ASTI Submission

to

Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy 2021-2023

Introduction

The ASTI welcomes the opportunity provided by the review of the Statement of Strategy to submit its views on core aspects of education policy. Given the extraordinary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system, this review provides a valuable space for the education stakeholders to communicate their ambitions, concerns and proposals to the Minister. In these unprecedented times, this Departmental strategic planning exercise has a unique import and urgency. Decisions and directions taken in the coming months and years will have an enduring impact on the capacity of the education system to contribute to social and economic rebuilding – and rebuilding back better.

Investing in education

In the last six months, two OECD reports have highlighted the abysmal record of under-investment in education. We are now ranked in last place out of 36 countries for investment in second-level education as a percentage of GDP. [1] 'Education at a Glance 2019' confirmed that in 2016 Ireland invested 1.2% of GDP on second-level education compared to the EU average of 1.9% and the OECD average of 2%. Overall, Ireland invested 3.5% of its GDP in education compared to the OECD average of 5%. This trend of under-investment was also highlighted in Volume 5 of PISA 2018. Across almost all indicators – material and human resources available to school, ICT infrastructure - Irish second-level principals confirmed that inadequacies were hampering the work of their schools. This cannot continue. The Irish state will not achieve its wider goals of economic and social progress if it does not invest in education.

Effective teacher policies

Effective teacher policies are the foundation for building successful education systems. While Ireland has strong teacher policies in relation to initial teacher education, registration and quality, problems in supply and retention have become pronounced. The Teacher Supply Action Plan, launched in November 2019, must remain a priority of the Department. Notwithstanding the fact that a number of its actions are being operationalised as part of the COVID-19 response plan, this area of education policy must not be allowed to drift. Supply and retention are central to ensuring quality in the profession as are supports for professional learning and opportunities for school leadership. ASTI must firmly put on record its concern about the corrosive impact of unequal pay on the attractiveness of teaching as a profession and its demoralising impact on the entire profession, not least those thousands of teachers who suffer the injustice of unequal pay for equal work. Effective teacher policies must also take cognisance of wider social discourse on schools and the profession. A key finding in ASTI research on teachers' experience of remote teaching underlined how negative media narratives

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[1] OECD 2019 *Education at a Glance*; OECD 2020, *PISA 2018 Results Vol 5: Effective Policies, Successful School*

was really impacting on teachers' morale.[2] The Department of Education and Skills has a responsibility to facilitate a balanced public discourse on teachers and their work.

Goal 1: Improving the learning experience and success of learners

The curriculum provides the context for students' learning experiences. Teachers are reluctant to engage in curriculum change if they perceive that the latter is at odds with their own experiential knowledge of what works best in the classroom. This professional response of teachers is sometimes unfairly described as 'resistance' to change. The latter charge also misrepresents the nature of teaching which is about creating relationships in the classroom which sustain students' motivation to learn. Policy makers must acknowledge the cumulative impact of 'innovation overload' on the profession and school leaders. While the pandemic has stalled the introduction of new initiatives, policy makers should reflect carefully on how best to manage future change programmes. Irrespective of the nature of the latter, key requirements include time for planning and collaboration; CPD and opportunities for professional learning; dialogue with the profession; strengthened school management; ongoing evaluation and review.

Priority actions:

1. Ensure adequate supply of teachers, including provision for upskilling teachers and incentivizing further professional learning.
2. Sustainable process of curriculum review underpinned by an implementation strategy which is resourced and does not add to teachers' workload
3. Sustain investment in the digital strategy for schools. (While Circular 0074/2020 represents an initial step in this direction it does not provide for contingency funding to schools to ensure that all students have appropriate ICT devices and access to broadband in the event of future school closures. Moreover, it does not address the lack of leadership capacity in schools to ensure that Digital Learning teams are in place to sustain peer learning, develop content and deliver wellbeing and other non-classroom supports to students.)

Goal 2: Increasing progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs

The introduction of the new Resource Allocation Model for students with additional and special educational needs in September 2017 was welcomed by the ASTI as representing a more transparent and effective resourcing model. The ASTI has communicated teachers' concerns to the Department around the need for a national training programme; a post for a SEN co-ordinator in each school; restoration of the allowance for advanced professional learning.

As regards improving the progress of students at risk of educational disadvantage, the ASTI again puts on record for the Department its view that the DEIS model must be supplemented by "*tapering of funding*" approach based on the DEIS model as recommended by the 2015 ESRI evaluation of the DEIS programme. (6) At second level in particular, the DEIS model of targeting areas of high levels of deprivation results in many students' needs outside such areas being unacknowledged and unmet, given that the majority of educationally disadvantaged young people do not live in DEIS-designated areas.

The shut-down of schools in mid-March dramatically exposed poverty and adverse family circumstances of many young people. Lack of access to school meals was a key issue as was lack of access to books, dictionaries, etc – not to mention ICT devices. With public libraries and other

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[2] *ASTI 2020 'Teachers' experience of remote teaching' (forthcoming)*

community resources shut, many families experienced overwhelming difficulties in supporting their children keep up their learning.

