

ASTI Annual Convention 2022

Address by ASTI General Secretary Kieran Christie

April 20th 2022

Check Against Delivery

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 a forceful exposition with incisive clarity on all the issues. It illustrated your commitment and passion for improving and advancing the interests of ASTI and its members.

Of course, I also want to express my congratulations to Miriam Duggan on her achievement in becoming President Elect. Miriam will undoubtedly serve ASTI with distinction. She will undoubtedly excel in all and every task she undertakes. Congratulations Miriam, I am very much looking forward to working with you.

I also want to congratulate Geraldine O'Brien on becoming Vice President. Geraldine as we all know is a strong and committed ASTI activist. I think that for the years to come, it

is clear that a strong team has been entrusted with managing the affairs of our Union.

Convention, for this report I have stripped out some central issues from among the several reports you have before you over these three days, many of which we will return to in the form of motions and debate. But first, I suppose it is important to acknowledge that much has happened that many of us would never have imagined since Convention 2019 when we last met in-person.

Pandemic

As we look back, hopefully in a rear-view mirror from now on, at all that transpired throughout the pandemic, we come to realise that the ASTI stood up well in what were difficult times. But in the first instance, we must never forget the

enormous amount of sickness and death that the virus brought and left in its wake. The havoc it wreaked across all strands of society will not be forgotten.

During this difficult time, ASTI activity ranged across an enormous selection of issues that were novel and challenging. ASTI members stepped up to those challenges.

For our part, we sought to balance the overriding importance of keeping school communities safe while protecting the right of our teachers to teach and their students to learn.

I want to pay tribute again today to our members who endured all the travails that came their way. Whether it was remote teaching, calculated grades or whatever, the challenges they faced were huge. They deserve the gratitude of the nation for all their efforts.

We in the leadership of the ASTI did our best. We didn't get everything right but as I have said before, at certain moments, ASTI made some key interventions. These included ensuring that a proper indemnity be put in place to allow our members to engage in the Calculated Grades process, and our effective closure of schools in January 2021 because returning to the classroom at that point was simply too dangerous, to name but two. Concessions regarding school attendance for Medically Very High Risk, High Risk and Pregnant teachers were also very important.

Mentioning Calculated Grades there reminds me of one of the more surreal, indeed comical moments, where one evening during lockdown, the RTE Six-one News had just started, Deirdre MacDonald the President at the time, was standing in her garden in Wexford waiting to do a live link-up at quarter past six and I was standing in my garden in Sligo

with two phones, one to each ear, attempting to do last minute negotiations with Department Officials before we collapsed the talks to ensure teachers were protected with an indemnity while they graded their students. Deirdre stood there with two alternative statements she was going to make, waiting for me to tell her which one she should go with. And when I told her, of course she duly obliged and in doing so struck a blow for the absolute need for the Department of Education to stop taking teachers for granted. They were crazy times.

And indeed, the withdrawal from the discussions on the Examinations in 2021 by then President Ann Piggott and myself, to ensure that the established Leaving Certificate should be protected and proceed insofar as possible, coupled with our insistence that there be no Calculated or SEC

Accredited Grades this year in 2022 could be all important in the years to come.

And we exerted influence in other crucial areas as well. We led the way in insisting and ensuring that substantial increased investment in the day-to-day running of our schools would be necessary if a successful and sustained reopening could be maintained.

We negotiated an allocation of over 1,000 additional teachers at second level as a pandemic support as well as other related supports for schools. Additional substitution supports were negotiated and the Covid-19 capitation grant to provide for enhanced cleaning, hand sanitiser and PPE etc. Protected time for Lead Worker Representatives and mandatory face mask wearing for second-level students in

2020 when the advice at time was that no masks were necessary were particularly important.

COVID-19 provoked an unprecedented health, social and economic crisis in Ireland and worldwide. The impact on students, staff and schools was profound.

We all earnestly hope I think that this pandemic is close to its conclusion and that we will never see another one again in our lifetime.

Ukraine

Convention, whether the pandemic is in our rear view mirror now or not, very much in front of us is the abhorrent and tragic challenges that the war in Ukraine puts before us.

The crisis and its impact on the education system is evolving on a daily basis. I know first-hand that ASTI members will not be found wanting in going each and every extra mile in welcoming and settling Ukrainian students into our schools.

ASTI and its members have an enormous humanitarian legacy to draw upon.

