

# **Address to Annual Convention 2026**

**by**

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**EMBARGO**

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**Check against delivery**

Thank you, President and Convention. It is my pleasure to stand here before you to deliver my eleventh and final General Secretary's report. And, as always, I begin by joining with so many in congratulating you, President, on your excellent address to Convention yesterday. It was a masterclass in how a President's address to convention should be delivered; clear, concise and incisive on all our issues. Your extraordinary commitment and passion for improving and advancing the interests of ASTI and the interests of our members was set out for all to see.

I also want to express my congratulations to Richie Bell on becoming President Elect. Richie is excellent and will prove to be a wonderful servant of the ASTI. Congratulations Richie.

I also want to congratulate Adrienne Healy on being elected Vice President. Adrienne is a strong and committed ASTI

activist and trade unionist. I know she will work tirelessly in advancing the cause of the ASTI and its members. And finally, I also congratulate Noelle Moran on her re-election as Honorary Treasurer. She will continue to serve with honour and distinction. I think it can be said that the team of officers we have assembled are second to none.

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. As you know, many of them have already been touched and others will be further discussed and returned to in the form of motions and debate at this Convention.

**Senior Cycle Redevelopment and Public Sector Agreement**

The first two topics I want to address with you this morning is the current situation regarding Senior Cycle Redevelopment and our rejection last May of the *Senior Cycle Redevelopment – Implementation Support Measures* document together with the issues relating to seeing out the Current Public Service Pay agreement and the upcoming negotiations around a successor agreement.

You will recall that in May last year, ASTI members voted on the proposals contained in the document *Senior Cycle Redevelopment – Implementation Support Measures*. They did so in the context of a CEC decision to ballot the ASTI membership without recommendation.

A further ballot was also undertaken asking members if, in the event that the outcome of talks document (Senior Cycle

Redevelopment – Implementation Support Measures) is not acceptable, would they be willing to engage in industrial action, up to and including strike action?

ASTI members voted to reject the document Senior Cycle Redevelopment – Implementation Support Measures by 68% to 32%. (Turnout: 73%)

In the second ballot, ASTI members voted by 67% to 33% in favour of industrial action, if necessary, up to and including strike action, in opposition to the accelerated implementation of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Programme. (Turnout: 70%)

In a parallel ballot, the Teachers' Union of Ireland voted to accept the terms as set out in the *Senior Cycle*

*Redevelopment-Implementation Support Measures (SCRISM)*.

In the aftermath, Standing Committee decided, in the first instance, to seek resolution of the issues of concern to teachers by invoking the dispute resolution mechanisms set out at Chapter 5 of the Public Service Agreement 2024-2026.

The ASTI's strong mandate to take industrial action, up to and including strike action, remains in place and available for use, if the conciliation and arbitration process available within the Public Service Agreement fails to produce a satisfactory outcome. Of course, we would hope that we can negotiate an outcome. Let me be very clear, we do not want to resort to industrial action if we can at all avoid it with a negotiated solution.

The Public Service Agreement provides for staged processes where disputes arise, including initial bilateral engagement at local level between parties to the dispute and onward

referral by either side to agreed machinery. In teachers' case, the Teachers Conciliation or Arbitration Scheme applies.

ASTI triggered the breach mechanism with the Department of Education and Youth and set out our alleged breaches of the Public Service Agreement 2024 – 2026 by the Department of Education and Youth.

In our view, the breaches concerned had either already taken place or were planned for implementation.

We pointed out that in that context, implemented and planned actions on the part of the Department of Education and Youth concerning the Junior Cycle Implementation Committee, Croke Park Hours (to name just two) were in direct contravention of the Public Service Agreement 2024 -

2026, in that they nullify and vary provisions of previous public sector agreements.

Discussions with the Department of Education and Youth took place over the following months in line with the provisions of the process, but there was no satisfactory conclusion. The Department of Education and Youth denies that it has breached the Public Service Agreement 2024 – 2026 in any way.

It should also be noted that in tandem with pursuing that, ASTI also sought to negotiate a substantially improved suite of supports for the implementation of Senior Cycle Redevelopment.

At this time matters have progressed to a point whereby, ASTI, under paragraph 5.4 of the Public Service Agreement

2024 - 2026, has referred matters to the Joint Implementation Committee set up under the Public Service Agreement. The JIC's role is to address matters of implementation, interpretation, or anomalies arising under the Agreement. This step reflects both the seriousness of the issues and our determination to secure appropriate resolution within the agreed industrial relations framework.

