

Wednesday 23rd April 2025

Address to Annual Convention 2025 - Kieran Christie

Thank you, President. I would just like to start by joining with so many in congratulating you, President, on your excellent address to Convention yesterday. It was incisive and clear on all our issues. It showed your commitment and passion for improving and advancing the interests of ASTI and the interests of our members.

Of course, I also want to express my congratulations to Padraig Curley on his achievement in becoming President Elect. Padraig will be an excellent servant of the ASTI and will excel in every task he undertakes. Congratulations Padraig, I am very much looking forward to working with you.

I also want to congratulate Richie Bell on being elected Vice President. Richie is a strong and committed ASTI activist and

trade unionist who will leave no stone unturned in advancing the cause of the ASTI and its members. And finally, I also congratulate Noelle Moran on her election as Honorary Treasurer. She will serve with honour and distinction; of that I have no doubt. I think that for the years to come, it is clear that a top-class team has been elected and entrusted with attending to the affairs of our Union.

Convention, for this report, as usual, I have stripped out some central issues from among the several we face and have faced over the past year, many of which we will return to in the form of motions and debate.

Senior Cycle Redevelopment

Convention, as I said yesterday, again this past year, the issue that has stayed at the very top of our priorities has been the

Senior Cycle redevelopment plans, originally announced on 29th March, 2022 by then Minister for Education Norma Foley T.D.

While welcoming some aspects of the plan, since then, we have sought to panel beat it into something workable and sustainable and educationally sound.

We should be mindful that we have scored some successes in that regard, ensuring that Minister Foley's initial plan to change the final assessment procedure to significantly reduce reliance on final examinations, and to introduce teacher-based assessment components were dispensed with. The integrity of the examinations, built upon fairness for students and trust in the system, must never change.

A vigorous campaign leading to the Minister's row back in February 2023 on her proposed plans for students to sit Leaving Certificate Paper 1 in both English and Irish at the end of fifth year was another major advance that shows how decisive and co-ordinated action works with our colleagues in TUI and organisations like An Gréasán and INOTE to name just two. It is important that we continue with this approach and I believe we are still in a position to effect further change. We have achieved progress and we can achieve further progress.

ASTI Commissioned Research

I won't go back over the ground we covered yesterday but I do want to refer to some ASTI commissioned research that we undertook during the year. As you will know, ASTI commissioned a Red C Research and Marketing Company survey of our members during the year in which we sought

their views on Additional Assessment Components. Some 2758 ASTI members took part.

The research objectives were to obtain teachers' views on the current implementation of the Leaving Certificate Additional Assessment Component (AAC) in a range of Leaving Certificate subjects and also to obtain teachers' views on the Minister for Education's proposal that there will be AACs in each subject of a minimum of 40%, starting in September 2025.

I will not delay convention setting out the findings of that survey again, they are in your handbooks, but there was some extraordinarily insightful comments in the open questions that I would like to share with you.

Stress for Students and Teachers:

Regarding stress on students and teachers two quotes from members that leaped off the page for me were:

“Stress levels for students will go through the roof, completing so many additional assessment components.”

“40% project in every subject increases workload on students and teachers which will in turn increase student stress levels massively. I don’t think parents or students understand the stress levels students could potentially face.”

Artificial Intelligence:

Concerns about Artificial Intelligence included:

“The potential use of generative AI in these AACs diminishes the standard of education and learning required in all subjects. These AACs will also heighten inequality between the haves and the have nots.”

Authentication of Students' Work:

Authentication of students' work is also a problem. One teacher said:

“My concern is how we will manage it in the context of AI developments. Urgent guidance needed on this for all aspects of students learning.”

Workload:

The increased workload teachers will face was well envisioned by a teacher who stated:

“40% AACs would create a world of extra pressure and stress for students and teachers. Preparing and supporting students to complete the written exam is already a big mountain to climb every year. Class sizes are a major barrier. “

Resources:

Of course, lack of resources is a crucial issue, particularly in the area of IT.