Standing Committee recently approved payment of a €10,000 donation to the Red Cross, to provide humanitarian support for victims of the Ukraine conflict. There is also a plan to encourage members to hold a coffee morning in our schools shortly to raise funds.

We in the ASTI have already sought to reach out and engage with our colleague teacher unions in Ukraine - the Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine (TUESWU) and the Free Trade Union of Education and Science of Ukraine (VPONU).

It is incumbent upon us as educators and trade unionists to stand in solidarity with our colleagues, their students and communities in Ukraine and support them in any way possible.

However, it is also clear that the war in Ukraine will present challenges on a scale for the Irish school system that we have never seen before. ASTI, as a participant in a stakeholder group that has been convened to plan for such a scenario, has sought to ensure that the impacts on an already heavily oversubscribed and underfunded system will be addressed.

We are calling for provision to overcome the language barriers, the need for education welfare services, critical incidents trauma and wider supports, and many other resources that are necessary.

As you may be aware, regional education support teams have been put in place to seek to match up services and

streamline provision. There is no doubt that the management of the situation will be an enormous strain in the period of time to come.

Old adages relating to coming out of a frying pan and into a fire come to mind.

Occupational stress crisis

Which brings me to the enormous occupational stress crisis that has developed in teaching and which must be addressed.

Working during a global pandemic further compounded the longstanding issues around teacher workload. This provides us with the challenge by way of continued ASTI campaigns for greater resources, higher staff numbers and an end to bureaucratic tasks that do not improve pupil learning or

experiences. Inadequate CPD, limited staffing and inadequate resources, implementing new curricular models, and teaching overcrowded classes are some of the contributing factors that have sapped the morale and energy of our members.

Our research has been confirming this for years.

The repercussions of all this are stark. Deterioration of both physical and mental health among teachers is all too common.

This is something ASTI has repeatedly raised as an issue. We have been advocating for some years for the establishment of an Integrated Workplace Health Management Initiative with the aim of promoting health and wellbeing, illness prevention and support initiatives where necessary for return to work after illness. It is imperative that this proposal is actioned soon.

Many feel that they are becoming very disenfranchised within a career they worked so hard to build.

Investment

Which neatly brings me along to the issue of Investment in Second-level Education. The OECD publication *Education at a Glance 2021*, reported - as have several previous reports - that once again Ireland ranks in last place out of 36 countries for investment in second-level education. The consistent underfunding of second-level schools in Ireland needs to stop. ASTI has insisted that the increased resources provided to schools regarding Covid-19 arrangements must only be considered to be a baseline for increased future funding of our schools. Ireland's track record regarding education funding is laid bare yet again on the international stage.

Significantly more investment in infrastructure and student services is required. Smaller classes, improved buildings, technology investment, extra guidance counsellor appointments and the restoration of middle management posts are the centrepieces of the list of needs. Normal underinvestment as a matter of policy must not resume once the pandemic is over. As I have said before, the Government must not be allowed to reach for the usual tool of austerity. They must invest, both short and long term, in public education as the key to enabling both a sustainable and an equitable education-led recovery. Society now appreciates like never before the value of education and what schools contribute to society.

Investment in the much-needed recruitment and retention of staff to ensure that the needs of students are met and to reduce excessive workloads and challenges to work-life

balance which the pandemic has exacerbated will have to happen. There must be no retrenchment.

Ventilation

And to pick out one matter that wrestled its way into all our consciousness over the last year is the need to address the ventilation levels available in all our classrooms. We are told that while manageable, Covid-19 is not going away anytime soon. The window of opportunity is here now and over the coming months to have this matter comprehensively addressed to minimise prospects of school closures next year and to remove the spectacle of classrooms being like ice boxes that so many of our teachers and students had to endure last winter.

Violence in Society

Convention, this year has been marked, dare I say scarred, by the horrors associated with violence in society and in particular violence against women and members of the LGBT+ community. Let's be clear, violence in all its forms and particularly that directed against people because of their gender or sexual orientation is a scourge that must be addressed. I am conscious that I am the General Secretary of a Union that represents a largely feminised profession. For our part, we have been pushing the Department of Education for some time to revise and enhance the Assault Leave Circular for Schools to drag it into the modern age and make it fit for purpose. We will not relent on this because everyone is entitled to work in a safe environment and when issues arise, victims should be treated with proper care and respect.

Leaving Certificate – Minister’s announcement

The recent announcement by the Minister for Education of her plans for the future of the Leaving Certificate have been uppermost in all our thoughts in the last few weeks.