My understanding is that the Joint Implementation Committee (known as the JIC) is due to meet later this week and consider where we go from here. There should be developments very soon.

While engagement has taken place, and some progress has been made, it is clear that further strengthening and formalisation of commitments are required in relation to Senior Cycle Redevelopment. Our objective is to secure an

enhanced addendum to the *Senior Cycle Redevelopment – Implementation Support Measures* document, building on the commitments previously provided.

The addendum must address several core issues including the provision of funding for science laboratory capital works. Schools cannot deliver reformed curricula without appropriate laboratory infrastructure. This is not optional; it is foundational.

The Coursework Rules must be updated to incorporate clear safeguards against the inappropriate use of AI in student work. At the same time, there must be defined legal protection for teachers engaged in authentication work. As assessment models evolve, teachers must not be left

professionally exposed. Clarity around indemnity provisions is essential.

We are seeking strengthened Teacher Professional Learning supports, including enhanced feedback mechanisms that are meaningful and responsive to classroom realities. Reform must be properly resourced if it is to succeed.

In language subjects, we require firm assurances regarding the continued and appropriate inclusion of oral and aural assessments. We are also pressing for rapid reviews of subjects within each Tranche at the earliest opportunity, so that unintended consequences or operational difficulties can be addressed promptly.

Further clarification is required across a range of additional headings: the provision of laboratory support, greater

transparency around roles within the authentication process, clarification of risk assessment practices, progress on the SEC portal, monitoring of emerging AI-related breaches, and clarity regarding our approach to Local Bargaining.

And I think we should never lose sight of the key previous achievements of ASTI Senior Cycle Redevelopment Campaign:

- Reversal by Minister for Education in 2023, ensuring that Additional Assessment Components will be externally assessed by the SEC.
- Reversal of plans for students to sit Leaving Certificate Paper one in both English and Irish at the end of fifth year.
- One year CID qualification period for our members
- Access to Consultation material in NCCA Subject Development Groups

**Moving on to the Public Service Agreement 2024 – 2026 and indeed the upcoming negotiations on a successor.**

I will start with the Local Bargaining element.

The Bargaining Arrangements that were set out in the Agreement were that 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.

Implementation of adjustments will be on a phased basis.

The first instalment, equivalent to 1% of the basic pay cost, will now be implemented with effect from 1 September 2025

and the balance will fall to be addressed in any successor pay agreement.

There have been extraordinary delays across the public service. Very few deals have been done and, to my knowledge, no segment of the public sector workforce are in receipt of payments yet.

Now, to frame this matter, it is useful to remind ourselves that CEC adopted the following motion in February 2024:

**Motion**

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

A key backdrop to the discussions that we are involved in, as mentioned earlier, was the insertion of Paragraph 5.1 into the *Senior Cycle Redevelopment – Implementation Support Measures* document on which ASTI voted and rejected its provisions.

The insertion of this element into the *Senior Cycle Redevelopment – Implementation Support Measures* document has complicated matters and has effectively dovetailed the Local Bargaining process with the Senior Cycle Redevelopment process.

In any event, ASTI was asked to set out in writing the potential claims which we proposed to pursue under local bargaining and we are pursuing those and pursuing costings with the Department of Education and Youth.

The potential claims submission was notwithstanding that the matter of how the local bargaining clause of the Public Service Agreement could be applied requires both teacher unions to be in agreement. The submission of our claims was without prejudice to what may be the final agreed position regarding the usage of the funds. ASTI is also open to the prospect of a viable proposal that may lead to an award of the 3% to all members in the form of a straight pay rise and I think that may be where we end up.

It should be noted that the slow progress of the process is connected to the fact that there are holdups across the public sector. And of course, in our case, the complications relating to our negotiations on Senior Cycle Redevelopment are

intermingled into this process – there are a lot of moving parts. Hopefully the logjam will be broken soon.

I now want to turn back to the outstanding business of Sectoral Bargaining in the Building Momentum Agreement 2021-2022.

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.

After considerable negotiations regarding options for disbursement of the balance of the funds, agreement was finally reached that the balance of the fund is to be allocated as a general pay and pension increase to 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.

Arising from this position, members received a 0.35% increase related to the remaining balance of the Sectoral Bargaining Fund as provided for in the Building Momentum Pay Agreement in addition to the 1% increase due under the current agreement in August 2025.

