

## **National Action Plan in Education**

The Minister for Education and Skills launched the first National Action Plan for Education in September 2016. The Plan was published following a consultation process. The Plan has five key aims:

1. Improve the learning experience and the success of learners
2. Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs
3. Help those delivering education services to continually improve
4. Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community
5. Improve national planning and support services

## **ASTI Submission to the consultation process on National Action Plan in Education**

### **ASTI Submission to DES Statement of Strategy 2016-2018**

#### **Introduction**

The ASTI welcomes the opportunity to take part in the consultation on the next Departmental Statement of Strategy and recognises that this consultation is an important aspect of a democratic and transparent policy formation process. This consultation process is also important from the point of view of the Department in that it creates a space for dialogue with teachers and their representative organisations after almost a decade of austerity comprising cutbacks in the funding of schools, reduction in teacher numbers, salary cuts, negative media portrayal of the work of public servants in general and teachers in particular, and ongoing industrial relations conflicts with the teacher unions.

#### **Repairing the austerity damage**

As the economy begins to grow again, Government strategy must explicitly focus on repairing the damage inflicted on schools by austerity policies. This damage has been extensive. The Minister's Brief Overview last month presents a stark analysis of this legacy. Capitation funding to schools is down by 11% since 2012: over 3000 teachers were lost as a result of pupil:teacher ration increases: *"a particularly challenging capital allocation in the school sector"* (p.8). The cuts to the pupil:teacher ratio have reduced the staffing schedule at second level to that of the early 1990s – notwithstanding the sustained demographic growth during the last decade.(p.28) This demographic growth at second level will see an increase of 12,000 pupils over 2014/15 and 2017/18 to 350,000, peaking in 2025/2026 at 405,000. (p.6) The narrative of *"doing more with less"* is no longer sustainable or acceptable. Investment in education must become the focus of education policy in the next Strategy.

## **Creating meaningful dialogue with teachers**

As education increasingly becomes the nexus between many strands of government policy – the national skills strategy, child protection, public health promotion, social inclusion, etc., there is a danger of ignoring the voice of the education professional in the public discourse. Teachers' perception that their voice was ignored in the formation of policy on the Framework for Junior Cycle created a deep sense of alienation across the profession which was articulated in the final Travers Report. Coupled with salary cuts of up to 20%, additional workload, larger classes, no promotional opportunities, this sense of marginalisation had damaged the morale of the teaching profession and its attractiveness as a career. Concrete steps need to be taken to rebuild morale. A programme of investment is a key first step. In tandem with this, it is incumbent on the Department to address the other issues which are affecting morale and diminishing job satisfaction.

## **Innovation overload in schools**

From the Department's point of view, "*a system-wide approach to reform based on international research*" may well be an effective approach to bringing about better outcomes in education. (p.13, Brief) However, from the point of view of the professionals who work in schools, this constant stream of new initiatives is primarily experienced as "innovation overload". Teachers feel overwhelmed by these external pressures which many feel don't help them in their core work of teaching. The undermining of in-school management structures since 2009 has, in any case severely damaged the capacity of schools to develop the collaborative collegial cultures which many of the new initiatives are predicated on. Future Departmental Strategy must acknowledge the negative impact which "innovation overload" is having on teachers' morale and well-being and engage in dialogue with teachers on how to reduce the administrative burden and associated workload.

### **Q.1: How well does the Education service meet the needs of children and students?**

The Irish second level education system has many acknowledged strengths. Chief among these is the high level of trust in the teaching profession; the holistic ethos of schools; the commitment to inclusion of all children; a broad curriculum underpinned by external assessment and State certification. External indicators of the system such as PISA demonstrate that Irish students' achievement level are generally at or above the OECD average. In this sense, the second level education service can be regarded as meeting the educational needs of young people.

However, it would be irresponsible not to acknowledge the challenges facing schools at institutional level. The work of second level schools is no longer confined to the achievement of educational goals: they are now the key societal institutions with responsibility for promoting their personal and social development and supporting their wellbeing. This changed role underpins, for example, the new Wellbeing programme in the Framework for Junior Cycle.

