

ASTI Annual Convention 2022

Clayton Silver Springs Hotel

Cork

Address by ASTI President

Eamon Dennehy

April 19th 2022

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Minister, Lord Mayors, guests and friends. I welcome you to the 100th ASTI Annual Convention and our first in-person Convention in three years.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought fear, suffering and disruption to the world on a scale that was hard to believe. In March 2020 several unprecedented restrictions were announced including the closure of all schools and the requirement to move to remote teaching. Teachers proved themselves to be resourceful and committed to their students in doing all in their power to ensure that teaching and learning continued to the greatest extent possible. Indeed, all of the evidence, both from the ASTI and academic research, demonstrated the resilience, innovation, high levels of collegiality and collaboration, self-reflection, and deep care for their students among the teaching profession.

From the beginning the ASTI insisted that if schools were to reopen, every possible measure would have to be taken to prevent the spread of the virus in schools and protect the health of students and staff.

The ASTI (as part of the ICTU Health and Safety Committee) insisted that Lead Worker Representatives be required in the Government Protocol for the safe return to work. They have played a crucial role in representing teaching staff, and monitoring and reporting safety concerns in schools. I would like to pay tribute to our Lead Workers, our school stewards and indeed all those who worked in schools to keep them safe.

The Leaving Certificate and trust

In 2020 the state exams were cancelled and teachers demonstrated great flexibility and commitment to the welfare and futures of their Leaving Cert students by taking part in the calculated grades process.

Research by DCU found that for many teachers, participating in calculated grades led to stress and pressure, particularly for those

teaching in rural school and in small towns. In addition, two errors in a subsequent statistical moderation exercise arranged by the Department, resulted in some students not receiving their correct grades. This was a stressful time for those students affected.

In 2021 teachers were asked to take part in a similar process of accredited grades. The ASTI position was that this should only be done as a contingency measure in the event that the externally-assessed June exams could not go ahead. Our Union's advice was not heeded and a hybrid system was put in place. This process did not work out for all students, some of whom received very good results but found that the points for the courses they had applied for had increased.

Again, this year there were calls for a hybrid system of assessment.

However, the ASTI called for modified course content in subjects and modified exams as the best way to address the pressures on students and ensure as much of a return to normality and certainty for students as possible. As it happened, when the actual implementation of a

hybrid assessment system for 2022 was considered it was found that it could not be conducted in a manner that would deliver fairness and integrity.

The experience of the last two years has indeed shown the value and strength of our externally-assessed state examinations system.

Students' work is marked by experienced well-trained and well supported examiners who can work in anonymity and in accordance with standardised marking schemes; and free from external pressures.

The identity of candidates is not known to examiners, so their work is marked without the risk of bias and in a completely objective way.

Every student benefits from the same high standard of marking which is objective and fair.

There is also a very high degree of transparency. Students can check the marking of their work and have it changed if errors have been made.

Two thirds of Leaving Cert subjects now have second-component exams such as practicals, portfolios and projects, some of which account for 50% or more of the final grade.

Of course, research and analysis of how well the Senior Cycle and Leaving Cert are working is welcome. Education must continually evolve. Change must be based on sound objective evidence and not on un-tested ideas or indeed imported parts of systems. A key lesson from the pandemic must be that changes to education policy can have unintended consequences, particularly for students. The current Leaving Cert maintains a high degree of trust and this must be maintained in any change process.

As teachers we are acutely aware of the challenges experienced by our Leaving Cert Students. A key stressor is how the college entry points system interacts with the Leaving Cert. This seems to be the elephant in the room in debates on the future of the Leaving Cert. Much more needs to be done to address the college-entry process. And this is one

area of education policy where the Minister for Education can act decisively to improve the experience of Senior Cycle for our students.

The gap between our desire for radical and exciting change and the capacity to bring that change about is well described by the Irish language poet Caitlín Maude in her poem Treall.

“Treall

Tabhair dom casúr

nó tua

go mbrisfead is

go millfead

an teach seo,

go ndéanfad tairseach

den fhardoras

'gus urláir de na ballaí,

go dtiocfaidh scraith

agus díon agus

simléir anuas

le neart mo chuid

allais...