ASTI and TUI continue to press for appropriate arrangements to be put in place for the payment of arrears that pertain to the period between 1<sup>st</sup> February 2022 to August 2025.

### **New Public Sector Agreement.**

As you will be aware, the current Public Sector pay agreement expires during the summer. I would expect talks to commence – probably in April and May – so we have an interesting year ahead.

But I will make a few general points:

There is no sense that the Government side have been or are willing to engage to ensure that the provisions of Public Sector Agreements, that may be advantageous to workers, are to be addressed in a timely manner. This must stop.

How can it be credible for the Government to expect unions to go back to members to ask that they agree a new deal – when so much of the previous two deals in our case remains outstanding to be paid.

Therefore, there should be no consideration of entering any new Public Sector Pay Agreement until the end line is in sight on Local Bargaining.

The second point I want to make is that it is as plain as a pikestaff that the Government has never moved on from the mindset of the recession – the mindset of the austerity years

of a decade ago and more. They seem to have no comprehension of a need to incorporate into public sector agreements any measures that would tilt towards addressing the daily problems that workers face – be they housing, childcare, healthcare or any of the rest of our big issues. The truth is that workers are only standing still or going backwards. For instance, in the budget for this year there was no indexing of tax bands and the energy credits were removed. A new deal will have to be a better deal. The narrative of the next deal must change.

### **Posts of Responsibility:**

Convention, I have been seeking and negotiating for some time to have important changes made to Circular 0003/2018

– that is the one for the appointments to Posts of Responsibility.

There have been quite a few issues with this Circular that have been well ventilated at Conventions over the years.

I am optimistic that we will shortly achieve a number of very important changes that will inject more fairness and accountability into the process.

These will include that:

*Each member of an Interview Board shall have to make and take account of a Conflict-of-Interest Declaration.*

*A departure from the agreed selection criteria or marking scheme and failure to adhere to a competency-based*

*interview model will become a separate ground of appeal for any disappointed candidate.*

*I also believe we will achieve a new ground of appeal to cover inconsistency in the recruitment and interview process.*

We have been insisting also and we will achieve it too, that *all interview boards shall comprise only those who have received training in a competency-based model.*

Once in place – these will be very important improvements.

### **Artificial Intelligence and teaching:**

Artificial Intelligence has rapidly become part of the educational landscape and is influencing how students learn and how teachers work. Used responsibly, AI has the potential to support teachers in meaningful ways. Many

teachers are already experimenting with these technologies in ways that enhance teaching and learning.

However, the rapid development of AI also presents significant challenges for education systems and for the teaching profession. ASTI has been clear that AI must serve teachers, not control them. The professional judgment, empathy and relational understanding that teachers bring to the classroom cannot be replicated by algorithms. Education is fundamentally a human endeavour.

There are also emerging risks that must be addressed. Some AI systems may increase surveillance, harvest large amounts of data from teachers and students, or intensify workload rather than reduce it. Bias embedded within AI systems can reinforce inequalities. In addition, generative AI presents new

challenges around academic integrity. Teachers are encountering situations where students submit work produced wholly or partially by AI and expect teachers to accept and validate it as their own learning. Leaving aside our Senior Cycle Redevelopment debates, this raises complex questions about assessment, authenticity and the purpose of education itself.

Teachers must not be left to navigate these issues alone.

Rapid technological change requires sustained, high-quality professional development and clear national guidance.

Teachers must also have a voice in decisions about how AI is introduced into classrooms and schools.

Our union believes that the development and deployment of AI in education must be guided by a human-centred, ethical

and rights-based approach. Technology should strengthen education, not undermine it. AI must support teachers' professional autonomy, protect students' well-being and uphold the democratic mission of public education.

### **Digital rights for teachers**

The digital environment now forms part of everyday life in schools, bringing both opportunities and new risks for teachers and students. While technology can support communication and learning, it has also exposed educators to new forms of online harm. Increasingly, teachers are finding themselves targeted by online harassment, cyber-bullying and defamatory commentary. Research undertaken by ASTI indicates that approximately one in five second-level teachers has experienced work-related cyber-bullying. Even where incidents are relatively infrequent, their impact on

professional authority, mental health and the wider school environment can be profound. (Red C survey on Digital Technology and its Impact on Teachers' Working Lives March 2024)

Teachers' public-facing role makes them particularly vulnerable to online abuse. Anonymous attacks on social media, the unauthorised recording of teachers in classrooms, and the manipulation or circulation of images online represent serious threats to professional dignity and safety. These behaviours often occur outside school hours but can quickly spill into the classroom, disrupting learning and damaging school relationships.

