Junior Cycle and curriculum change, entry to the teaching profession,

student teachers, casualisation in teaching, education of students with special education needs and lots of issues related to teachers' terms and conditions of employment. ASTI has been to the forefront of the fight on all these issues and will continue to be so.

Examinations 2021.

On February 17th the Government announced its plan for 2021 Leaving Cert Exams and State Examinations Commission Accredited Grades. The ASTI expressed its bitter disappointment that SEC Accredited Grades are not underpinned in any way by externally validated elements such as coursework, projects, etc. SEC Accredited Grades will prove a very challenging proposition for all concerned given the lack of credible data in many instances.

However, there were some important gains for the ASTI. These include

- The removal of a requirement for teachers to place their students in rank order merit in their class.
- The fact that at ASTI insistence, second components – coursework, project work, orals, aurals – are proceeding
- Adjustments of the 2021 Leaving Cert written exams have been put in place
- No mixing of estimations gleaned from Accredited Grades Process is allowed for the established Leaving Cert.
- A full indemnity for teachers and school leaders as achieved by the ASTI in the 2020 Calculated Grades process will be in place.
- Protections against canvassing of teachers as achieved by the ASTI in the 2020 Calculated Grades process.

It is noteworthy that in a survey of our members in February we posed the following question.

“In terms of a pathway for progression for 2021 Leaving Certificate Students, the Minister for Education has stated that “Any corresponding measure should have the confidence of the education partners.” Do you have confidence in the State Examinations Commission accredited grades system that has been announced?

Only 46% of our members expressed confidence while 56% indicated they did not have confidence.

The truth is that this State Examinations Commission Accredited Grades process should never have been developed as being more than a contingency measure. We will await and see how it transacts with interest. It was unfortunate that it took a very public walkout from the discussions by ASTI to address the lack of visible planning in relation to the established Leaving Cert 2021 second component exams – and what at the time was the inevitability of their cancellation – which would have led to an emasculation of the established Leaving Certificate as we know it. I would ask precisely who's agenda would that have best suited in the long term?

Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate

While I mention it, change in Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate provision has not gone off anyone's agenda either.

There is no doubt that changes to Senior Cycle will be the big item for us to deal with in the years to come.

As you know, NCCA has been undertaking a review of Senior Cycle education in recent years.

There have been a number of cycles of consultation. We ensured that we were well represented at all stakeholder events to which we were invited. We ensured that the voice of the ASTI was strong and we will demand that we are listened to at all stages of development. But we must be vigilant.

We also commissioned a piece of research by Dr Brian Fleming on the approach so far by NCCA to the consultation process. It was an excellent piece of research and well received.

In particular, it identified that issues such as initiative overload, increasing workload and lack of capacity at school level must be addressed before major change at Senior Cycle can take place.

Among its key recommendations is the need to consider an appropriate timeframe for introducing change at Senior Cycle. According to the author, "schools are in need of a breather from the current pattern of ongoing innovation and additional workload".

There is a need to evaluate the impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle on the learning that is taking place in classrooms. There is also a need to examine implementation issues that are problematic.

I believe that in Dr Fleming's research we have a solid foundation for our approach to any proposals that come our way in the coming period.

Schools Reopening and Vaccinations

I now want to turn to the reopening of schools. Our objective throughout has always been that safety comes first. I referred earlier to the balancing act involved in keeping school communities safe while protecting the right of our teachers to teach and their students to learn. We will continue to do our utmost in that regard. Teachers are all exhausted – the relentless pressure has taken the same toll on them that it has on other frontline workers.

For several months, both publicly and privately, we pushed hard for reprioritisation of teachers and others who work in schools in the context of the review of the vaccine rollout programme. We met the Minister for Education just over a week ago and it was top of our agenda. We insisted that she must be unequivocal in the fight for vaccines for teachers and other school workers. We all now know how all that worked out.

Last week's revision of the prioritisation within the roll-out of the vaccine programme came as a hammer blow. It has been continuously stated that a key objective is to keep schools open. This decision undermines that objective completely. Let's be very clear: Teachers and other school staff are frontline workers. It was reprehensible that this change was made without consultation with us and our fellow trade union colleagues. It is bizarre that the Minister's defence in that regard seems to be that she found out about it as she sat down at the cabinet table to make the decision.

A situation whereby a Minister for Education is out of the loop when proposals are being formulated that will have huge implications for the health and welfare of tens of thousands of workers in our schools is unfortunate. Or as one of her ministerial colleagues might put it - "beyond unhelpful".

It is simply not good enough for the Government to tell teachers that they are "essential workers" - have them working in classrooms of 30 students often in poorly ventilated buildings – and then expect them to stand in line for vaccination with those who have remote facilities available to them. We are

working with other trade union colleagues to seek to have this reversed. Implementation of the motion passed here this morning provides a strong platform to advance that vital work.

Our view is clear. If keeping schools open is the highest national priority, protecting those who work and learn within them must also be the priority.

Teacher Welfare Issues

The work that ASTI has been involved in on the wider questions associated with teacher welfare continues apace. We remain heavily involved in *the Integrated Workplace Health Management Project*.

IWHMI is a collaboration between education stakeholders and has developed a structure to effectively put policy objectives into action. It is a working group that is made up of all the Management Bodies, the Teacher Unions (at both primary and second level) and the Health & Safety Authority (HSA). All school staff are covered in this initiative.

