

ASTI Annual Convention 2021

Address by ASTI President

Ann Piggott

April 6th 2021

President's Address ASTI Convention 2021

ASTI President, Ann Piggott

General Secretary, Delegates, Staff, Strangers and Friends,

“Táimid go léir i dteannta a chéile” – all in this together.

Without cherishing it outrageously, “together” is what we have always been at Easter Conventions, and although always appreciating such events, we took for granted packed halls, rousing speeches, chats over coffee, fervent electioneering and visits of dignitaries and guests. This year, the 99th Convention comes live from Head Office to your armchair, whether you are attending from Limerick to Leitrim, or Baltimore to Bundoran.

As you won't be going too far in the next while, I will move you momentarily, from the confinement of your kitchens and the limitations of your living rooms. I will transport you back over 100 years ago to 1918.

The Spanish Flu, which did not originate in Spain, affected up to a third of the world's population in four successive waves. Crowded conditions increased the transmission of a more lethal form of the virus. Just like now, quarantines were imposed, and essential services were restricted. It was especially fatal to those in the 20-40 age bracket. A moderate estimate of 50 million people died, The Spanish Flu, the H1N1 virus was given from humans to pigs in 1918, and in 2009, they returned it to humans and was called the swine flu. The virus never fully went away and Dr. Fauci and articles state that the influenza H1N1 virus in circulation in modern times is a descendent of the 1918 virus.

It was called the Spanish Flu as Spain was the first country to publicly report the disease, yet cases in France, China and the United States were unreported due to wartime censorship. At the time, in London, schools closed and public transport stopped, following that, there were timetable changes as classes moved outdoors, and other buildings such as museums, libraries and church halls were used for schooling.

Prime Minister Lloyd George, aged 55, became ill owing to the Spanish flu, and in an era before vaccines and antibiotics, he spent 11 days in a sick bed but survived. Interestingly, Boris Johnson, who had Covid-19, was also 55 when he contracted Covid.

And staying in London, I will take you further back, to 1563 when the plague swept through the city. This was known as the bubonic plague or a version of Black Death which was also one of the worst previous catastrophes of the world in the 14th century. Later outbreaks culminated in the Great Plague of London in 1665. In 1666 the Great Fire of London, killed rats, which halted the spread. However, the bubonic plague still exists, and cases develop each year in many countries. One recent case was found in a herdsman in Asia.

One year after a plague in 1553, Shakespeare was born; and as there were intermittent outbreaks from 1582 to 1606, Shakespeare lived most of his life in the shadow of infections and death. Theatres and taverns were regularly closed as people battled to survive and

avoid the disease which was carried by fleas who lived on rats. As playhouses were closed for up to two years, Shakespeare toured provinces with his plays and many performances were held outside.

Due to our experiences of the pandemic, we can now understand more knowingly where Shakespeare was coming from. His plays are loved for many reasons, one factor being the RICH imagery. Images of flowers, darkness, light, heaven, hell, animals and clothing, together with the language of pestilence, blisters, ulcers and disease permeate his works.

King Lear told his daughter Goneril “Thou art a boil, a plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle in my corrupted blood”. MacBeth’s tyrannical reign is metaphorically described in a diseased country “The tyrant whose sole name blisters our tongues” and “Good men’s lives Expire before the flowers in their caps, Dying or ere they sicken”.

In the play Othello, Iago claims he will “pour pestilence into Othello’s ear”.

The play Hamlet also uses references to pestilence and disease as we become discover “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. Hamlet tells of his disillusionment with the world “It appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours”. He compares his uncle, his mother’s new husband, to a mildew’d ear”. He tells Ophelia if she marries “I’ll give thee this plague for thou dowry”. In describing a murder involving poison in the ear of the old king, the play is full of bleak images of death and decay, but is not I believe as depressing as the mood in King Lear, which speculators, since Covid, consider if it was written in quarantine.