The ASTI is concerned that little progress appears to have been made on the education actions in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021. It was profoundly disturbing to read the recently published 6-country report from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights [3] and the alienation of Traveller and Roma children from school and their wider peer groups. The next Statement of Strategy must contain specific measures to implement current policy, including procedures for schools to respond to racism and xenophobia.

Priority actions:

1. Support the NCSE SET Allocation Model with national training programme for teachers and the allocation of adequate co-ordination hours.

2. Implement the recommendations in the 2015 ESRI DEIS evaluation, in particular with respect to tapering of support to support students in non-DEIS schools.

3. Prioritise actions on education in the Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy.

4. DES to cooperate with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure that families experiencing severe deprivation are not left behind.

Goal 3: Helping those delivering education to continuously improve

Teachers are central to quality education. Prior to COVID-19, there was strong evidence of stresses on the teaching profession, in particular problems of retention and supply. A strategy aimed at helping those delivering education services to continually improve must therefore address the root problems of malaise and low morale in the profession. Increased access to CPD and other 'upskilling' responses will not in themselves address the underlying problems of workload, working conditions – in particular unequal pay, deteriorating wellbeing and job satisfaction. Notwithstanding the professional mobilisation to keep schools open and safe, these problems have, if anything, become more pressing. The Statement of Strategy should acknowledge the need to commit to support the teaching profession into the future and identify key actions to this end.

Priority actions:

1. Develop a strategy to address teacher workload, drawing on the experience of the UK 'Teacher Workload Survey' initiative and that of Scottish government [4]

2. The Department of Education and Skills must re-join the OECD's quintennial teaching and learning international survey – TALIS. This survey provides unsurpassed data on core aspects of teachers' professional lives, including workload, access to leadership roles, professional learning, pedagogical challenges and school improvement.

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[3] *https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/roma-travellers-survey*

[4]

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/594696/TWS-2016_FINAL_Research_brief_Feb_2017.pdf

https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/news-and-events/teacher-workload-study/

3. The Department of Education and Skills introduce the Integrated Work health Management Initiative (IWHMI) developed by the teacher unions and school management bodies. [5]

Goal 4: Building stronger bridges between education and the wider community

Schools are at the heart of the local community. The ethos of Irish schools of promoting the holistic development of young people ensures that schools have multiple 'bridges' with their local communities. Schools' extra-curricular activities such as sport and games, the arts and cultural activities, community and volunteering, wellbeing projects, faith-based activities, etc., 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, supervision and substitution duties is such that they are no longer in a position to engage in extra-curricular activities.

Extra-curricular activities are but one of the complex role schools perform in local communities. There has a been a sustained output of research on the impact of school closures on young people's wellbeing, mental and physical. The social importance of school for young people was succinctly captured in the HSE paediatric experts' report when it stated that:

> *School is central to a child's social life and wellbeing, this is particularly true for marginalized children. School is the vehicle through which the State channels much of its investment in children.[6]*

Schools are not sufficiently funded to perform the range of socialisation and support functions now ascribed to them. The Departmental 'Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023' remains aspirational. The key barrier in this regard is the lack of capacity at school leadership level. There are simply not sufficient school leadership posts currently available to schools to enable the complex planning processes to implement the models of good practice identified in the Framework. The other key 'disabler' in relation to wellbeing is the huge variation in the type of support schools can expect from local service providers such as CAMHS, EWS, NEPS, SENOs, etc. Inadequate staffing levels in these service means that waiting lists are long, staff have high caseloads, preventative work takes second place due to the need to prioritise critical cases, etc. The redeployment of speech, language and occupational therapists to work on contact tracing and other COVID-19 related measures is compounding an already fraught situation for thousands of children. The promise of the School Inclusion Model, which includes an In-School Therapy Demonstration project, to support inclusion inside and outside the classroom, will never be realised until systemic problems of supply, recruitment and retention of professional staff are addressed in the health services.

The guidance and counselling service is a key bridge between schools and the wider society. Career orientations are formed early and primarily outside the school context. The guidance counselling service aims to assist students in making choices and successful transitions in personal and social, education and career areas. The service is of particular support to students from lower socio-economic

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[5] *The IWHMI looks to address many of the shortcomings of the return to work scheme for teachers in addition to developing a working environment which truly protects and promotes teachers' health particularly by applying the HSA's recommended Work Positive system.*

[6] *National Clinical Review on the Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions on Children and Guidance on Reopening of Schools and the Normalisation of Paediatric Healthcare Services in Ireland National Clinical Programme for Paediatrics and Neonatology Clinical Design and Innovation, Health Service Executive, August 2020*

groups and students with special educational needs. The 2019 Indecon consultants' review of career guidance contains key recommendations, including the provision of high-quality guidance tools and career information; information on multiple pathways including apprenticeships; and enhanced enterprise engagement.[7] These need to be operationalised in the Strategic Plan, not least the specific recommendations on e-guidance tools and platforms. The current allocation ratio for guidance counsellors is completely inadequate and is not meeting the needs of students. The advent of the COVID-19 crisis is placing unsustainable demands on the service

Priority actions:

1. Reduce teacher workload to sustain motivation and capacity to engage in extra-curricular activities.

2. Insert here policy on promotional posts

3. Develop a roadmap for implementation of the recommendations in the Indecon review of career guidance, including a review of the allocation ratio.

