ASTI Submission

to

NCCA Senior Cycle Review Consultation Document

October 2019

Introduction

The ASTI is the largest second-level teachers union. Its members teach in all types of second-level schools, including voluntary secondary, community and comprehensive schools and colleges, community colleges, Gaelscoileanna, Educate Together schools and in special school settings. The union has a distinguished tradition of contributing to the development of education policy at all levels and represents the professional voice of second-level teachers.

The literature on curriculum change is unanimous on the centrality of the teaching profession to the process of curriculum change. Transformative curriculum change takes place in the classroom and, ultimately, the teacher is the mediator of this change. However, the latter is predicated on teachers' support for the rationale for change, their engagement in the change process from the beginning and their willingness to effect pedagogical and other professional practices in their day-to-day classroom teaching. These factors are absolutely intrinsic to transformative educational change. Without them, the latter cannot happen.

The ASTI must put on record the enduring negative perception among second-level teachers that they were marginalised in the junior cycle reform process. The 2015 Travers report, 'Junior Cycle Reform: A Way Forward', highlighted the deep sense of alienation among teachers created by the 'top-down' change process. While the austerity measures implemented during this period were deeply resented by teachers, the depth of alienation experienced by teachers in the process cannot be solely attributed to the former. Rather, teachers felt that their collective knowledge, expertise and professional values were disregarded in change process, in particular by the decision of the then Minister for Education to sidestep the advice of the NCCA and issue the Department's own version of A Framework for Junior Cycle. The report on teachers' reaction to this Ministerial decision was well described in the ASTI report, 'Teachers' Voice', which stated that the former demonstrated the huge gap between the rhetoric of educational change and realities of school life. Teachers will not engage with a reform agenda at senior cycle which does not place teachers at the centre of the process.

Further meaningful consultation will be required at all stages of development, if only to avoid the kind of scenario that developed and led to the ministerial decision on the status of History in the Junior Cycle curriculum.

Change at senior cycle must be evidence-based

The ASTI, as the professional voice of teachers, supports the premise of evidence-based change in education. Too often, change initiatives in education are introduced in compliance with broader social, economic and political agenda rather than emerging from indigenous school-based research and analysis. The perception by teachers that the change agenda is often set elsewhere leads to mistrust and disengagement. Teachers are also aware of the influence of global economic paradigms on Irish education policy and are instinctively concerned that such agendas have the potential to undermine much of what is good and valued in Irish education. In this context, there is deep concern within the ASTI at the failure of the Department of Education and Skills to commence an external, independent longitudinal evaluation of the impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle on teaching and learning in

schools. The Department committed to this exercise in 2016. There is a pressing need for such a study in advance of changes to the senior cycle curriculum at both a policy and political level. The former requires evidence in order to avoid unintended consequences of change and to protect educational standards: the latter requires trust and reciprocity.

Furthermore, ASTI believes that there must be an integrated approach to any new curricular reform whereby design and implementation are considered in parallel to avoid the problems that have emerged at Junior Cycle where the process has been largely sequential.

The ASTI submission is structured under the headings presented in the NCCA consultation paper.

Purpose

The ASTI believes that it is important to develop and agree a distinct vision or purpose for senior cycle education. Such a vision should be based on core values such as equality and inclusion; justice and fairness; respect for human dignity and identity; and freedom and democracy. Senior cycle education should aim to enable every student to fulfil their potential. Achieving this aim requires a holistic approach based on the above values. Irish second-level schools are ethos-oriented and curriculum change must support the realisation of ethos in its multiple articulations.

Knowledge, skills and qualities

The ASTI fully endorses the centrality accorded to disciplinary knowledge in the senior cycle curriculum in the paper. Moreover, such knowledge must be of sufficient depth and breadth to ensure that students are adequately challenged. A balance must be articulated in subject specifications between content/knowledge, learning outcomes and skills. For the majority of teachers, their experience of the junior cycle specifications has caused them to be concerned about the erosion of the knowledge content inherent in each subject discipline. It is simply unacceptable that teachers have to 'unpick' the junior cycle specifications in order to have a clear sense of the subject's disciplinary content. The proliferation and perceived lack of coherence of learning outcomes in specifications is deeply problematic: in many instances teachers feel that the latter undermines rather than enhances their professional judgement in the classroom. Curriculum change should reinforce – and not reduce - teachers' professional autonomy. The ASTI believes that an independent external evaluation must focus on these issues in its analysis of the impact of curriculum change on teaching and learning.

Moreover, the ASTI is extremely concerned by the conclusions of the critique of the Leaving Certificate Science syllabi conducted by Professor Áine Hyland in 2014. The latter stated that it is not sufficient to describe a high-stakes examination programme in terms of topics and learning outcomes alone. Rather, more detailed information about the depth of treatment of subjects and the requirements for examination must be provided to bring the syllabi into line with international best practice. At the same time, the ASTI acknowledges that the content of individual subject syllabi can be heavy and recommends that a common and transparent approach is utilised in NCCA Subject Development Groups to address this issue.