“There are not enough computers in the school to make working on coursework doable. Clashes of CBA timings will now become an issue with senior coursework. I do not know how it's going to be managed.” was one of the many comments on this issue in the survey.

Equity:

Widening of the social divide is also a concern.

AACs will benefit the 'better off' students and discriminate against the less well-off students was something that was uppermost in the mind of many of our members.

As one teacher put it succinctly, teachers are considering leaving the profession. They are burnt out. Many are already looking for alternative careers.”

“This is not a well thought out plan”

On this topic, I don’t think I have to say much more. Our members have their fingers on the pulse and have said it all.

Junior Cycle

And a quick word on the Junior Cycle. As you know, a decade or so in, there remains considerable problems with it to be ironed out.

It is bizarre that the Junior Cycle profile of achievement is presented to students long after they have received their examinations results.

At long last, the Department of Education are looking at this and a project is being put in place to ensure the JCPA will be provided to students on the day of the Junior Cycle results.

And of course, the grade bands for the Junior Cycle examinations have been a matter on which we in ASTI have been voicing our concern for several years. It was untenable that the official verdict on the vast bulk of our students is that they fall into categories that could only be described as mixed middling, with very few achieving top grades. I am delighted that after having us beat that drum for so long the Minister announced yesterday that it is going to be addressed very soon and we have a very clear and prescient motion on it later today on the matter. The truth is that Junior Cycle results day has been far from a pleasant experience in many schools in recent years.

ASTI Survey 2025

Another fine piece of research that ASTI recently undertook was the School Leaders: Workload, Wellbeing, and Curriculum Change ASTI Survey 2025.

The dominant and pervasive theme throughout the findings is the unsustainable workload and the sheer volume of administrative tasks placed upon school leaders. Principals and deputy principals repeatedly mentioned the relentless stream of new initiatives, circulars, and policies from the Department of Education and other agencies, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and unable to prioritize teaching and learning.

Tellingly, in relation to the introduction of new science specifications in September 2025, just over half of schools

have a dedicated science budget, while just under half consider their school laboratories to be well equipped.

School leaders were explicit in stating that difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers are in large part attributable to the declining attractiveness of teaching as a profession.

The teaching career is widely perceived as having a heavy workload, multiple and competing role demands and lack of work-life balance.

Two comments that particularly caught my eye in this body of work – again in the comments section were simply:

“I have Zero work life balance”

And another

“There is a disconnect between Department expectations and the reality on the ground; schools are floundering”.

Investment in Education.

And of course, a large proportion of the issues I raise today in this report could be well addressed if investment in education was increased. The 2024 OECD Education at a Glance report published last September shows Ireland languishing in last place out of 34 countries when it comes to the proportion of GDP invested in education.

The proportion of GDP a country invests in its education system provides an indication of the priority given to education relative to a country's overall resources, according to the report.

In 2021, the year examined in the report, Ireland invested 0.9 per cent of its GDP in second-level education compared to OECD and EU averages of 1.9 per cent. What this means is an annual funding gap of almost \$1,000 per second-level student between Ireland and the OECD average. (They measure it in dollars)

In terms of overall investment in education (primary to tertiary), Ireland invested 2.9 per cent of its GDP compared to the OECD average of 4.9 per cent and EU average of 4.4 per cent.

I have said it before and I will say it again, it is shameful to see Ireland languishing at the bottom of the table for investment in education. The Government must commit to closing this investment gap between Ireland and the rest of the world and they must do it soon.

Quality education is simply not possible without adequate financing.

Recruitment and Retention Crisis

And of course, the recruitment and retention crisis in our schools is all part of the underinvestment picture too. For too long now, the crisis has bedevilled second-level schools.