Goal 5: Providing better national planning and support services

National support services are an important part of the education infrastructure and promote peer learning.   However, coordination between national initiatives and support services remains a challenge. For example, the SEN resource allocation model introduced in September 2017 was not accompanied by a national training programme. Moreover, communication to schools via circular letter failed to reach the classroom teachers, many of whose first indication of the new model was when they were directed to co-teach with the SET teacher. On top of this, teachers were expected to engage in individualised planning processes which the majority felt entirely unprepared for. Moreover, while NCSE was a key information provider for schools, it has no direct communication channels with teachers to promote a mass-communications exercise, particularly around its support services. This sequence of inadequate planning is not unusual and requires analysis. Teachers have the primary responsibility for implementing change in the classroom yet are generally not identified as the key audience for communicating, supporting and pre-planning for the change model. The fallout from this poor coordination is manifest in the evaluation reports on provision for students with special educational needs which highlighted the need for schools to improve SEN co-ordination and for teachers to deploy appropriate differentiation and assessment strategies – precisely the areas where ASTI reiterated that teachers needed training. Clarification of roles and responsibilities is an indispensable dimension of effective policy implementation.

The current review of senior cycle curriculum is causing unease among teachers: the protracted process of securing agreement on implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle has left an abiding mistrust. An overly technocratic approach to change frequently fails to take into account the impact of curriculum on teachers' workload, in particular, on their professional time. These and other issues must be addressed in advance of senior cycle curriculum change. Policy design and policy implementation is an iterative integrative process rather than linear.

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[7] https://assets.gov.ie/24951/dffde726604b451aa6cc50239a375299.pdf

Priority actions:

1. The conclusions and recommendations in the forthcoming OECD report on policy implementation for curriculum change must be given careful consideration in the Strategy Statement.

2. The development of a communications/engagement strategy to focus on those required ot implement change, namely teachers. The top-down model of circular letters and long guidelines is no longer an adequate communications tool in complex, increasingly networked educational institutions.

3. All change projects/reforms need to address the capacity issues of school. Teachers' time, level of leadership posts in schools and training are the core resources which need to be in place.

Goal 6: Implementing evidence-based policies

Effective policy design requires evidence from multiple sources. An important dimension of the evidence base is learning from previous reforms. In this regard, the delay in ensuring a longitudinal research project to capture teachers' experience of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle is regrettable. From the perspective of the ASTI, this delay not only constituted a failure to implement an agreed action: it was perceived as bypassing the experiential knowledge of the profession. Another lesson learned from the protracted process of the implementation of the Framework was the over-reliance by the Department of Education and Skills on the NCCA to disseminate information to the system. The NCCA is essentially a consultative body to provide advice to the Minister for Education and Skills. The latter has the responsibility for communicating such advice to the system and for putting in place a well-resourced implementation strategy. As noted above, clarification of roles and responsibilities is critical.

One of the many unprecedented consequences of COVID-19 has been the rapid research output by academics, teacher unions, ed-tech companies, research institutes, etc, on the impact of school closure on children's learning and wellbeing, teachers' pedagogical responses, and parental involvement in their children's learning. This output provides a rich evidence base for policy. In particular, the overwhelming evidence of digital and other resource inequalities among students must be taken into account in all future pandemic/shock planning. At the same time, the capacity of a wide range of actors to produce quality contemporaneous research points to exciting potential for enriching and extending the evidence base. At the same time, there needs to be an awareness of the import and rationale for different sources of evidence in education. In this regard, the ASTI is concerned that there is an under-appreciation in the Department of Education and Skills of the scale of global for profit ed-tech monopolies on education discourse; the ethical challenges arising from 'big data'.[8] There is absolutely no doubt that the digital 'turn' in education is accelerating and there is an urgent need for wide and sustained discussion on this phenomenon. Equally there is a need to address as a matter of urgency the current deficiencies in supporting digital literacy among students and teachers. The latter is no longer a question of being able to use ICT. Rather it is a question on how we educate young people to live in the online world. The latter has both positive and negative consequences. The latter are already causing profound disruptions in terms of rising extremism, threats to democracy, and the very idea of science and rational thinking.

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[8] https://www.ei-ie.org/en/detail/16858/edtech-pandemic-shock-new-ei-research-launched-on-covid-19-education-commercialisation

Policy actions:

1. Statement of Strategy should include a commitment to developing a framework for research in education to sustain the evidence base for policy.

2. Statement of Strategy should inform the development of the agenda for the proposed Citizens' Assembly for education which identifies the 'big' questions facing schools and educators.

3. Statement of Strategy should set out a commitment to examine the impact of the 'digital shift' on education, including how best to embed digital literacy across all areas of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The ASTI acknowledges the complexity of the six strategic goals outlined in the consultation. COVID-19 has dramatically exposed the inadequacies and inequities embedded in our education system and in the wider social infrastructure. The economic and socials costs of COVID-19 will mark a generation. Education