Pathways and programmes

The ASTI supports the statement that the senior cycle curriculum must be capable of responding to the learning needs of all students. There is a need to evaluate the 'ring-fencing' that currently exists between the three Leaving Certificate programmes so as to broaden learning opportunities of students. Transition Year must remain a stand- alone programme based on the current principle of supporting

students' transition to a Leaving Certificate programme based on local needs and contexts. Transition Year should be available and accessible to all students. Vocational and other modular learning experiences, including work experience, are best provided for in the Transition Year programme. There is a need to rethink how such modules are developed to ensure equity for all students. The senior cycle curriculum should have sufficient options to enable students to combine academic, vocational and other forms of learning in a manner which best meets their needs.

Enhanced career guidance and counselling is critical in this regard. The current staffing schedule for this service is completely inadequate and over-stretched. The Department of Education and Skills has received a commissioned report on service the recommendations in which must be implemented to support any future process of curriculum change at senior cycle. The ambition for more pathways in the curriculum will fail to be achieved if students do not have access to appropriate guidance and counselling.

Students who have taken Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes at junior cycle need to have a dedicated senior cycle programme to which they can transition to. Such programmes are, by definition, resource intensive both in terms of teaching staff and material resources. The ASTI has already submitted a statement of requirements for integrating SEN students into mainstream education. They include a national training programme for all teachers, dedicated SEN co-ordinator posts and the restoration of the training allowance to SEN teachers.

Assessment and reporting

The strengths of the current model of external assessment of the Leaving Certificate examination has been strongly endorsed in the consultation paper. The former include a high level of public trust; its capacity to serve as a valid and objective statement of students' academic achievement; its fairness, impartiality and transparency. At the same time, it is acknowledged that there is a need to broaden the range of assessment to ensure that all aspects of students' learning is both validated and recorded. The proposal to explore the role of second-component assessment for all subjects should be considered: the question of the weighting of such components needs to be addressed. The ASTI does not support the introduction of Profiles of Achievement or CBAs at senior cycle education.

Reporting on student learning as they conclude their second-level education has quite different functions compared to that at junior cycle. Moreover, given that reporting in the junior cycle is as yet a new and emerging practice, the State Examinations Commission should continue to serve as the external statement of student achievement.

Priorities and supports

Curriculum change should be incremental rather than radical. Research commissioned by the ASTI, 'Making Education Policy Work', referenced the NCCA in stating that achieving educational change that is deep and lasting, takes time. Moreover, there is probably inadequate appreciation of the time required to sustain change. Teachers' experience of curriculum change at junior cycle has left them wary and concerned. There is a widespread perception that subject specifications are inadequate and that the proliferation of learning outcomes and focus on key skills inadequately prepares students for the senior cycle curriculum. There is absolutely no support among teachers for radical change at senior cycle. The current range of subjects should be maintained of which students should undertake a minimum of six. ASTI further believes that subjects should be offered at both Higher and Ordinary levels. Teachers will engage with change which they believe will work,

will maintain and enhance students' learning and achievement, and which sustains their professional autonomy.

The 2018 OECD Education at a Glance report once again demonstrated that Ireland was at the bottom of the global ranking for investment in education: Ireland ranked last out of 34 countries for investment in education as a percentage of GDP: 1.2% of GDP compared to the OECD average of 2% and the EU average of 1.9%. Schools need additional supports in advance of the introduction of any revised curriculum. The former include agreement on professional time; additional in-school management posts for curriculum co-ordination; career guidance and counselling; reduced class size; measures to address teacher supply; CPD and ongoing opportunities for teacher learning.

In the context of any forthcoming proposals, it will be imperative that an extensive and fit for purpose programme of CPD is provided for teachers augmented by a model whereby sufficient professional time is provided to properly implement such proposals.

This appalling record of under-investment has had a cumulative impact on teachers' working conditions. The aforementioned ASTI research underlines the growing problem of teachers' work is becoming increasingly intensified, with teachers expected to respond to greater pressures and comply with multiplying innovations in conditions that are at best stable and at worst deteriorating. ASTI research, 'Teachers' Work: Work Demands and Intensity of Work, 2019', on teacher workload demonstrates that teachers' working week averages at 40 hours, indicating that in addition to the class-contact time of 21 hours and 20 minutes, teachers were spending a further 20 hours working outside of the school day. Of that additional out-of-school time, 60% of it was spend on preparation for classroom teaching and marking students' work. This workload is unsustainable and teachers are not positively disposed to any curriculum change which would add to workload.

Conclusion

The ASTI will continue to engage with the NCCA, the Department of Education and Skills and the stakeholders in education to review the senior cycle curriculum. The Association is deeply concerned that any change proposals would be put forward in the absence of a comprehensive external review of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. It must also put on record its critique of many aspects of the initial consultation process with the Network Schools and attendant regional seminars. The ASTI will engage in a comprehensive consultation with its members, the classroom teachers, in the coming months to ensure that the professional voice of teachers is central to any future change in the senior cycle curriculum.