Posts remain vacant and substitute teachers are unavailable in many instances. Schools can barely cope. We in the ASTI have been calling for a more fundamental approach to finally address this problem. Teaching needs to be made more attractive as a profession. There must be increased investment and a reversal of the relentless onslaught on teachers' terms and conditions that has been in train over many years. The OECD report *Education at a Glance 2024*

found that, in real terms, teachers' salaries decreased by 6% between 2015 and 2023, at a time when they increased by 4% in most other developed countries. Increased workload and initiative overload has been the norm. A proper promotional structure will have to be put in place. There must be a restoration of allowances that were abolished in 2012 for new beneficiaries. Many ASTI members still suffer from the adjustments made to their incremental progression during the industrial dispute of 2016/2017. The two-year Professional Master of Education (PME) must be reduced. The move by the Minister this week whereby permanency can be achieved after one year, rather than the current two-year wait for the awarding of contracts of indefinite duration (CIDs) is acknowledged and is at last a move in the right direction. The list goes on. I wrote recently about the 46 apartments at Bolands Mills Quarter in Dublin, which were

launched at discounted rents for key workers such as gardaí, nurses and teachers.

The apartments were offered with rents that are up to 36% below market rate and were heavily oversubscribed. We have been arguing that ringfenced affordable accommodation for key workers could be one measure that might help to alleviate the teacher recruitment and retention crisis. The Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee T.D. has stated that she intends to bring forward further proposals as to how the teacher shortage can be addressed. It is clear that she needs to show more vision and imagination than we have seen in the past. The one year CIDs are a good start. We will see.

Digital Rights of Teachers

I now want to say something about the Digital Rights of Teachers. ASTI has been very active over the last year regarding the whole digitalisation and social media space and, in particular, we have a sub-committee of Standing Committee working hard to produce resources for members to combat cyber-bullying of teachers. An initial poster and associated guidance on prevention will be in schools for September, while work continues on the production of detailed information on what members should do in the event of being targeted online. There is ongoing engagement with a range of bodies so as to best inform this process, including Coimisiún na Meán, the Gardai, NAPD, JMB and ACCS.

As you will know, highly unacceptable content about teachers can sometimes find its way on to social media channels. In

that regard, ASTI has engaged with the social media company TikTok.

The ASTI is now able to highlight/ report content that could be considered harmful or in violation of TikTok's Community Guidelines via TikTok's Community Partner Channel. This Community Partner Channel gives the ASTI access to an escalation process in the event that the normal TikTok reporting channel has not resolved an issue for an ASTI member, and once ASTI Head Office deems that the issue is of a threshold that requires urgent and immediate attention. Once a report is submitted by ASTI Head Office, TikTok will process the report.

This is just one aspect of the modern world that teachers live in and I can assure you that anything ASTI can do to support members in such circumstances will always be done.

Special Educational Needs:

I now want to address the issue of Special Educational Needs:

In recognition of the growth in terms of policy development and the 20th anniversary of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, this year's ASTI Education Conference took place last October with the theme, 'Inclusive Education in our Schools: Challenges and Opportunities'. Of course, the impacts on schools since Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2018 has been immense. Speaker after speaker at that conference identified the need for more resources in this area. I was particularly taken by Emeritus Professor of Education at UCD, Sheelagh Drudy who remarked that we need more special education needs posts. She said: "We need therapeutic and clinical supports, universal design for learning [and] partnership with parents".

She noted that the training mainstream classroom teachers receive does not equip them to deal with the demands of special needs students in mainstream classes. I believe that to meet the need for inclusion in Irish classrooms, training and professional development for teachers and additional time allocation needs to be provided to ensure that these students receive adequate attention in the classroom. It was stated that the Department of Education should have psychiatric services, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, special speech and language therapists, and they should all be employed by the Department so that when schools need them, they are just a phone call away. Indeed, it is pitiable that in recent months, parents of children with special needs felt compelled to have an overnight protest outside the Department of Education in Marlborough Street to simply secure school places for their children. Every child

should be supported to achieve their full potential within our education system and the fact that there are not enough places to meet some children's needs is a national disgrace.

Each special class needs additional dedicated teacher resources and special needs assistants and the full range of supports, including equipment, training, grants for accommodation, assistive technology and so on. In this area, there is so much to be done.