The ASTI will consider these proposals, some of which have merit and in keeping with our long-standing traditions of democracy and inclusion of all shades of opinion, will consult widely across our membership.

Without drilling down too deeply into the detail, I see two fundamental problems with the proposals.

Minister Foley has stated that the changes she is bringing forward aims to reduce stress on students. A noble objective that we would all share.

However, it has been a popular commentary for many years that the big problem with the Leaving Certificate is not so much the Examinations per se but the fact that they are

tethered to progression to third level and it is that the drives the stress.

The conclusions reached by Professor Áine Hyland in her paper on entry into higher education some time ago are worth reflecting on.

The report stated:

"The examination becomes the determinant of what is studied and how; non-examination subjects get little or no attention and, in many cases, broader co-curricular activities are ignored or minimised. Student stress levels increase as the June examination looms and for some students their final year in school is an unhappy experience which they simply want to get through as quickly as possible."(p.4)¹

¹ ea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/Aine-Hyland_Entry-to-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-in-21st-Century-2011.pdf

Professor Hyland concluded that an analysis of the current curriculum and its individual syllabi suggests that the curriculum itself is not the key problem. Rather, the various subject syllabi are written in such a way as to require students to engage critically with subject content and to apply higher order thinking skills.

How precisely, adding to the number of examinations and spreading them out across a two-year period will lessen the stress, has not been explained by Minister Foley.

Indeed, as we found out during the SEC Accredited Grades process, every ordinary homework assignment will now become high stakes as the students will erroneously but nervously believe that each and every one will have an impact on their final grade. Stress levels will fly sky high in that context. Not to mention that there are many credible voices

from the world of academia that would argue that continuous assessment tends to exacerbate inequality in the education system.

In truth, teachers assessing their students for State Certification is simply a bad idea.

The second fundamental problem as I see it is that on the 29th March, Minister Foley took to the airwaves to announce changes to working arrangements for every second-level teacher in the country. She did this without consultation or negotiation of any kind with their Union. She enveloped it all in nice soft language peppered with notions of inclusion, valued stakeholders, consultation and what have you. It's a neat trick if you can carry it off. Let me be clear. If this is the manner in which she intends to proceed with her proposals

she will find that we in the ASTI can be a strong adversary. ASTI members cannot and will not be taken for granted.

Indeed, I will make one more point.

As we know, history teaches us lessons. Many of you will recall that when the current Junior Cycle Framework was being introduced and all that went with that, a coalition of what I would characterise as uncritical voices worked assiduously to ensure that they would be on the right side of history from their point of view. There were groups and individuals that welcomed each and every iteration of proposals at the time, be they Minister Quinn's original proposals, those that emanated from the Travers intervention or those that finally emerged- albeit there were substantive differences between all three. Ironically, some of the same voices now complain about aspects of what they welcomed just a short number of years ago.

A similar coalition of uncritical allies has now emerged, positioning themselves wisely as they would see it as the proposals for Senior Cycle evolve. The truth is that change wrought from within a herd mentality, as we saw at Junior Cycle, could be very detrimental. I fear that many of the actors from among the great and good of the educational establishment may have allowed themselves to fall within the definition of success put forward by Winston Churchill when he observed that success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.

For our part, ASTI has never shied away from change. If we have been sticklers, it's because we have always insisted that the change must be founded on clear and established research and underpinned by a coherent strategy that is properly resourced. That's why as far back as 2016, we secured an agreement that a longitudinal study of Junior

Cycle be undertaken in the succeeding years. Wouldn't we be in a much better position today to assess where we are at Junior Cycle and where we need to go with Senior Cycle if the Department of Education had not reneged on the commitment.

Throughout my teaching career, I taught Construction Studies. You do not need to teach Construction Studies to know that the first thing you need in place if you want to build anything is a solid foundation that can carry the design load. That's why we have consistently argued that a full and comprehensive analysis of the Junior Cycle needed to be fully completed and taken into account before any proposals would emerge to build upon it in the form of a new Senior Cycle. I fear that the equivalent of an educational pyrite fiasco could be under construction. Put simply, the need to

evaluate the impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle on the learning that is taking place in classrooms was never more pressing. Our own research on the implementation of Junior Cycle indicates that there are real problems to be overcome. Indeed, research commissioned and published by ASTI and undertaken by Dr Brian Fleming clarified that issues such as initiative overload, increasing workload and lack of capacity at school level must be addressed before major change at Senior Cycle can take place.