The aim of IWHMI is to address staff health and wellbeing. A demonstration model (pilot project) is proposed, the objective of which would be to demonstrate the efficacy of an integrated approach to workplace health management in the education sector, which promotes both teacher and staff health /wellbeing and promoting quality teaching and learning.

This progressive transformation of the school as a workplace and a place of education to one where everyone, teachers, staff and students are enabled to fulfil their potential to the benefit of the whole school community and society is where we want to get.

Right to Disconnect

Our Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Committee have also been doing some valuable work. As you will know, ASTI were active in asserting the right to disconnect from work related contacts and so on for some time now. The need for proper protocols had become more and more apparent in the context of the remote teaching and learning experience of the last year. You will be aware that a *Workplace Relations Commission Code of Practice* was launched last week which gives guidance to organisations and their employees on the right to disconnect. As part of our membership of ICTU, ASTI were to the

forefront of submissions to this process. The new Code protects the right to not engage in any work-related tasks, activities or communications outside of working time and one cannot be penalised for exercising this right. The Code is vital for safeguarding work-life balance. Now that the guidance is issued, I can assure you we will be to the forefront of efforts to secure the full application and implementation of the Code of Practice within the second-level education system.

Building Momentum – A New Public Service Agreement 2021-2022

On the Industrial relations front, an ASTI ballot of members on *Building Momentum – A New Public Service Agreement 2021-2022* was conducted in February 2021. It was resoundingly rejected by ASTI members.

There can be no doubt about the overriding issue that led to that rejection. Unequal pay remains to be fully addressed. With this agreement, the largest pay discrimination still occurs in the early years of employment. New entrants to second level teaching will still earn substantially less upon appointment than someone who entered the profession prior to 2011. And because the allowances issue remains to be addressed - the loss in career earnings will still be very considerable. It is clear that the Professional Masters in Education qualification allowance must be restored and ASTI remains steadfastly committed to securing it.

However, the Public Services Committee of ICTU endorsed the Building Agreement.

Notwithstanding the rejection of the proposals by ASTI in the ballot of members, the aggregate vote in favour by ICTU affiliates means that ASTI members are encompassed by its terms.

From a pay perspective, the agreement provides for pay adjustments of 3% over the period of the agreement.

As part of that, the equivalent of a 1% increase in annualised basic salaries is to be used as a Sectoral Bargaining Fund in accordance with Chapter 2 of the Agreement.

The discussions have yet to begin on the allocation of this Sectoral Bargaining Fund. This fund, as I said equivalent to 1% of basic pay, will be allocated to sector-based pay claims and/or outstanding adjudications and awards which could to be resolved within the process. In the alternative, a sectoral

bargaining unit such as teachers can elect for the funds involved to be used as a sectoral pay round whereby each member would receive a 1% pay rise.

My expectation is that these talks are to start shortly. ASTI will participate fully in seeking to maximise the interests of our members and act accordingly. Other aspects of the agreement will also have to be engaged with in the coming months. It promises to be an interesting period ahead.

Organisation

I now want to turn to an organisational matter. A number of years ago we endured a regrettable intervention in terms of membership recruitment by our sister Union the TUI. We engaged in the appropriate process within the ICTU and to cut a very long story short, we have been in receipt of a financial settlement of €280,000. It was an unfortunate and unacceptable state of affairs that must never be repeated. It is time to move on from that now because it is important to maintain positive and constructive relations and protecting and advancing the interests of teachers and of the education system is paramount.

The importance of unions in giving workers a collective voice in the workplace has been underscored in many ways during this pandemic. The *Return-to-Work safely Protocol*, the election of Lead Worker Representatives, the insistence on investment and enhanced safety measures and so on, have been driven by pressure applied by us within the second-level education sector. ASTI is the Professional Union for Professional Teachers.

In 2020, the ASTI increased our membership more than any other public sector or private sector Union in the Republic of Ireland. We now have more members than we have ever recorded. No other union, increased its membership by more than a thousand members like we did in 2020 – big or small. We are in the number one spot. Clearly, we have been doing something right. I want to pay tribute to the work of school stewards, regional and national organisers, Standing Committee, our Central Executive Council and many others on committees and in roles within our union for this enormous achievement. We have proven that there is an enormous resilience in the ASTI, an ability to stand up and be counted, to weather the storm. For the ASTI, the comeback is always stronger than the setback.

Convention, I also have one more very important thing to acknowledge. In March 2020, after the pandemic was declared, Head Office had to close its doors like everywhere else. Armed with no more than a laptop and a mobile phone, the staff of the ASTI retreated to their kitchen or living room tables and set about the task of maintaining the services the ASTI provides for its 18,000 plus members. Since then, through all the levels of restrictions, our staff stepped up to the challenge, not only maintaining our services but having played an enormous part in ensuring that our union is progressing and flourishing. I would like to put on record here today that it is my enormous privilege to lead this team of talented, hardworking professionals.

Rebuilding our School Communities: Teachers Priorities.

I will now conclude with a couple of quotation taken from the comments submitted by members in our recent research Survey themed – *Rebuilding our School Communities: Teachers Priorities*.

One teacher said:

“A reduced timetable and smaller class sizes are paramount for effective teaching and learning to occur. Better equipment and facilities for sports and recreation. A dedicated work space and computers provided in all classrooms for teachers to use.”

Another stated:

“In a nutshell, smaller classes are the answer to most problems. So many educational, behavioural and workload problems would be solved at the one time.”

Convention, teachers never look for much beyond the means to do their job effectively and professionally. It really is that simple.

Thank you.