The world of death carts and disease was at times the backdrop to Shakespeare’s life. In fact “Romeo and Juliet” is different than before - the focus may no longer be on “the love” but on the plague! In Covid times it presents a deal of insight, coupled with questions:

The tragedy in that play could be blamed on the plague. Friar John, on his way to tell Romeo that Juliet was not really dead was stopped. There was a raging and infectious plague, therefore Friar John could not deliver the all-important message and the play consequently ended in devastation for all in Verona. As was the practice times of the plague, “social isolation” involved not leaving anyone out of an infected house; it involved boarding up doors and painting red crosses on them, often meaning definite death for families. Friar John called to another Friar on the way who had been visiting the sick. Thus they were both “close contacts” and swift action was taken:

“Going to find a barefoot brother out,
One of our order, to associate me,
Here in this city visiting the sick,
And finding him, the searchers of the town,
Suspecting that we both were in a house
Where the infectious pestilence did reign,
Sealed up the doors and would not let us forth,
So that my speed to Mantua there was stayed”.

And then for the first time, you question:

- Lord Capulet's huge party in the same region?
- How did Romeo move freely to and from Mantua?
- Why were several people on the streets of Verona?
- Why did many go so close in vicious physical brawls?
- Was it acceptable for Romeo and his friends to gather in groups and gate-crash parties?
- How did Friar John escape from quarantine of the sealed house? The play covers three days, so he wasn't shut inside for very long, he brings the letter back saying:
"I could not send it – here it is again –
Nor get a messenger to bring it thee,
So fearful were they of infection."
- After being a close contact, was he not worried about Friar Laurence's health?

The plague indirectly caused the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, and the severity of the dying words of Mercutio "A plague on both your houses" was hauntingly expounded in the severe loss to both the Montagues and Capulet families.

The world, oblivious to previous pandemics, has been shaken and dramatically disturbed by the arrival of Covid-19; unexpected and staggering to all of us, except when you look at history. Interactions of birds, humans and animals resulting in contagious infections is not new as bacteria and viruses appear, disappear, mutate, and re-emerge.

Following on from Shakespeare's northern Italy of over 400 years ago as he presented it, Italy in 2021 continues to grapple with infection and is under lockdown again.

The scenes in Italy last March shocked and saddened the world. Army trucks lumbered through Bergamo, as there was no space left in local graveyards and the army vehicles carried the bodies of the dead to crematoriums outside the city; with the most acute sadness, Italy lost many of its people, particularly the elderly. We realised the virus could soon be on our doorsteps. The earlier experiences of China and Italy allowed us some time for preparation and defence.

School Closures/Remote Learning:

March 2020 brought changes which we have never seen before in the Irish Education system. A swift announcement on Thursday March the 12th 2020 meant most teachers and students grabbed their books, left the school premises with an innocent naivety of the situation which has only been altered by hindsight and experience. No one expected to be away for too long, it came with the suddenness of snow-days but with a bleak and dangerous darkness. Easter chased into summer and along with it came the technological education change that could never have been imagined.

With little if any training, a huge online revolution had begun– by the time the equally unexpected second closure of January 2021 locked everyone at home once again, major

milestones were crossed and advancements were realised. The school day resumed and worked, learning and teaching took place virtually, amid the pandemic. A major change had occurred. People who did not previously own laptops became proficient at piloting platforms, pre-recording and teaching live classes; homework was assigned and corrected via digital devices to the thousands of students who learnt online. The compelling fact which emerged is that teachers were no more lost among the virtual corridors of social platforms than students. Some pupils equally at first found it difficult to access and navigate their way around cyber classrooms; the associated work was challenging at first without adequate training. Obvious issues such as broadband access, equipment and privacy were problematic. The ASTI's exposure of such potential problems last September led to the demand of IT equipment for students and teachers.

Masks:

The ASTI repeatedly made representations for the wearing of masks ahead of the return to school last summer, when advice at the time suggested that masks were unnecessary in schools originally. Masks have been essential in keeping people safe, but masks alone cannot safeguard lives. When masks are loose, of poor-quality material, and sometimes sit under noses, teachers worry.