There have been incidents involving AI-generated deepfake images or fabricated content targeting teachers or students.

Such material can spread rapidly online, causing reputational damage and distress before it can be addressed.

ASTI has taken a number of practical steps to support members in navigating these challenges. The union has developed a dedicated Digital Rights Hub which provides guidance on protecting digital identity, minimising online exposure and responding to incidents of cyber-abuse. It also outlines reporting procedures, legal rights and pathways for escalation when necessary. In addition, ASTI has engaged with TikTok in particular through a Community Partner Channel to expedite the removal of harmful content affecting members.

However, responsibility cannot rest solely with teachers or schools. Technology companies and regulators must be held accountable. Strong enforcement of online safety laws, faster

removal of harmful content and clearer legal protections are essential. Teachers have the right to dignity, privacy and safety in the digital world, as well as the right to disconnect from constant digital availability outside working hours.

I now want to mention aspects of the body of valuable and useful work the committees of the ASTI undertake throughout the year. Reports from all our committees are to be found in your handbooks so I won't labour the point.

For instance, I want to congratulate the ASTI Global Solidarity Committee in organising an excellent inaugural Global Solidarity Seminar on Saturday, 28<sup>th</sup> February.

ASTI is playing a pivotal role in the promotion and support of those in education around the world who are less fortunate than ourselves and to be able to stand in solidarity with

educators and students in parts of the world who need for us to use our voice on their behalf.

The Equality Committee hosted an excellent Branch Officer Training Workshop on Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> March in Athlone. It was an excellent session which focused how to welcome students and colleagues of different backgrounds and cultures to our schools, warning against mistakes that can be made and emphasising the benefits of an international and multi-cultural school population. It dealt with the problems faced by students as a result of negativity in that regard and was an extremely useful session.

It is also intended to hold an Equality Conference in November. The theme of the conference will be “Immigration and Racism” and it promises to be very interesting.

At this juncture, I think it important to mention the work of our recently departed Deputy General Secretary, Diarmaid de Paor, and all the work he did over many years in this area.

### **Safety, Health and Welfare Committee**

During the year the Safety, Health and Welfare Committee has expanded the network of Safety Representatives and provided a number of training modules.

The training modules have been well attended and are in high demand.

Mental health hazards and teacher stress remain as primary causes of illness and early retirement.

We continued to engage with our European colleagues in the European Trade Union Confederation to seek legislative change which will prioritise psychosocial health hazard identification in law.

We have liaised with our partners and welcomed the DCU Research on Teacher Occupational Wellbeing 2025 that you heard about yesterday.

This further demonstrates the effectiveness of a health and safety based approach, to issues of teacher workload and burnout.

### **Recruitment and Retention of Teachers:**

Colleagues, one of the most pressing if not depressing challenges facing our education system remains the crisis in the recruitment and retention of teachers. This is not a new

problem. It has been with us for more than a decade and it is affecting every part of our second-level system and, most importantly, the educational experience of our students.

Across the country, schools are struggling to recruit teachers and to keep the talented professionals already working within the system. ASTI surveys have consistently shown the scale of the challenge. Around two-thirds of schools report unfilled vacancies, even after repeated rounds of advertising.

Approximately three-quarters of schools have advertised teaching posts that received no applications at all. In many cases, vacancies remain open well into the school year.

The consequences for students are increasingly visible.

Schools are forced to rely on unqualified short-term cover, non-specialist teaching or, in some cases, dropping subjects entirely. Teacher shortages are particularly acute in areas such as Mathematics, Irish, Modern Foreign Languages, the

sciences and practical subjects. In some schools, students experience multiple teachers for the same subject during the year or are left with regular “free classes” because no teacher is available. Special Educational Needs teachers are frequently redeployed to fill mainstream gaps, reducing supports for the students who need them most.

At the heart of this crisis are structural problems that have never been properly addressed. Teacher pay has been eroded in real terms, while the cost of living, particularly housing, has risen dramatically.

The barriers begin even before teachers enter the classroom. The two-year Professional Master of Education significantly increases the financial burden on new entrants, with fees of almost €15,000 as part of six years of higher education.

Graduates face this cost only to enter a profession where secure employment may take years to achieve.

