

## LEAVING CERTIFICATE REFORM

### Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

#### A.S.T.I Submission

Tuesday, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2021

#### Introduction

In the last twenty months, the COVID-19 pandemic, school closure and the return to the classroom has dramatically demonstrated the vitally important work of teachers and schools. Across society, there is a renewed appreciation of the centrality of school to young people's lives and that of the wider community. What happens in schools is very much determined by the curriculum in the broadest sense. This is why teachers frequently respond cautiously to proposals for curricular reform. Teachers know that transformative curriculum change takes place in the classroom and that, ultimately, the teacher is the facilitator of this change. Teachers need to be convinced of the rationale for change; feel that their views and experiences are listened to; trust that adequate resources will be provided to support change; and – most importantly – that change will deliver better learning outcomes for students.

The ASTI's submission to this consultation process will focus on the six areas as requested by the Joint Committee. However, it is incumbent on the ASTI to provide the Joint Committee with its understanding of the systemic issues which, unaddressed, will negatively impact on the process of senior cycle reform.

#### Systemic issues in Irish education impacting on the curriculum

**Investment in education:** Investment in education matters. It means that schools have enough teachers, enough classrooms, enough laboratories, technology suites, etc, to deliver a curriculum which is broad, flexible and can be tailored to suit the diverse needs of students. The pandemic has exposed that many of our second-level schools are over-crowded, lack communal space for eating, relaxing and studying, for outdoor activities, etc. It has also highlighted that ventilation, heating, lighting and noise containment is frequently inadequate. These are very basic issues but they impact on all aspects of school life in particular subject choice for students- especially in relation to STEM subjects, range of programmes provided, access to PE and games, availability of hot meals for students, and space for dedicated facilities for students with special educational needs. The Department of Education's own demographic projections indicate that by 2024, there will be 39,000 more students in second-level schools than in 2020. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/departments-of-education/?referrer=http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/projections/projections-of-full-time-enrolment-primary-and-second-level-2020-20381.xlsx>

**Teacher supply:** Prior to March 2020, the most pressing issue in education policy was teacher supply. In November 2018, a National Action Plan was published which requires renewed attention. The high cost of initial teacher training is having a negative impact on supply. Currently, the 2-year Post-graduate Masters in Education/PME costs between €11,000 and €14,000. Student teachers complete a 20-week practice placement (10-weeks block-release) which attendant accommodation and commuting costs. Academic research has identified the high costs of initial teacher education as one of the reasons for a lack of diversity in the teaching profession. The latter is increasingly identified as a major challenge in the context of wider social policy on integration, inclusion and diversity.

**Attractiveness of teaching as a profession:** Several factors are key in determining attractiveness, including salary. While teachers want to teach because they want to work with and help young people, they also know that their work is important and should be appropriately remunerated. It is expensive to train as a teacher: it is totally demoralising to do the same work for a lower salary scale *and* inferior pension entitlements. Unequal pay structures have been repeatedly described by the ASTI as having a corrosive impact on the profession. The status of the profession is also critical. Negative media commentary and ill-founded expectations of the work of teachers and schools' damages morale. Workload is also critical. Indeed, after unequal pay, workload is cited in ASTI surveys as a major cause of work dissatisfaction. 'Intensification', 'innovation overload' and teacher wellbeing are now dominant in the discourse among teachers.

### Curriculum change at senior cycle

**Note:** *The ASTI made a detailed submission to the NCCA's public consultation in autumn 2019 on the review of senior cycle.<sup>2</sup> This submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee is largely based on that earlier submission. Given that the Minister for Education has not yet published her response to the Advisory Report arising from the NCCA's public consultation, the ASTI considers that it should not speculate but rather engage with six areas of interest as highlighted by the Committee.*

**Assessment options:** Assessment is not separate to the curriculum: rather, it is an intrinsic component, the core purposes of which is to establish progress in learning. Teachers engage in assessment every day as they observe their students, provide feedback on their learning, and set and mark homework. More formal assessment takes place to mark the end of the completion of programmes of study, namely the Junior Cycle and the Senior Cycle. The Leaving Certificate examination typically includes a written examination paper *plus* a second assessment component. The latter includes oral/aural examinations, project work, portfolio and practical work. The NCCA's review of senior cycle has identified three major problems: the timing of the assessment; the range of assessment types; and the balance of marks awarded to the two components. What is not identified as problematic is the externally assessed nature of the assessment process.