When students eat lunch in school, obviously masks are taken off. Up to 30 students eating lunch, talking and laughing are in rooms where masks will be put on again and school staff will teach in those rooms for up to three hours after lunch. Rooms are cramped, tables are more spread out, but with a teacher, students, and perhaps two special needs assistants, this can generate 33 people in a room where viruses are most probably airborne.

Latest statistics inform that 22% of positive cases are asymptomatic, showing no signs. This means there may be people in classrooms who are positive and may not know. Students travel to different rooms for optional practical subjects where equipment is shared and movement is unavoidable. Case numbers described as community numbers have been perplexing for teachers. Last week's figure show that there were 1256 confirmed Covid cases in the under 18 age group.

Phased return:

We do not have the luxury of large classrooms the size of convention centres. ASTI asked for a phased return to school, and we were pleased with the staggered restart in March. This has helped to ensure that classes are able to use bigger rooms and smaller crowds roam the corridors and school grounds. It has also allowed time to observe the numerical pattern of infection. Over the cold winter classrooms have had little spare space. Students even sit at desks in doorways to be one meter away from others.

Ventilation:

Ventilation has been an issue, older windows in some rooms do not open, cold drafts have howled in doorways and rain has battered in the doors of out-dated eroding pre-fabs. Coats, cold, rain and wind have earmarked some in-class experiences of late 2020.

Vaccinations:

Although previously appearing at Level 11 on a 15-point list, we were suddenly thrust into oblivion as the last 6 levels after Level 9 were removed instantly and unexpectedly one week ago. The Minister for Health stated it would “facilitate planning and execution of the programme”, NIAC’s document informs that it will be “operationally simple” and “efficient way of continuing the vaccine rollout”. A member of NPHET on the news agreed “Yes, it would be easier to give this in an aged band cohort. Less checking, less searching. Much easier to do, but it happens to be something that is quite effective too.”

Did NIAC set the original list?

Why was it changed? Was it for simplicity or for other concerns?

Why will someone who is working from home, without meeting anyone be vaccinated ahead of people who are in positions of potential exposure to coronavirus.

We are not the only union to feel anger at the abandonment. TUI, INTO, Fórsa, GRA, AGSI, NBRU have all publicly expressed disappointments.

This has been a brutal and sudden kick in the teeth for teachers and other public sector workers. Total disregard has been shown for the frontline workers in this country who come face to face with hundreds of people in the course of essential work where exposure to illness is unavoidable.

Despite the objective of keeping schools open, no vaccination of essential school workers is deemed important. In December Unesco, Unicef and Education International called on governments to prioritise school staff for vaccinations. Last weekend, the United Nations, has called again for prioritisation of vaccinations for teachers and a few days later, our government removed:

- Level 10: Key workers in essential jobs who cannot avoid a high risk of exposure to Covid 19,
- Level 11: People essential to education who face disease exposure,
- Level 13: People in occupations important to the functioning of society.

Other countries have prioritised the need to keep schools open. USA, France, Chile, Italy, Canada, China, Serbia, Indonesia, Russia, Portugal, Argentina, Colombia, Turkey and Vietnam are just some of the countries who have vaccinated or are about to vaccinate their teachers. They value education, and the health of the more exposed workers in society. They have protected essential staff. This will ensure schools stay open, that staff will not have to self-isolate or be confronted by illness.

The latest promised ease of restrictions will allow only two people who are vaccinated to meet indoors, but in undersized classrooms, the parallel universe continues: 33 can meet without vaccinations.

Less than two metres is unsafe in society, but one metre is acceptable in schools, and if masks are worn, close contacts have not been of concern during tracking and tracing of positive cases. Hundreds of people swirl and circle in cramped and overcrowded situations in schools daily.

I agree with the propositions of last weekend by union representatives: If the Government's new strategy is the plan going forward, a parallel system of protecting frontline workers is the obvious solution. The rollout will continue and remaining frontline workers will be protected as they should, over 27,000 vaccines were administered on one day last week, therefore workers in exposed workplaces would be vaccinated in very little time. This is the obvious solution, we need to move from a two-tier parallel system of classroom measures to this parallel safety control for teachers, SNAs and others. The poor decision to exclude teachers must be rescinded, and I call on the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the leader of the Green party, the Minister for Education, the Minister for Health, and the government, to fulfil their duty of care to teachers and frontline workers.