At the same time, workload pressures, administrative demands and the loss of promotional opportunities have made the profession less sustainable than it should be. Many highly qualified teachers are choosing alternative careers or leaving to work abroad where conditions are more attractive.

This crisis requires more than piecemeal responses. It demands a strategic commitment to restoring teaching as an attractive, respected and sustainable profession. That means addressing pay and career structures, reducing unnecessary bureaucracy, supporting teacher training, recognising all overseas experience, and tackling the housing pressures that make it increasingly difficult for teachers to live in the communities they serve.

Our students only pass through the education system once.

We cannot afford to wait for this crisis to resolve itself. Bold action is required now to protect the quality and future of Irish education.

## **Additional Educational Needs and Special Educational Needs provision**

I also want to reflect on the current state of Additional Educational Needs and Special Educational Needs provision.

The work being done by teachers in this area is extraordinary, but the demands being placed upon them are growing rapidly and are becoming increasingly unsustainable.

At the centre of this work are AEN Coordinators and Special Education Teachers. In many schools, AEN Coordinators now face workloads that are simply unmanageable. They are

responsible for overseeing complex learning support timetables, responding to the expectations of parents, preparing learning materials and coordinating supports for students with diverse needs. At the same time, they are being asked to meet an expanding range of requirements from the Department and the Inspectorate, including targets, support plans and care plans that add significantly to administrative pressures.

In recent years, many responsibilities that were once carried out by external services have been devolved to schools. For example, the management of Reasonable Accommodations in examinations now rests largely with schools. While this gives schools some influence over decisions, it has also transferred significant workload onto AEN Coordinators and SET teachers, who must conduct assessments, manage

testing and deal directly with parental concerns where accommodations are refused.

At the same time, the role of the National Educational Psychological Service has shifted toward consultation, and many schools no longer have a dedicated NEPS psychologist assigned to them. As a result, AEN Coordinators frequently find themselves sourcing private psychological assessments and supporting families through that process. They are also heavily involved in the new Assessment of Need procedures, which carry additional workload and potential legal implications for schools.

In short, the administrative burden has grown to such an extent that it is increasingly limiting the time teachers can devote to what matters most, teaching and supporting

students directly. The professionalism and commitment of SET teachers is beyond doubt, but the scale of the workload they now carry must be recognised and addressed.

And speaking of teachers' workload – last week we published the detail of a survey of members.

Out of 1,591 classroom teachers, principals and deputy principals who completed the survey, only 44% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their current duties and work environment. A high percentage (69%) said they regularly or occasionally consider leaving teaching; 46% said they could see themselves leaving in the future. Teacher workload and stress were the main reasons given.

The research finds that teachers are facing the challenges of curricular transformation, new assessment demands, and expanding administrative loads without corresponding professional development supports, preparation/administration time or school resources. Teachers perceive a widening gap between what is expected of them and what is feasible within the realities of timetables, school resources, and the working day.

There were many interesting observations from our members in the survey.

One teacher wryly observed that *“the additional roles added on our plates every meeting are untenable.”*

Another said that *“If the increase in workload due to curriculum change continues the job will become too stressful*

*for a large cohort to bother becoming a teacher. Also it will lead to a large number of teachers leaving the profession.”*

Which leads me to a few wider reflections on where teaching stands at this juncture, before I conclude.

The truth is that the lived experience of teachers in our schools is too often ignored, misunderstood, or dismissed.

The great philosopher John Dewey once described education as the *“midwife of democracy.”* Think about that. Education is not a side concern of society, it is the very force that brings democracy to life.

And at the heart of that process are you: dedicated, professional teachers.

You are the ones who nurture curiosity.

You are the ones who develop critical thinking.

You are the ones who help young people learn how to

disagree respectfully, to participate meaningfully, and to care about the common good.

That is the true purpose of education.

But colleagues, that vision is under strain, serious strain.

We see it in the relentless focus on assessment and inspection. A system obsessed with measuring, counting, and recording, yet too often failing to support, trust, or empower.

And let's say it plainly: nobody ever fattened a pig by weighing it.

We know that education is about relationships, creativity, and professional judgment, not endless paperwork and performative accountability.

And yet, the pressure grows.

Teachers are overworked.

Schools are under-resourced.

This is not sustainable or acceptable.

Because when teachers are stretched beyond breaking point,

when schools lack the resources they need, when

bureaucracy crowds out meaningful learning, democracy

itself is weakened.

Something needs to be done.

Thank you.