This phenomenon is not unique to Ireland. However, unlike many other systems, Irish second level schools continue to be resourced and staffed as if the work of teachers is confined to the classroom. The retrograde abolition of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor allocation to schools is a clear demonstration of this short-sighted policy. One of the major reasons why teachers' experience change as "innovation overload" is because such change is accompanied with minimal additional staffing – it at all. The drastic reduction in English-as-a-second language supports to schools is another case in point. Schools cannot become the inclusive multi-cultural communities if immigrant children do not receive the educational supports to enable their access to the curriculum.

In summary, the ASTI believes that teachers work extraordinarily hard to ensure that the educational and developmental needs of young people are met. This holistic commitment is reflective of the high professional standards of teachers. However, schools are not properly resourced to ensure that more challenging needs as elucidated in the “triage of support” model in various Departmental guidelines are fully met. As the school population grows, this situation will become increasingly untenable and the losers will be our young people.

**2. Comment on work currently being undertaken by the Department in your area of interest and/or expertise.**

The ASTI must use this Question to reiterate its concerns about aspects of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The union engaged in a number of extensive consultations with its members on the reform of the Junior Cycle curriculum. There are a number of outstanding areas where the ASTI needs progress in order to move ahead with curriculum change. These include the provision of externally assessed oral examinations for languages; the availability of higher and ordinary levels in the State Certificate examinations and the implications for increased workload. It must also be put on record that the extensive cutbacks in education over the last eight years have severely undermined teachers’ confidence in Departmental capacity to ensure adequate supports for major curriculum change.

**3. Are there opportunities (e.g. new areas of work) which the Department should consider when developing the 2016 - 2018 strategy which would advance the achievement of our mission, vision and objectives across the continuum of education and skills?**

The ASTI is deeply concerned at the lack of understanding of the issues facing the teaching profession in Chapter 10 of the Programme for Government. Apart from a commitment to additional CPD, including specific CPD for newly appointed principals, the Programme does not address the outstanding issues facing the teaching profession which are causing widespread demoralisation and have led to serious industrial relations conflicts. These include differential and unequal salary structures for post-2011 entrants to the profession; lack of job security for these teachers; lack of promotional opportunities and non-existent career progression pathways; over-burdened role of Principal teachers and greatly increased workload for all teachers. A failure by the Government to address these issues will invariably impact negatively on the quality of the teaching profession. If unaddressed, these issues have the potential to undermine the attractiveness of teaching as a profession; will lead to further demoralisation and deepen the sense of alienation among teachers that their views don’t matter.

In addition to these industrial relations issues, there are system-wide issues which need to be addressed. Chief among these is the need to act on the report on teacher supply provided by the

Teaching Council to the Department in December 2015. The need to improve workforce planning in the education sector is explicitly referenced in the National Skills Strategy given the demographic projections. (p.85)

Developments in teacher education, induction and probation are already proving problematic at school level. Student teachers are increasingly finding it difficult to obtain placements which meet the requirement of the PME programme. The Teaching Council guidelines for student placement made an explicit call for the Department, following consultation with the stakeholders to develop a *“more structured approach to the identification, involvement and support of host schools”*. (p.8) Such an approach is now imperative as more and more schools are reluctant to provide a placement to student teachers due to intensification of the work of schools and lack of time for co-operating teachers to support the student teacher.

Similarly, the introduction of a mandatory Droichead induction process in September 2018 will place a huge strain on newly qualified teachers to find employment in schools which provide the Droichead model. The Department cannot allow a situation to develop whereby individual schools can opt out of participating in these new mandatory professional regulatory processes. Student teachers are already deeply concerned about this issue and have met with the teacher unions and members of the Teaching Council. The Department of Education & Skills has the key role to play in ensuring that all publicly funded schools support the new placement, induction and probation procedures. There is already evidence of what are elsewhere referred to as “soft selection” processes whereby schools serving disadvantaged communities are taking a disproportionate number of student teachers and newly qualified teachers.