Indeed, in a context, I believe that Trade Unions should always act as a Sword for Social Justice. I can tell you that ASTI will always stand with the marginalised in our schools and society.

Inclusivity in our schools

Indeed, our bona fides regarding our commitment to advancing the agenda of inclusivity in our schools was

enhanced and highlighted when we held an ASTI Equality Conference last November on that theme. The challenges faced by schools in addressing inequalities for students and the need for additional resources to tackle the issue were well summed up President when you told the conference that “School communities are embracing the values of inclusivity but they require significant investment and supports to address the effects of sociopolitical shifts, wars and conflicts, emerging youth mental health issues, and enduring inequities in a rapidly changing world”.

I should also mention in passing that the conference heard from Dr Richard Hogan on adolescent boys and harmful ideas about masculinity, Megan Berry on members of the Travelling Community in our schools, and Nicola Beagan on dealing with dyslexia and neurodiversity in the classroom.

This breadth and depth of input shows that we in the ASTI will

never shirk our responsibilities as teachers and as trade unionists in tackling the tough issues and the issues of concern to the marginalised. I commend the work of the Equality Committee in that regard.

Safety, Health and Welfare.

One issue that the ASTI has been active and vocal on for many years is the safety, health and welfare of teachers and wider school communities alike. Thankfully, while schools are generally great places to work, from time-to-time difficult situations can and do arise. It is infrequent but unfortunately, on rare occasions, teachers get assaulted in their school. As I say, it is a very small number of instances and a sad fact of life.

ASTI has been demanding that the Department of Education broaden the definition of assault in its Circular Letter for quite some time now.

It is no longer acceptable that assault is so narrowly defined that you nearly have to have to show the bruises to qualify for assault leave. The concept of psychosocial injury hasn't yet arrived in the consciousness of the Department of Education. The psychological effects of an assault in the course of the teacher's duties and during approved school activities can be devastating. This must change.

Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) Amalgamation Discussions

I now want to turn to the amalgamation discussions between ASTI and TUI.

The annual conferences of the ASTI and TUI 2024 saw the launch of a survey of members regarding the prospect of amalgamation of the two unions.

The survey ran from Wednesday, 10th April to Thursday, 25th April 2024.

The survey asked if members are in favour of forming one single education union representing members in the Post Primary, Further/Adult and Higher Education sectors.

It also asked if members support continuing the work towards amalgamation.

Survey results:

On 26th April, 2024 the results of the survey were published.

In the survey, members in both the ASTI and the TUI stated that they are in favour of unity in principle, and that amalgamation talks should continue.

The results of this survey provided a clear indication of sentiment on the broad issue of unity and indicate a desire for one union with one coherent voice. It is no more than that. The next stage of the process is requiring extensive discussions, and both unions have been engaging with each other in that regard.

As has been repeatedly stated, both memberships, and the staff working in each union, will be consulted throughout the process. Any final proposals will be decided upon by ballots of memberships of both unions. It is impossible to predict when said proposals will be ready.

Since the outcome of the survey emerged there have been meetings between the parties. Work is continuing to seek to draft a potential Rule Book for a potential amalgamated union.

However, the sheer volume of work that is being absorbed in both unions, particularly related to the Senior Cycle redevelopment issue has meant that the project has been pushed aside somewhat and progress is very slow. In truth, little has been achieved yet.

But Convention, of course it is our clear intention to keep the membership and each of the arms of our executive fully updated at every significant juncture.

Public Service Agreement:

I now want to address the current Public Service Agreement which as you know continues to run until June 2026.

ASTI members voted by a large margin to accept the terms of the Public Service Agreement 2024 – 2026. It was also ratified and accepted by the Public Services Committee of the ICTU.

Circular Letters setting out the revision of teacher salaries

under the agreement have been issued and we await the further salary uplifts of 1% with effect from 1st August 2025, 1% or €500, whichever is greater, with effect from 1st February 2026 and 1% with effect from 1st June 2026.

Chapter 4 of the agreement provided for Local Bargaining.