Sín chugam anois

na cláir is na tairnní

go dtógfad

an teach eile seo...

Ach, a Dhia, táim tuirseach!”

The Poet sets about demolishing a house with great enthusiasm and energy. She then looks for some wood and nails to build another house.

But she sighs “O God I’m tired”

I wonder has she realised that constructing the new house is a daunting task that is going to take a lot of thought and effort. Or if she regrets

acting so impulsively without consulting others who might have experience of doing such work.

The introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle came at a time when major cuts were being made to spending in education resulting in larger classes, a reduction to guidance and counselling services and to many other resources available to schools. This was hardly the most opportune moment to begin radical change, but it was done anyway. It was also done without any heed to many of the concerns raised by teachers who would have to implement the Framework.

In 2019 the ASTI commissioned independent researcher Dr Brian Fleming to examine key issues in the context of the ongoing review of the Senior Cycle. He too came to the conclusion that a “rigorous independent” evaluation of the Framework for Junior Cycle should be conducted before considering any further curriculum changes.

Dr Fleming also made reference to:

- The need to introduce change in an incremental way.

- The need for education policy and its implementation to be considered together at the design stage.
- The need for curriculum policy to reflect the primary role of the teacher in implementing change rather than marginalising teachers.

PJ Kennedy the first president of this great union made a similar observation well over a century ago when he said “A system of education which ignores the teacher is radically unsound”.

Minister, on the 29th of March just weeks after schools emerged from pandemic restrictions and after two years of making every effort and adjustment possible to continue providing education to our students, you announced an ambitious programme for Senior Cycle change.

I welcome your acknowledgement in that announcement, Minister, that the standard of Senior Cycle education provision has been high.

We too wish to maintain this. We are extremely concerned about the impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle on Senior Cycle. In a recent

ASTI survey the majority of respondents said they do not believe the Framework for Junior Cycle specifications support progression to Senior Cycle. The ASTI is on record in calling for ongoing research into aspects of curriculum design at Junior Cycle.

In your announcement you mentioned “Learnings from 2020 and 2021” which, as I already said were years when teachers went more than an extra mile to cater for the needs of their students. Flexibility was asked for and given in areas such as assessment of state examinations and the arrangements for music practical and oral exams. The ASTI sought and secured assurances that these were one-off changes needed to overcome exceptional circumstances and would not form a precedent for any future change.

We took those words in good faith. We regard any attempt to go back on these commitments given to our members, who acted out of a sense of duty and commitment to their students, as unacceptable and

counter-productive. As the collective voice for teachers, let me say this: There can be no change to our working conditions without negotiation. The cost of driving through Senior Cycle reform without proper research and reflection could be very high and could lead to a fall in the standard, status and credibility of our second-level education system. The policy makers must tread carefully when it comes to changing the Leaving Cert.

Attractiveness of teaching

The introduction of the FEMPI measures in 2009 marked the beginning of a dark and challenging period for all public service unions. Swingeing cuts were made to public service workers' pay. The number of public servants was reduced by 32,000. It is those on modest incomes that depend most on public services and thus were affected most severely. The greatest burden was put on the backs of those least able to carry it. All this suffering was imposed as a result of the failure of our

banking system and the need for all of us to put our shoulder to the wheel and bail them out. So much for social justice.

The treatment of the education sector was particularly severe. A new tactic of treating newly qualified teachers differently was introduced.

An inferior pay scale was created, new teachers were placed at the first point of this new scale, and entitlements to allowances were abolished for new entrants to the profession. These brutal measures were put in place without any apparent awareness by those in power of the consequences for our education system.

In an effort to push back some of the most destructive and unfair austerity measures, the ASTI took industrial action to protect teachers and education standards in 2016. The reaction from the government was ruthless and perhaps even vindictive. Pay and increments were frozen, payment for Supervision and Substitution work was withheld, and young ASTI members were denied their CIDs. All this happened

while government ministers were telling us that the financial crisis was over.