And as mentioned, our recent research on the impacts of Junior Cycle provided much rich food for thought too.

From an ASTI perspective one thing is certain. The views of ASTI members will be sought as always and ascertained in a detailed consultation across our structures to inform our position. Those views will be brought to every forum at every

stage of the process. We will not be cheerleaders for anyone and we will not be side-lined.

Building Momentum Agreement

I now turn to the issues pertaining to the Public Service Pay agreement and the outlook in the context of the enormous growth in inflation that has emerged.

The rapid growth of inflation over the past six months has substantially undermined the living standards of all workers, including teachers.

Let's be clear from the beginning. No one need apologise for the submission of a claim for a substantial pay rise at this juncture to match inflation.

To that end and following advocacy by ASTI, the ICTU Public Services Committee recently moved to seek to activate the

review clause in the Building Momentum Agreement that was designed to deal with changed circumstances which challenge the underlying assumptions on which the Agreement was based. The Government has announced that it will engage in that context and that may prove useful because the current situation is not sustainable. We are being told that while the economy is performing extraordinarily well, workers' living standards are being eroded to an unacceptable degree.

Indeed, the many succinct and strong contributions during yesterday's debates have also set out for us the key non-pay elements that must also be addressed in any future deals. On the basis of the motions we are and will be debating at this convention, it is clear where ASTI's priorities will lie in those discussions.

I can assure you that the leadership of the ASTI are listening carefully and will do everything in our power to advance those issues.

However, I must refer to the appalling manner in which the discussions and interactions with the Department of Education and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have evolved over the past year regarding the use of the Sectoral Bargaining Fund.

As you know, the agreement contains a clause to address sectoral issues. The ASTI and TUI are regarded as one sectoral bargaining unit. A financial equivalent to 1% of basic pay will be allocated to a fund where Grade or sector-based pay claims and outstanding adjudications and awards could be resolved within the process. Alternatively, a sectoral bargaining unit such as teachers can elect for the funds involved to be used as a sectoral pay round whereby each

member would receive a 1% pay rise. The equivalent of a 1% increase in annualised basic salaries became payable on 1st February 2022 as a Sectoral Bargaining Fund in accordance with Chapter 2 of the Agreement.

We wrote in March 2021 with a list of questions to the Department, asking what exactly was the fund available is and what were the costings relating to a variety of matters we might use it for, if we decided to use it to settle those matters.

The delays by Government departments in compiling and providing full and accurate information to ASTI have led to the Sectoral Bargaining element of the current Building Momentum Agreement not being concluded and paid as it should have been on the 1st February this year. This has added to the financial pain that members are enduring.

Be all that as it may, Standing Committee have decided that a central plank of the fund's usage will be to resolve the restoration of the Professional Master's Degree in Education allowance to Post 2011 entrant teachers – once and for all.

This is the group from among our membership that have endured a decade like none that any segment of our profession should ever have. This aspect of the scourge of unequal pay must never again be allowed to afflict our profession.

Indeed, there remains another appalling vista to be resolved in that context. We must and we will continue to fight for the full restoration of the increments that were delayed for ASTI members when we were the sole union from across the public sector to take industrial action, including strike action in 2016, to stand up for education and lesser paid teachers.

An enormous and unfair price was paid for which we must continue to demand redress.

Convention, the coming period of time is going to be very difficult for all our members on the industrial relations front.

We will do all we can to deal with the challenges that are sure to emerge.

Convention, many of you may have observed over the years that I often reference the research we undertake about this time every year to draw my General Secretary's report to a conclusion. The objective of this year's research was to inform ASTI's on-going campaign for safe schools and promoting teachers' welfare as we emerge from the pandemic. This year, as ever, the responses to the open

questions provided rich material and interesting food for thought.

One respondent said: *I need less class-contact hours so I can prepare the many materials I need to teach my classes which are almost all at maximum capacity*

Another stated: *I have an AP1 post as Year Head and I am strongly considering giving it up because I simply can't do the job properly in the time allocated.*

Another member put it simply:

Something needs to be done about the intensity of the work environment and curriculum overload. Change needs to be worthwhile, beneficial and implemented fully with adequate resourcing and training.

Colleagues, the future is uncertain as always except I will say this.

ASTI and its members faced and surmounted the challenges that the pandemic threw at us. We will face the future with the same character and determination.

Thank you.