Under the bargaining arrangements, employers and trade unions may negotiate additional changes in rates of pay and/or conditions of employment up to a maximum of 3% of the basic pay cost, inclusive of allowances in the nature of pay, of the particular grade, group or category of employee or bargaining unit. This may include proposals involving changes in structures, work practices or other conditions of service.

I mentioned yesterday that we are seeking clarity on how the current negotiations regarding senior cycle fits into this

particular process and the inevitable asks that will be advanced to us as part of the process.

Implementation

Detailed arrangements for local bargaining units were set out as to be agreed by the parties by 30 June 2024.

In that regard, in June 2024, the ASTI together with the TUI were established to be a local bargaining unit for the process under Public Service Agreement 24-26.

The agreement goes on to state that:

Local negotiations within sectors concerning proposals will take place between July 2024 and June 2025. The parties will endeavour, to the greatest extent possible, to reach agreement through direct negotiation.

Implementation of adjustments will be on a phased basis.

The first instalment, equivalent to 1% of the basic pay cost,

will be implemented on 1 September 2025 and the balance will fall to be addressed in any successor pay agreement.

Now I can say that progress in the wider context regarding the implementation of the provisions relating to local bargaining has been extremely limited.

However, it is also worth recalling that CEC adopted a motion in February 2024 that stated:

Motion

That ASTI shall not accept a local bargaining offer as part of the Public Service Agreement 2024 – 2026 without a ballot of members.

It is regrettable that right across the public service, negotiation on all of this is still in the embryonic phase.

Hopefully we will see intensification on this very shortly and as I say, our current discussions regarding Senior Cycle Redevelopment may become relevant.

But I will say that the clear and strong feeling I am picking up from ASTI members is that whatever outcome is achieved, it should be applied to all our members equally.

Sectoral Bargaining (Building Momentum)

I now want to turn to the outstanding business of Sectoral Bargaining in the previous Public Sector Agreement - the Building Momentum Agreement.

You will recall that in the Sectoral Bargaining aspect of the Building Momentum agreement, ASTI/TUI allocated

approximately two thirds of the 1% available to resolve the payment of the PME allowance to new entrant teachers. The remainder, equating to a figure between six and seven million euro, remains to be disbursed.

The latest position is essentially as follows:

ASTI and TUI representatives met with the Department of Education on 31st August 2023 regarding the outstanding Sectoral Bargaining claim with a view to making a proposal to resolve the issue for some ASTI members who had their increments frozen in the 2016/2017 dispute and as such, lag behind their counterparts.

Prior to that meeting, the Department of Education provided costings in that regard.

I won't go into the minutiae of the detail but essentially, after much delay, in May 2024 the Department of Education

informed ASTI that it would not be approved by the Department of Public Expenditure NDP and Reform.

Essentially, from their point of view, it did not fit the sectoral bargaining model for the fund and how it should work.

They argued that our proposal involved upfront costs to be recouped over several years.

Thereafter, ASTI and TUI met to consider next steps and submitted the following proposal to the Department of Education.

“The ASTI and TUI propose that the outstanding sectoral bargaining fund be allocated as a general pay and pension increase. This increase should apply to all points on the scale for post-2011 entrants and to all points on the scale, including all allowances, for pre-2011 entrants. The increase should be

inclusive of all percentage pay increases applied since February 2022.”

Obviously, we also requested that arrangements are put in place to provide appropriate back payments in a timely fashion to all serving post primary teachers regarding the period between 1st February 2022 to date.

The current position is that the Department of Education have informed us that they are agreeable to this being paid, including payment of arrears. Just a few weeks ago they put forward a proposal on how this might be paid. We have submitted a request for detailed clarifications on their proposal but we have been adamant about one thing. ASTI's requirement is that the outstanding payments, both in the form of enhanced pay going forward and back payments owed, should be paid promptly and properly calculated in each individual case.

We await development but this needs to be concluded soon.

It has gone on too long.

Croke Park Hours.