The Statement of Strategy must also acknowledge the roll-out of the pilot project for Cosán – the Draft Framework for Teachers’ Learning. The piloting of this Framework up to 2020 provides a unique opportunity for the education system to understand aspects of teachers’ professional learning and to identify strengths and challenges. Schools and teachers participating in this Project should be supported as the outcomes of their work will influence this key dimension of quality in teaching for many years to come. The proposed so-called School Excellence Fund could be usefully dedicated to this work rather than used to increase competition between schools.

#### **4. How should success on achieving our strategies be measured?**

The development of success criteria for education is fraught with complexity. A judicious balance needs to be achieved between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Given the increasingly social dimension of the work of schools, the latter need to be identified in the Strategy. For example, in discussing the Wellbeing programme in the Framework for Junior Cycle, a key theme is the need to create a school culture where individual young people develop a sense of connectedness with the school at every level – in the classroom; in their relationships with peers and teachers; positive home –school relations. These dimensions of connectedness cannot be quantitatively measure yet they are absolutely central to successful learning and wellbeing. The revised guidance for school selfevaluation reflects the need to develop a balanced mix of indicators when looking at the work of schools and how they can improve their service to young people.

## 5. Comment on any issues relating to the continuum of education and skills, in addition to your particular area of interest and/or expertise

See answers to questions below.

## 6. Any other observations that you would suggest the Department should consider in the formulation of the Strategy?

The ASTI is disappointed that the Programme for Government does not contain any references to the Sustainable Development Goals in education. This omission is deeply worrying: it suggests that there is a lack of understanding of the obligations which this global agreement presents. Specifically, the ASTI is concerned about the need for the Department to act on SDG 4.7 on global citizenship. There is now a sense of urgency around this agenda, as was also clearly indicated in the recent UN Universal Periodic Review of Ireland from Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights in its call for a strengthening of human rights education at all levels of the education system.

The ASTI is also concerned that the Programme for Government does not address another area of policy on which the Irish government was also criticised for not meeting its obligations, namely, the need to take specific measures to address severe levels of disadvantage among Traveller and Roma children. The 2016 Concluding Observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child called on the State to strengthen its efforts to combat discrimination against and stigmatization and social exclusion of Traveller and Roma children” and to “*establish an appropriately high-level and comprehensive successor to the National Action Plan against Racism*”. The Departmental Strategy should address these deficiencies in Government policy.

## 7. Tackling Disadvantaged

**Raising of school-leaving age:** The proposal to raise the school leaving age to 17 years has many wideranging implications which the Strategy will need to anticipate and plan for. Chief among these are the implications for the curriculum at senior cycle and the need to provide a diversity pathways to an older age cohort in schools. Schools will also have to re-think aspects of school policies to accommodate an older age cohort: for example, schools’ discipline policies and programmes for student engagement in the school community, including students’ councils and other structures to support students’ developing sense of maturity and agency; school accommodation and student services.

The role and availability of the Guidance and Counselling service in schools will be particularly important in the context of a raised school-leaving age. There are also specific actions around Guidance and Counselling in schools in the Further Education and Training strategy which will need to be addressed in the Statement. The raising of the school leaving age will moreover require extensive policy integration across the latter strategy, the National Skills Strategy and the senior cycle curriculum.