You have braved the job with trepidation since last August, and now with the UK variants, and both the Brazilian and South African variants present in Ireland and reported to be spreading, there is no safety net. Rumours abound of more variants in the world, some of which are: a second Brazilian variant, a Nigerian version, and a double mutant in India.

Current vaccines may only protect against the original and the UK variant. In time booster shots may be needed. This causes another problem for workers who work in close contact during the pandemic – it will possibly mean that during any booster rollout, teachers and SNAs will again experience the same 'invisibility status' as was introduced a week ago.

Depending on your age, you may have to wait a long time! Despite the fact, that the median age of those with coronavirus is approximately 32, and 75% of people with Covid are under 45, the removal of essential workers from the list is thoroughly unacceptable; at a time when everything is apparently being done to keep schools open, nothing productive is being done in this regard to keep schools open.

I also wish to clarify, that having us on the list will not deprive vulnerable, or senior people from getting vaccines. That is the last thing we want.

High Risk:

There has been much focus on high-risk teachers. The Chair of NIAC last week said that "If we were to compare a 20 -35 year old to a 65 year old, the 65 year old has 70 times the risk of death as the younger". Presumably the risk to people aged 60 to 64 must also be very high. So why are teachers in this age bracket being instructed to returning to choc – a- block classrooms, along with other people in the high risk category who suffer from cancer, heart failure, chronic kidney disease as examples. People in the high-risk categories must be facilitated to work from home until they are safely vaccinated.

Pregnant teachers:

Four still births among women with coronavirus have led to concerns, it is crucial that pregnant women are not exposed to the virus. Recent correspondence implies that flexible arrangements will remain in place on April 12th, but also advises that “Further clarification will follow in relation to pregnant staff pending further consideration by the HSE”. Pregnant staff must undeniably be facilitated in remote working for the remainder of the school year and in the future if they risk being exposed to Covid.

Leaving Cert Exams:

How can people suggest that calculated grades are acceptable at the same time as they criticise the Leaving Cert? What has emerged is the value placed on schooling by society for several reasons.

Following talks, we are glad that a Leaving Cert is being held with second components. It is also heartening to hear that many students have so far signed up to sit exams. We had continually asked for adaptations to exam papers to offer choice and reduce strain, stress, anxiety and workload for students in Leaving Certificate 2021. The changes made are helpful in doing so and should encourage students to sit exams this year. The Leaving Cert. corrections will be standardised and every exam will be marked relative to each other, from a marking scheme which will be used uniformly by all examiners. No one shall be unfairly brought down, in calculating results and a proper appeal mechanism is available involving a re-correction of scripts.

The Accredited Grades Model, also offered, it is not an option favoured by us, and we would only have liked to see it used as a last option contingency in the pandemic. However, it is here again, results will be computed with no uniform schemes, in different ways, using diverse standards in separate schools. Subsequent standardisation may lead to school results being readjusted downwards.

Senior Cycle Reform:

Any future changes to the Senior Cycle curriculum must both enhance what is currently working well and address acknowledged problems. The externally assessed Leaving Certificate has high levels of public trust and is essential for maintenance of high educational standards. The majority of Leaving Certificate subjects now contain an examination of students’ practical skills – an important dimension of learning. What is problematic about the Leaving Certificate is the role it serves in providing points for access to higher education. We need to develop an entry model to higher education which does not rely exclusively on the Leaving Cert.

We are not teaching the same curriculum since 1924, schools are not like the unimaginative utilitarian no frills schools presented by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* with noses to grindstones where they kept filling children like vessels, with knowledge, and did not allow them to imagine flowers on carpets.

We wish to nurture creativity and imagination and independent thinking; and Peig Sayers has not been compulsory since 1995. We are not against reform and are in favour of changes such as oral exams for modern languages and would be open for discussion on timelines for project and practical work, but if we change the bathwater, we do need to ensure that the baby is protected and nurtured.