The strengths of the current model of external assessment of the Leaving Certificate examination were stated in the NCCA's consultation paper. They include a high level of public trust; its capacity to serve as a valid and objective statement of students' academic achievement; its fairness, impartiality and transparency. What is deeply problematic about the current model is the fact that the Leaving Certificate examination is the sole pathway for school-leavers to higher education. The landmark

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.asti.ie/document-library/asti-submission-to-ncca-senior-cycle-review-consultation/>

report on this issue by Professor Áine Hyland in 2011 recommends options such the ‘decoupling’ of the entry to higher education from the examination; changes to the examination; or variations on the current point system.<sup>3</sup> The ASTI believes that it is time to revert to Professor Hyland’s recommendations to address the acknowledged problems in the Leaving Certificate examination.

**Key subject areas and digital learning:** The shift to remote teaching during the last twenty months has demonstrated both the potential and limitations of digital learning. Digital literacy is a key skill across all subject areas. It comprehends practical technical skills, collaboration skills, social and cultural skills, critical thinking, and understanding bias to enable young people to participate fully and ethically in a digitalised social world. The key issues are ensuring equal access to broadband and digital devices; teacher professional learning; whole-school policies and leadership for the school’s digital strategy.

**Access, Equality and Wellbeing Supports:** Access and equality in education are interrelated. The 2018 Admission to Schools Act ensures equal access. However, the legislation does not address the ongoing problems in the capacity of schools to meet the needs of students with special educational needs. This problem has also been highlighted in the recent policy focus on reduced timetables. There is a need for a more proactive model of engagement by the NCSE<sup>4</sup> and the Department of Education with schools to ensure that schools have the human teaching and SNA allocation, accommodation and specialist facilities in place *when* students commence school. A more entrenched problem is the paucity of school and community psychological/mental health services for young people. Students with emotional and behavioural disorders represent the majority of students with special educational needs. Professor Paul Downes, DCU, has previously highlighted to the Joint Oireachtas Committee the need for counselling services in Irish schools; the latter are mainstream in most European countries.<sup>5</sup> The Department of Education’s Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice<sup>6</sup> is, regrettably, largely aspirational as it is not underpinned by necessary human resources such as counsellors, dedicated leadership posts, teacher training for SPHE/RSE<sup>7</sup> or whole-school teacher training.

**Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths:** The senior cycle curriculum should be flexible to give students greater choice and support their post-school transition to higher education, further education and training, or employment. The NCCA’s advisory report underlines the need to reduce the ‘ring-fencing’ between the three Leaving Certificate programmes. The ASTI broadly support this proposal but believes that Transition Year must remain a stand-alone programme and be available to all students. The senior cycle curriculum should have sufficient options to enable students to combine academic, vocational and other forms of learning in a manner which best meets their needs. Central to this ambition is the availability of an adequate career guidance and

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<sup>3</sup> [https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/Aine-Hyland\\_Entry-to-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-in-21st-Century-2011.pdf](https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/Aine-Hyland_Entry-to-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-in-21st-Century-2011.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> National Council for Special Education

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[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_education\\_further\\_and\\_higher\\_education\\_research\\_innovation\\_and\\_science/submissions/2020/2020-12-17\\_opening-statement-dr-paul-downes-director-educational-disadvantage-centre-institute-of-education-dublin-city-university\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_education_research_innovation_and_science/submissions/2020/2020-12-17_opening-statement-dr-paul-downes-director-educational-disadvantage-centre-institute-of-education-dublin-city-university_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/24725/07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Social Personal and Health Education/Relationships and Sexuality Education

counselling service in schools. The choices students make in relation to post-school destinations have long-term implications: moreover, these choices are made early on in their education. The Department published a review of the service in 2019 which contained eighteen recommendations four themes: improvement in career guidance tools and career information, better engagement with enterprise, inclusion and enhanced governance structures.<sup>8</sup> Apart from slow movement towards restoring allocations to the pre-2009 'crash level', no progress has been made.