**Action Plan for Educational Inclusion:** The ASTI welcomes the proposal to publish an updated plan for educational inclusion. The ASTI would also make the point that we now have more data on the

socioeconomic profile and educational experiences of our young people than at any time in the past. In particular, the Growing Up in Ireland study is already providing both a quantitative and qualitative data base on children. The 2012 PISA report has indicated a higher risk of “economic vulnerability” for the 2008 cohort because of the recession. A series of reports, including the 2015 ESRI Report, “*Learning from the experience of DEIS*”, have highlighted the need for a review. The ASTI made a detailed submission to the DES following the publication of this report in which it highlighted a number of key recommendations:

- ✓ The need to support disadvantaged students who are not in DEIS schools. The research evidence demonstrates that numerically speaking, the majority of educationally disadvantaged young people do not live in DEIS-designated areas. The 2009 ESRI report on educational disadvantage concluded that: “*National survey of school leavers indicates that 61% of young people from semi-skilled/unskilled manual backgrounds and 56% of those from non-employed households attend non-DEIS schools*” (P.16)
- ✓ The immediate introduction of a “tapering of funding” approach to ensure the allocation of additional resources under DEIS is both fair and effective across schools
- ✓ The need for a specific focus on immigrant students. The majority of non-English speaking immigrants have lower average household incomes than Irish nationals and have experienced more job losses and a higher unemployment rate. PISA data since 2009 demonstrates that non-English-speaking immigrant students have much lower achievement scores in Maths and Reading.

The ASTI would consider the immediate operationalisation of these recommendations as priority actions in the Statement.

## 8. Diversity and Choice for Parents

**School admissions legislation:** The ASTI supports the introduction of new school admissions legislation and previously made a substantial submission on same to the Department. The issue of choice in an education system in which the majority of schools are privately owned but publicly funded institutions is complex. Government policy must seek to achieve a sustainable balance between the rights of individuals and the requirements of the common good. It is not plausible to have a whole-of-government approach to promoting greater social inclusion on the one hand, and on the other, to allow publicly funded institutions to derogate from policies aimed at achieving such inclusion. There is extensive national and international evidence on the enduring impact of socio-economic status on educational achievement levels. Recent PISA studies have indicated that our second level schools are becoming more stratified by SES status. Departmental policy cannot tacitly sustain this development. The Statement should, in addition to specific actions on educational disadvantage as outlined above, explicitly address the need for schools to be inclusive, to serve local communities and to ensure that school management are both supported and required to provide a range of appropriate curriculum choices for a diverse student population. The persistent decline in the number of schools providing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, notwithstanding the increase in school retention rates and levels of poverty in society, is a case in point.

**Ombudsman for Education:** The ASTI must put on record its scepticism as to necessity for this proposal in the Programme for Government. There is already an Ombudsman for Children which delivers an effective and trusted service for children and their parents/guardians. The enactment of

Section 28 of the Education Act will bring a standardised and statutory approach to existing procedures for complaints against teachers and schools. In tandem with the imminent introduction of Section 5 of the Teaching Council Act on Fitness to Practice, both will provide a clear structure for parents to process complaints against teachers.

**Charter for parents:** The ASTI is disappointed with both the tone and the language around the proposal for a charter for parents. They suggest that parents do not have confidence in the work of schools nor have trust in the teaching profession. The Chief Inspectors reports have demonstrated strong and consistent levels of trust in, and satisfaction with, the work of schools across both primary and second level schools. The Department needs to consider the impact of an overly negative framing of such a charter on the morale of the teaching profession. Such measures have significantly contributed to a negative public discourse and low trust in teacher professionalism in neighbouring jurisdictions. The attractiveness of the profession for high quality graduates has been badly damaged in these jurisdictions and is evidenced in high attrition rates; endemic teacher shortages; high levels of stress in the profession. The quality of the teaching profession in Ireland should not be undermined by short-term and partisan policy *borrowing* which is at odds with existing school accountability frameworks and their focus on school improvement based on professional learning cultures in schools.

**Options for standardised testing; annual reports to parents:** The Education Research Centre produced a comprehensive report on options for standardised testing as part of the policy development process around the Framework for Junior Cycle. Its conclusions focused on the *educational* merit of various options as distinct from the role of standardised testing in an accountability framework which it acknowledged was problematic given the limitations around the use of context-specific and narrow data from standardised tests.