Project Maths was not the panacea that was once dreamed of; the metamorphosis to the Junior Cycle has unimpressed teachers, who feel standards are lost, despite additional material bundled on courses; too many repetitive CBAs exist and students state that the time given in exams is too short for the amount asked, and exam papers are at liberty to ask anything. The grouping of marks means students who get 55% or 74% both receive a Merit. Only 2% of students get a distinction.

We do not want a mirror image of this at Senior Cycle – standards and fairness must prevail.

New Entrants

We have a teacher shortage and area such as Irish, home economics, maths, science and English. Jobs are increasing harder to fill, however new teachers continue to report the same issues; whilst being extremely well qualified, with Masters degrees after 6 years at college, precarious employment abounds. Job offers of 7 hours a week, for a certain period of time, with no guarantee of successive employment in the same school or any other is common; This is a meagre starting point to attract young teachers into the profession.

Sunny days in Dubai, with rewarding tax-free salaries are more attractive than the lesser two-tier pay scale; guaranteed jobs where accommodation costs are not debilitating, relieve pressure for our young talent: we fail to match in any way.

Previously new teachers, who really wanted to teach, used to find second jobs in shops, bars and restaurants; their only dependable way to earn a steady income in the early years of teaching no longer exists.

Teacher/Principal Workload

Workload has increased for all and the nature of the job has changed negatively, particularly since the recession in 2009. Extra mandatory unpaid supervision during lunch time, and substitution of classes, with multiple meetings after school are extra impositions. After school hours are spent preparing and correcting; online learning has added more layers – preparation for online classes, and incessant corrections arriving online has meant no work life balance.

School principals have had a hard year. Summer was spent preparing schools for opening, this Easter, overseeing exams is taking place on the school premises, and mid-term break necessitated replacing withdrawn sanitizers. Saturday exams and overseeing orals, calculated grades and out of school learners has added to the everyday burden, which will see many principals cutting short their career span due to exhaustion and overload.

Charter:

As the teacher has been cut from the vaccination list, we continue to be invisible elsewhere. Whilst schools could not run without us, whilst we are the cornerstone of teaching and learning in schools, we protect for the students in our care and do our best on a daily basis. The potential establishment of a charter will also exclude us. Despite all talk of inclusivity and rights in education, the exclusion of one of the main stakeholders is bitterly dissatisfying, where the rights of all should be acknowledged and respected.

Remote Inspections

In circumstances of continued remote learning, an inspection model is being considered. This could be a possibility in the next school year, if we find ourselves in this situation again. Considering the efforts that have taken to get to this point, with little if any training, and a major increase in workload, zooming in with the intention of publicly judging teachers who are juggling all parts of the Covid jigsaw, online teaching may potentially be judged in a distasteful series of published reports.

The teacher of a single subject would be entirely exposed, and in the time of a pandemic, it is not the right thing to do.

At this point I wish to thank everyone, for your support and kindness. I thank ASTI members for your loyal commitment to your union and I wish you and your students well with this year's Leaving Cert. I thank members of the many committees for your dedication and efforts, AVC for today's Convention, I sincerely thank the staff who have had a difficult year working remotely at Level 5. Staff. I thank my family, friends, fellow officers, standing committee and extend best wishes to Eamon for his presidency which will begin on August 1st. I also wish to thank the Immediate Past President Deirdre Mac Donald for all of her work with the union.

I greatly appreciate and acknowledge the consistent and persistent work our general secretary Kieran Christie.

As I referenced Shakespeare at the beginning, I will finish in a similar fashion. The joke about William Shakespeare being vaccinated goes as follows:

Which arm?

As you like it

Was that painful?

Much Ado About Nothing.

You will have to have a second jab.

Measure for Measure.

So how was the experience?

A Midsummer Night's Dream.

What do you think of the Government's handling of Covid?

A Comedy of Errors.

And as we move forward, I wish to add a hopeful last optimistic one myself:

All's Well that Ends Well!

Thank you.