

LEAVING CERTIFICATE REFORM

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

A.S.T.I Submission: Executive Summary

Friday, 1st October 2021

Systemic issues which negatively impact on curriculum reform projects

Investment in education: The 2020 OECD Education at a Glance once again ranked Ireland at the bottom of 36 countries in terms of investment in second-level education as a percentage of GDP. 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 and flexible. 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. Ventilation, heating, lighting and noise containment is frequently inadequate.

Teacher supply: The 2018 National Action Plan on teacher was published requires renewed attention. A key issue is the high costs of initial teacher training. Currently, the 2-year Post-graduate Masters in Education/PME costs between €11,000 and €14,000. Student teachers MUST complete a 20-week practice placement (10-weeks of which is block-release) which adds considerably to their costs in terms of accommodation and commuting. The high costs of initial teacher education results in a lack of diversity in the teaching profession.

Attractiveness of teaching as a profession: Several factors are key, including salary. Teaching is a rewarding career teachers know that their work is important and should be appropriately remunerated. Unequal pay is having a corrosive impact on the profession. Negative media commentary and ill-founded expectations of the work of teachers and schools' damages morale. Workload is also critical: 'intensification', 'innovation overload' and teacher wellbeing are now dominant in the discourse among teachers

Curriculum change – 6 areas

Assessment options: 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 written and practical components. What is not identified as problematic is the externally assessed nature of the examination. The strengths of the Leaving Certificate 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. The core problem is the fact that the Leaving Certificate examination is the sole pathway for school-leavers to higher education.

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 more than knowing how to use digital technologies to learn for learning: it encompasses social and cultural skills, critical thinking, and understanding bias to enable young people to participate fully and ethically in our digitalised social world. The key issues are equal access to broadband and digital devices; teacher professional learning; whole-school policies and dedicated leadership posts.

Access, Equality and Wellbeing Supports: The 2018 Admission to Schools Act ensures equal access but does not address the ongoing problems in the capacity of schools. The NCSE and the Department of Education must engage with schools to ensure that schools have the human teaching and SNA allocation, accommodation and specialist facilities in place when students commence school. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice is largely aspirational as it is not supported by counselling and psychological services. Students with emotional and behavioural disorders represent the majority of students with special educational needs.

Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths: 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 counselling service in schools. Policy must address the issue of the Leaving Certificate serving as the sole pathway for school leavers to higher education.

Irish Language and Irish Medium Education: The hugely positive impact of ‘the Gaeltacht experience’ on attitudes to the language should be harnessed. Grants must be made available to educationally disadvantaged students to attend the Gaeltacht summer courses. Student teachers should also receive grants to meet the costs of their mandatory Gaeltacht placement. Serving teachers should be assisted to attend Gaeltacht course to upskill.

International Evidence and Best Practice: The Irish education system has benefited from engaging with the international evidence and best practice including through the EU 2020 policy cooperation framework and the successor programme, the European Education Area 2025. 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 contained in the Education (Parents and Students’ Charter) Bill, 2018. It is premised on a market model of service provider-and-client. It totally fails to reflect the community or social dimension of education.

Conclusion

Achieving educational change that is deep and lasting takes time. 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. Insufficient attention is paid to systemic issues impacting on teaching and learning. Under-investment impacts on teachers’ working conditions and workload.