

## **ASTI Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on Curricular Reform at Second Level**

### **Introduction**

ASTI greatly appreciates this opportunity to address the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills. Its timing is particularly opportune as our public representatives engage in preparation for the Budget. The economic crisis facing our country is un-precedented; the consequent social crisis is under-articulated. Our message here today on behalf of the 18, 600-plus second level teachers which we represent is un-equivocal: education is central to national recovery.

As a nation, we are facing so many challenges and threats on simultaneous “fronts” to the point of losing faith in ourselves. The only way out of this crisis is through the innate strengths and talents of our population, especially our youth. 44% of our population is under 30 years of age. Our schools – more than at any other stage in our history – represent our future. Innovation and sustainability are core requirements. How can schools meet these challenges?

### **Curricular Reform**

Obviously, curricular reform is central to meeting these challenges. Our high-performing National Council for Curriculum & Assessment is implementing important “change projects” in our schools such as embedding key skills in teaching; developing flexible learning profiles which prioritize autonomous learning; integrating assessment for learning into teaching, not to mention Project Maths. Subject content is constantly being renewed as is assessment of learning.

However, we would caution that there can be an over-emphasis on changing curricular content to the neglect of what will really advance an innovation-learning culture in schools. A recent report from the influential Center for American Progress concluded that: *“Every aspect of school reform depends on highly skilled teachers for its success. This is especially true as educational*

*standards rise and the diversity of the student body increases*".\* The curriculum content is vital but how students are challenged to engage with this content is even more critical. For reform success, we need to look at the overall quality of the learning environment in schools.

### **We Need High Quality Learning Environments**

In Finland, they are literally restraining visitors to their schools as policy makers flock to Helsinki and elsewhere to find out the secret of Finland's high performing education system! We ourselves have had the Finns over here!! The Finns are at pains to point out that their success is not due to a magic combination of policy factors which can be exported. Rather it is due to a tradition of the highest standards of entry to teaching and continual renewal of teachers and schools through regular upskilling of teachers; speedy provision of supports to students who are having difficulties; high quality ICT infrastructure; freedom for schools to manage much of the curriculum. These are the conditions which allow creativity, innovation, teamwork, critical thinking to flourish in schools.

In Ireland we must extend our vision for curricular reform beyond merely changing *what* students learn to focusing on *how* they learn. If we want meaningful educational change which will address criticisms such as too much rote learning in schools, or teachers 'teaching to the exam', then we must allow schools to concentrate on developing students' innate innovation capacity. Lifelong learning is not a cliché – it must become a reality for our young people. Our curriculum at both Junior and Senior cycle has many strengths – which far outnumber the well-identified weaknesses. The current review of the Junior Cycle curriculum is a key opportunity for rectifying the weaknesses.

### **Supporting Curricular Reform**

What conditions are necessary to allow Irish schools to become innovative learning hubs?

- Don't raise the pupil: teacher ratio

- Press ahead with the Smart Schools Programme and take technology into every classroom
- Continue to provide teacher training, especially in the area of active teaching methodologies, teaching students with special educational needs and understanding students' emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- Make sure that Project Maths, which is really about deepening the mathematical competencies of all students, is properly supported.
- Make sure funding is provided to enable the professional assessment of practical work in science.
- Trust our schools to be innovation builders – league tables of exams results give teachers the message to teach to the test instead of empowering students to develop their innate innovation capacities.

#### **Inherent Strengths In Our System....**

We want to finish our presentation on a positive note. Of course, we need continued investment in education to support meaningful change. The ASTI has been to the forefront in making the case for at least keeping our investment in education equal to the OECD average of 5.7% of GDP compared to our “bottom drawer” level of 4.7%. But we also have many inherent strengths in our system which we should harness.

***High Level Of Trust In Teachers:*** A recent report from the Teaching Council demonstrates the high level of public trust in teachers – second only to nurses in terms of the value the public places on their work. Moreover, teaching continues to attract high calibre graduates. Well over half of all entrants to teacher education have Masters' degrees. Situation is quite different in many other OECD countries.

**OECD PISA studies** display our consistently above average performance in the international benchmarks for literacy, mathematics and science. Of equal importance, PISA also demonstrates that, compared to many other countries, Irish young people like school; “*are engaged in the school project*” and feel cared for by their teachers. Our school retention rate is much higher than in other EU countries. Our pastoral care structures are vital in this regard.

Finally, to revert back to theme of today, ***reforming the curriculum is an ongoing project***. How students learn is even more important than what they learn. Focusing on the school environment is the key to successful educational change. Teachers will drive that change when the conditions are provided – as Project Maths so amply demonstrates.

You, our public representatives, are the decision makers on education policy. Your concerns are properly at the macro-economic and social cohesion level. Teachers concerns tend to focus on the students in their school, their progress, their behaviour, their well-being, making sure that they reach their potential. ASTI believes that such concerns are mutually compatible. We both want the same end result: young people who are well educated. What do we mean by this? The answer must be young people who have well developed critical thinking and creative skills; who are open to change and innovation; who are socially responsible; who value citizenship; who value our distinctive Irish cultural heritage, and, of vital importance today, who are equipped for a mobile and precarious global labour market.

\* “Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness: How Teacher Performance Assessments Can Measure and Improve Teaching”, Linda Darling-Hammond October 2010.