The provision of annual reports to parents is an important dimension of good governance in schools. The embedding of School Self-Evaluation practices and the provision of school improvement plans is beginning to create good practice in this area. However, there are system factors which militate against such practices including poorly developed subject/programme departmental structures; loss of in-school management posts; unsustainable administrative burden on school principals. The Department of Education & Skills should, following consultation with the stakeholders, develop guidance for schools on annual reporting.

## 9. Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools

Excellence in education has, unfortunately, become a deeply contested term largely as a result of the extreme market-driven education policies of successive British governments. There is a need to define what is meant by excellence in the culturally specific Irish context; otherwise it becomes a mantra, devoid of evidence and not consonant with stated goals for schools as defined in legislation and education policy. Moreover, equity and excellence are not incompatible. Indeed, the OECD PISA series has consistently advocated that excellence in education without equity risks leading to large economic and social disparities. There is clear evidence from PISA that the most advanced education systems now set ambitious goals for all students, focusing on both excellence and equity. They do this by ensuring that all teachers have the pedagogic skills that have been proven effective and have sufficient autonomy where it matters, namely, in their classrooms. Systems which allow teachers to

use their own creativity in determining the content and instruction they provide to their individual students and which do not burden teachers with standardised testing and other prescriptive quantitative record keeping are global leaders in education.

The idea of a Schools' Excellence Fund is highly questionable after almost a decade of intense fiscal austerity in schools. There are several reports available to the Minister on funding priorities for schools including the need for equalisation of funding models across sectors. The creation of such a Fund could only exacerbate existing funding inequalities in our system and divert limited public monies to "showcase" individual projects which may not add value to the system as a whole.

The concept of "local education clusters" has much potential. A key requirement for the successful operation of such clusters is release time for teachers to share good practice with each other.

## **11. Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students**

A key requirement for supporting the broad curriculum envisaged in this section is the raising of the pupil:teacher ratio. As has been evidenced in the ASTI commissioned research since 2008, schools have had to drop subjects from the curriculum because of changes to the pupil:teacher ratio. New subjects and short courses will require more teachers in our schools. This also includes the full restoration of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor.

Transition Year is an important space for students to develop, through work experience and other vocational activities, entrepreneurial skills. However, there is a need to examine the senior cycle curriculum as a whole to ensure that all students have access to these important experiences. The continued decline in the number of schools providing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The implementation of the recommendations in the STEM report will require additional funding for schools not just in terms of laboratory space and other facilities but also in terms of the availability of teachers of the physical sciences in schools. The latter issue is critical to ensuring that every school has the capacity to provide the full range of science subjects to Leaving Certificate level.

## **12. Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities**

This proposal has considerable merit and will require consultation with the various patron bodies. Many schools already make their facilities available to local community groups. Key considerations for school managers are insurance issues and additional costs in terms of staffing and caretaking. Some form of financial support will be needed to incentivise schools in overcoming these barriers.

## **13. Special Needs Education**

The ASTI welcomes the various provisions in this section. However, it is disappointed that there is no reference to the need to develop the overall capacity of schools to implement the existing



Continuum of Support model and other guidelines which require schools to put in place early identification procedures with staged support for students. This approach requires experienced teachers to work closely with the guidance counsellor, Year Heads and resource teachers. Such an approach requires teachers to have release time to work together as teams. This is simply not happening in our schools as a result of the cutbacks. Inclusive schools for all students require a whole school approach underpinned by dedicated teams of teachers working with the various year groups and with individual students. This model of support in turn requires strong in-school management structures; release time for teachers and adequate numbers of suitably trained specialist teachers.

#### **14. Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future**

The ASTI broadly supports the proposals in this section. Senior cycle education has a uniquely important role in supporting the transition of young people to further learning, work and adult life. The ESRI longitudinal study clearly demonstrates the importance of high quality guidance for senior cycle students, especially those from less affluent backgrounds. It also underlines the need for a greater range of post-school options to be presented to students as part of their guidance experience. The report of the ESRI review of the PLC sector will have important policy implications in this regard. The commitment to doubling the number of apprenticeships by 2020 is very positive but there are significant gender issues to be addressed in this sector.