**Irish Language and Irish Medium Education:** The Irish language is a foundational pillar of Irish education: it must continue to be nourished and supported to ensure not only its inter-generational transmission but, of equal importance, to give young people access to their heritage, culture and patrimony. Curriculum, assessment and classroom practice are important and have a major impact on young people's response to the language. That is why it is important to get curriculum 'right'. More can and should be done to enable young people to attend the Gaeltacht summer courses. For many families the cost is prohibitive. The hugely positive impact of 'the Gaeltacht experience' on attitudes to the language should be harnessed. Grants should be made available to educationally disadvantaged students to attend the Gaeltacht summer courses. Grants should also be available to student teachers of Irish to meet the costs of their mandatory Gaeltacht placement. In order to meet Teaching Council registration requirements, teachers of Irish must have a verifiable immersive experience of at least one month in an area designated as a Gaeltacht area, at a cost of at least €650 a week. As far back as 2012, the Teaching Council called for financial support for teachers for this course. The ASTI has also made the case that serving teachers should be facilitated to regularly attend upskilling courses in Gaeltacht areas.

The aim of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 is to support the use of the Irish language in Gaeltacht communities through strengthening Irish-medium education provision. The first reports are encouraging and demonstrate that schools can be highly innovative when they are given the necessary supports.<sup>9</sup> The ASTI is fully supportive of these initiatives and sees scope for the model to be extended to English-medium schools.

**International Evidence and Best Practice:** The ASTI supports the principle of evidence-based change in education. The perception by teachers that the change agenda is often set elsewhere leads to mistrust and disengagement. While we can and should learn from other systems, we also need to value and trust what is good in our own education system. The Irish education system has benefited from engaging with the international evidence and best practice through, for example, the EU 2020 policy cooperation framework and will continue to do so within the successor programme, the European Education Area 2025.<sup>10</sup> Policy guidance and technical expertise from multi-lateral organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO is also significant. Policy learning should not be confused with policy borrowing. In this regard, the ASTI must put on record its rejection of the model of school accountability in the Education (Parents and Students' Charter) Bill, 2018. It is premised on a market

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<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/24951/dffde726604b451aa6cc50239a375299.pdf#page=1>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e9253-report-on-case-study-schools-participating-in-the-gaeltacht-school-recognition-scheme/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en)

model of service provider-and-client. It totally fails to reflect the community or social dimension of education. It is, moreover, contrary to the Inspectorate's model of accountability and evaluation which is based on school improvement based on school self-evaluation and teacher professionalism.

## **Conclusion**

Curriculum change should be incremental rather than radical. Achieving educational change that is deep and lasting takes time. Moreover, there is inadequate appreciation of the time required to sustain change. Teachers' experience of curriculum change at junior cycle has left them wary and concerned. Teachers will engage with change when are convinced of its necessity and rationale: most importantly, when they consider that it will enhance students' learning and achievement.

For the third year in a row, the OECD Education at a Glance report demonstrated that Ireland was at the bottom of the global ranking for investment in education: Ireland ranked last out of 34 countries for investment in education as a percentage of GDP: 1.2% of GDP compared to the OECD average of 2% and the EU average of 1.9%. This appalling record of under-investment has had a cumulative impact on teachers' working conditions. The aforementioned ASTI research underlines the growing problem of teachers' work is becoming increasingly intensified, with teachers expected to respond to greater pressures and comply with multiplying innovations in conditions that are at best stable and at worst deteriorating. ASTI research, *Teachers' Work: Work Demands and Intensity of Work*, found that teachers' working week averages at 40 hours, indicating that in addition to the class-contact time of 21 hours and 20 minutes, teachers were spending a further 20 hours working outside of the school day.<sup>11</sup> Of that additional out-of-school time, 60% of it was spend on preparation for classroom teaching and marking students' work. This workload is unsustainable and teachers are not positively disposed to any curriculum change which would add to workload.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.asti.ie/document-library/teachers-work-work-demands-and-work-intensity-march-2018/>