Convention, perhaps the largest bugbear issue we have here in the ASTI for many years has been the dreaded Croke Park hours.

Last year, you adopted a motion that stated as follows:

“That the ASTI ballot members with a view to taking industrial action, up to and including strike action, if the unpaid 33 Croke Park hours are not terminated before the beginning of the 2025/26 school year.”

I am happy to report some limited progress in that regard during the current school year. Strong pressure we applied on foot of that motion led to the opening of discussions on a

review of the usage of the Croke Park hours. I know that a review is more likely to secure change in the complexion of the hours rather than the termination mandated within the motion I have just quoted. The terms of reference state that “It is intended that the review will have regard to teacher professional judgement, system and school requirements and experience to date of best practice in the utilisation of the hours. Drawing on good practice, the review will make recommendations to optimise the most professional and valuable usage of the additional hours by teachers.

1. The effectiveness and value of the current arrangements for usage of the additional hours, including features of current good practice in this regard;
2. Any further recommendations to the already agreed to maximum period available for planning and development work on other than a whole school basis;

3. Potential recommendations for any further changes that would optimise the most professional and valuable usage of the additional time having regard to the objectives of the review;
4. Any other relevant comments or views.

That work is now underway and we will see what outcome it brings.

Synge Street CBS

I referred earlier to work we do in the area of research and of our work in producing advisory materials for our members and of course that's important but I cannot but reference the day to day work we do on behalf of members to protect their terms and conditions of employment. In particular, I would like to turn my attention to the situation in a school where

the teachers and the rest of the school community have been treated disgracefully by their patron. I am, of course, talking about Synge Street CBS. I am sure you are aware, the school's patron, the Edmund Rice School's Trust, unilaterally took the decision to transition the school from being a boy's school, where tuition was through the medium of English, to a co-educational Gaelcholaiste. This decision was taken without any consultation with the teachers or parents of students in the school and throughout the process they have continually been kept in the dark. This is no way to treat a dedicated and professional staff who have created a warm and caring school environment for the children placed in their care. ERST should be ashamed of themselves.

I must emphasise that the ASTI, and our members in Synge Street have no objection to the establishment of a Gaelcolaiste in South Inner City Dublin. This is simply not the

way to go about it. At this late stage, it is not too late to postpone any decision about the school's future and to begin a proper and meaningful process of consultation with the teachers and the wider school community. I call on the Department and the patron to do so immediately.

I am delighted that staff from Synge Street CBS are here as delegates at Annual Convention today and I once heard it said that solidarity is gold for the soul. I know I can assure you that you have the full solidarity of ASTI Annual Convention and the entire membership of ASTI at your back.

Membership and Finance:

As I end this report, it is always useful to reflect.

ASTI stands in rude health. Yesterday, the Honorary Treasurer presented a healthy balance sheet, the product of a clean

audit of our finances. Later this week you will hear that our membership numbers, here at our 103rd Annual Convention are at an all time record, smashing the 20000 barrier in fine style for the very first time. I want to pay tribute to our outgoing Honorary Treasurer and our outgoing Honorary National Organiser in respect of both matters and in respect of the membership growth, although there have been many involved in securing those numbers, the School Stewards across all our schools deserve a special thanks. They are the lifeblood of our organisation and I salute them.

Today, our union has never been stronger despite everything that has been thrown at us over a long period.

Our members know that being in the ASTI help's win better terms and conditions. Being in the ASTI gives members a real voice at work.

The recent DCU survey that found that 84% of teachers are experiencing burnout and 42% will leave or are thinking of leaving the profession shows that being in a strong and unified union has never been more important.

Solidarity is the glue that binds us Convention,

There's a musical running on Broadway called Suffs. It's about the movement to win women's right to vote. The lyrics from one of the songs called "Keep Marching" are as follows:

"Progress is possible, not guaranteed

It will only be made if we keep marching. ...

The future demands that we fight for it now

It will only be ours if we keep marching".

*I put it to you Convention, A Luta Continua – (The struggle
Continues) ... let's keep marching.*