Today we still have pay discrimination against second-level teachers who joined the profession after 2010 and perhaps even more shocking the retention of a delayed increment date for all ASTI members which was a punishment imposed on us for being outside the protection of a wage agreement. The ASTI was not the only union to find itself outside the parameters of an agreement in an attempt to protect its members rights, but it was the only union to be punished in this way.

In the 2022 sectoral bargaining process, the ASTI was asked to decide if it wanted all ASTI members to get a 1% general pay increase or if it wanted an equivalent financial amount to be used in another way. In the context of unprecedented teacher shortages – caused mainly by demoralising unequal pay - the ASTI has decided to prioritise reducing the pay-gap for post 2010 entrants to teaching. It is deplorable that ordinary teachers have to use their pay to rectify a reckless

government decision that has left schools unable to recruit teachers across a range of subjects. In a RED C survey in March this year, 55 per cent of principals said their school currently has an unfilled teaching post. Let me say this, all ASTI members need a pay rise.

In his book, *Unlikely Radicals*, published to mark the centenary of the ASTI, John Cunningham mentions the Molony Committee which was set up in 1918 to report on the conditions of service and remuneration of teachers in Intermediate Schools. It made the following observation, “If the State requires professional services it is but just that it should pay for them”.

Padraig Pearse writing some years earlier came to the same conclusion when he said that teachers should have: Adequate salary, adequate security, adequate promotion and adequate pension.

It is amazing that over 100 years later our government can't see that fair pay and adequate working conditions for teachers are directly related to the quality of educational provision.

Valuing education

The commitment of the Irish state to the provision of quality education for our young people comes into sharp focus when we compare it to the efforts made in other jurisdictions. For years now Ireland has been ranked at the bottom of 36 countries in terms of investment in second-level education as a percentage of GDP.

Investment in schools really matters. Students need: suitable classrooms, reasonable-sized classes, access to specialist resources, well-equipped laboratories, specialist rooms for technical subjects, IT equipment, communal spaces for eating relaxing or studying, adequate heating, lighting and ventilation. We have a right to expect this for our young people.

In recent weeks many schools have received an influx of Ukrainian refugee students. The ASTI held a well-attended webinar for teachers on how they can best meet the needs of these students: help them to

heal from trauma, restart their education, and recover their lives. Once again, teachers will pull out all the stops, despite working in underfunded, under-resourced schools. We acknowledge the work of the Department of Education in providing resources and advice to schools in recent weeks. Much more resources must be provided, and must be provided even after the initial glare of the media has gone. This is a big challenge for schools and teachers, but it has to be met and met in a way that is sustainable and fair to all involved.

In this context, it is extremely concerning to the ASTI that the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill appears to step over the issue of investment in schools, and instead moves to transfer accountability for “improving” education to schools and teachers.

ASTI research carried out in 2021 by Dr Caitríona Fitzgerald found that charter-type models used in education are largely based on market-led mechanisms. These mechanisms treat schools as measurable entities with outputs that can be used for evaluation, ranking and comparison.

Such models shrink the state's role and redefine the citizen as a consumer and parents as customers. In other jurisdictions, most notably Sweden, this has had a negative effect on student and teacher wellbeing and actually widened the equity gap between students who have the resources and supports and those who do not.

Minister, we acknowledge your intervention and statement that the name of the Bill will be changed to the Education (School Community Charter) Bill. However, we need much more to convince us that this legislation is based on a whole-school-community approach that values the professional role and contribution of teachers and acknowledges the state's responsibilities in supporting schools and education.

As it stands, this legislation is not likely to give much comfort to those who believe in equality or in the right of every young person to a good quality education. If we allow our education system to be dictated by market-led policies we will do a great disservice to our children and

young people. Schools are not retail outlets and children's education is not a commodity.

Finally, I will end where I began: Trust. Minister, teachers too are ambitious for education. We want the best for our students and our future students. We always want education to improve. We are always concerned where we see regression. No education plan can succeed without the trust of teachers.

Ireland's emergence from the pandemic offers an opportunity to build trust with teachers and co-operation through meaningful dialogue. We look forward to this.