

# **Draft Transition Year Programme Statement**

## **ASTI Submission**

**October 2023**

### **Introduction**

Next year, the Transition Year (TY) programme will mark its 40th year in the senior cycle curriculum. Introduced in 1994, TY is now available in practically all schools (98%) with an uptake of 75% across the student population. It is an undoubted success story in the second-level education system. In her announcement of plans for a redeveloped senior cycle in March 2022, the Minister for Education stated that Transition Year will remain as a standalone programme in Senior Cycle and that all students will have the opportunity to take the Transition Year programme. Therefore, schools that have not previously provided TY will be encouraged to do so. The ASTI supports the retention of the TY programme as a stand-alone programme while noting that the NCCA's Advisory Report on Senior Cycle underlines the need for more integrated pathways in the senior cycle curriculum. This submission will present the ASTI's observations on current challenges in relation to TY followed by specific observations on the draft programme statement.

### **TY Programme – current challenges**

The NCCA Advisory Report confirms that Transition Year is viewed as a valuable programme for students that offers opportunities for personal, social and academic development and experience of adult and working life. The local autonomy afforded to schools in the development of their TY programme is a distinctive and positive feature of the programme. The primary challenge for schools in relation to the TY is that of resources – human resources and material resources. Human resources are the most challenging. Delivering a quality TY programme requires significant time and collaboration between staff. Developing and delivery the TY requires a TY Coordinator and a core of teachers. Moreover, the current guidelines state that a documented TY programme be reviewed annually, using appropriate quantitative and qualitative indicators, and its implementation revised accordingly.

This professional approach requires adequate management structures in schools which currently don't exist. In fact, annual ASTI commissioned research consistently indicates that approximately a third of all teachers have an unpaid additional role in their school outside the post of responsibility structure, most typically in the area of curriculum or policy coordination. This situation is a direct consequence of the across-the-board moratorium on appointments to posts of responsibility in 2009. More recently, the teacher supply and retention problem are exacerbating the pressure placed on middle management structures. The supply and retention problem creates a very difficult environment for curriculum innovation in schools. Practically speaking, it means that many schools do not have sufficient number of teachers to provide the TY to a full-year cohort, which in turn raise questions of access and equity. Smaller schools, schools in disadvantaged areas and rural schools are identified as having significant difficulties in providing TY. It is of particular concern that 70% of the schools not providing TY are designated DEIS schools.

Other resource challenges for schools in providing widest access to TY stems from pressure on school accommodation and facilities. The enrolment projections for second-level are expected to peak in 2024 with an estimated 39,000 more pupils in post-primary schools than in 2019. This sustained growth in student numbers has placed huge pressures on school accommodation across all school types. Some newly built schools are currently accommodation up to 200+ more students beyond their original projection. Indeed, it is noteworthy that one of the key themes emerging from the research on the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on education is that of overcrowded schools with little spare space for more active learning or social activities.

Notwithstanding these resource constraints, the evidence from the Inspectorate's TY Inspection reports shows that most schools are committed to providing a full spectrum of learning experiences as set out in the TY guidelines, regularly evaluate the programme and have a TY coordinator and team in place.

A dimension of TY which is of particular concern is the financial resource implications of taking the TY for many families. Participation in TY offers students many opportunities for personal, social and academic growth as well as opportunities for community and vocational experience. Providing a TY within the school's resources should be the norm. It is also more sustainable for the school and for students' families. While school autonomy is a feature of the second-level system, the ASTI believes that issues of access and equity in TY require further discussion beyond the current consultation on the draft TY Programme Statement.

Finally, attention must be drawn career guidance in TY. Vocational learning, work experience, community placement and skills development are rated highly by students in the research. An effective TY programme builds on these skills and experiences and prepares students not just for the Leaving Certificate programme but also provides insights and guidance on post-school choices. The guidance counselling service clearly has an important role to play and many schools. However, this service is completely overstretched in that schools do not have enough guidance counsellors.

### **ASTI observations on draft programme statement**

**Rationale:** The ASTI recommends that a formal statement on the national Education for Sustainable Development Strategy be included in this section. This Strategy has practical application across the entire second-level curriculum and TY is typically the space where students can have a deeper engagement with climate and environmental issues including through enrichment programmes such as ECO UNESCO and Young Social Innovators.

**Aims:** The ASTI supports the aims of the TY as set out on page 7. However, it must register its unease with the terminology of competence. The ASTI does not consider that this term fully captures the holistic nature of students' growth as learners and young people.

**Coordination:** The post of responsibility structure in schools should include the role of TY coordinator, with dedicated time allocation.

**Curriculum dimensions:** The delineation of four dimensions is helpful both as a programme planning tool and a guide for students and parents. In relation to Components, the ASTI strongly supports the statement that TY is a standalone programme and core subjects should not be taught as part of a 3-year Leaving Certificate cycle. It has been recommended by the ASTI Education Committee that the NCCA develop modules in modern and foreign languages to widen students' language learning opportunities.

In relation to Recognising and Reporting, the ASTI endorsed the continuance of the student TY portfolio as the primary reporting instrument. Over-assessment of students is acknowledged as a negative dimension of the student experience in junior cycle. The absence of a standardised external assessment and reporting model is a key strength of the TY.

### **Concluding remarks**

The TY programme is internationally acknowledged as a unique, innovative programme in senior cycle/upper secondary education. The fact that the programme is currently taken by 74% of the student cohort attests to its enduring relevance and popularity among students and parents. As with most areas of curriculum redevelopment, the primary challenges for schools arise from resourcing and capacity issues. A related issue is that of the costs of participation to families raises issues of access and equity. These issues need to be address in tandem with the introduction of the revised TY Programme Statement.