

ASTI Congress

19 April 2022

Minister Norma Foley, T.D., Minister for Education

Introductory Remarks

Check against delivery

A Uachtarán, a Rúnaí Ginearálta, a thoscairí, agus a dhaoine uaisle, is onóir mhór domsa mar Aire Oideachais, a bheith anseo inniu agus ba mhaith liom ar dtús mo bhuiochas a ghabhail as ucht an ama agus an deis seo a thabhairt dom chun bualadh agus chun labhairt libh inniu.

I am very pleased to join you all today here in Cork and to experience the unique atmosphere of the Easter Education conferences in person for the first time as Minister.

Thank you to your President Eamonn Dennehy and your General Secretary Kieran Christie for the invitation and the opportunity to address you this evening.

I am conscious this is a particularly notable Congress for ASTI, as it marks the 100th Congress that has been held in ASTI's long and proud history as representatives of the teaching profession. Indeed, I look forward to hearing Professor Cunningham's contribution who I know has documented that fascinating history.

The Irish education system has changed fundamentally in many ways throughout ASTI's existence. But there is no doubt but the Education system and Irish society in general are today at a turning point. We have come through, together with the rest of the world, a collective trauma. It has been a challenging, difficult and demanding two years for everyone.

However, what became very apparent very quickly in the pandemic, was the central role that schools play in families' lives especially when that role was removed or diminished through school closures and severe restrictions.

Social and emotional health and wellbeing are inextricably tied up with access to school for children and young people. It was not just daily school life that changed beyond recognition but hugely important milestones that we took for granted, graduations, debs, and of course State Exams were all impacted. In facilitating the continuation of education your members responded to the crisis with energy, commitment and professionalism, and I want to thank you for your response in a time of severe crisis.

I assure you I am mindful of your generous co-operation in a time of adversity and I commit to engaging closely with you as we seek to meet the challenges of the 21st century in Irish education. Irish society has reflected deeply as closely guarded habits were abandoned one by one. And we realise it would not be wise to return to a normality that does not adapt and build upon to what we have learned.

The public service ethos which was a hallmark of the past two years is again shining through with the welcome that schools up and down the country are showing to those families in great need and hardship who have come from Ukraine. The trade union movement has always played a hugely significant role in terms of social conscience and helping the most vulnerable. I will speak later about supports for schools so that we in the education sector can offer the hand of friendship, support and solidarity to the young people of Ukraine.

Coming through the pandemic, there are learnings that will help us through this new phase, both in recovery from the lasting effects of the pandemic and with managing new demands arising from this humanitarian crisis.

Together we have learned the power and value of:

- The collective voice and collective effort.
- Innovation and agility.
- Wellbeing and resilience.

It is important to celebrate and acknowledge this collective national effort as we reach calmer waters that will allow us to hopefully return to the fuller richness of school life that had by necessity, become restricted this past two years.

Looking to the future

As I mentioned earlier, the strength of school communities was thrown into sharp relief by the vicissitudes of Covid 19. But I must also acknowledge where fault lines emerged as we worked to respond to the crisis. Consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the current system allowed me to clarify where I want to see the school system evolving and how we can work together to co-design and implement change for the benefit of all our students.

Today I would like to set out my agenda in terms of addressing some of my objectives for future development such as:

- Reforming teaching, learning and assessment at senior cycle.
- Creating and resourcing more digitally aware schools.
- Strengthening and supporting leadership in our schools.
- Underpinning greater engagement, communication and collaboration within the school community, and
- Building inclusive school communities for all.

Senior Cycle Redevelopment

Delegates here today have reflected on the announcement I made at the end of March for a re-imagined Senior Cycle. The Vision I outlined is based on three key objectives:

- To empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century
- To enrich the student experience and build on what's strong in our current system; and
- To embed wellbeing and reduce student stress levels

For the benefit of all our students both now and in the future it is important to bring this vision to life. To do so it will require each one of us to be part of the process to build the next stage in our country's education history.

I am conscious that in introducing significant change at Senior Cycle it is essential that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), State Examinations Commission (SEC), the teacher support services, the Department and schools, including you as teachers, can work through the changes together over a period of time.

Senior Cycle redevelopment must address the diversity of students' learning needs and strengths; it must provide accessible and equally valued learning pathways in school; and we must broaden the ways we assess and accredit students' achievement.

And, I fully recognise that we must also make sure that the conditions for change are in place.

I am determined that curriculum design and teacher professional development will support the use of a broader range of methodologies and learning experiences.

I strongly believe it is essential for teachers to be involved in co-designing our curricular and assessment approach and I will facilitate the allocation of time and professional development to enable this to happen. We will learn lessons from previous experiences and other systems in this regard and the NCCA is being asked to conduct research, including a consultation process with teachers to better inform us of what is needed for improved professional support.

We will, together, design and build a system for Ireland that is made in Ireland for Irish students but one which harnesses experiences internationally and the professional and other experiences gained here at home.

I know that in moving to externally moderated, teacher based forms of assessment some teachers will have concerns or indeed reservations. As a teacher I understand that. I can say that the NCCA and SEC will have extensive engagement with teachers and other stakeholders as this work progresses and we will rely on the use of a “network schools” approach to introduce this aspect of Senior Cycle development, which will allow space for each element of the curriculum to be carefully worked through.

There is no doubt that Teacher Assessments broadens the range of skills or types of learning that can be assessed. We can look to those examples internationally; look at how they might be adapted for our schools and students; or how they might form part of the Irish approach. There are also lessons to be learned internationally that tell us we must align curricular and assessment evolution and that we must support teachers and schools as they evolve their teaching.

To do this, we need to move past traditional forms of consultation and into active “co-construction”. Adopting the network schools approach offers a tangible example of our commitment to co-construction. The NCCA will invite a selection of schools, representative of the different types and sizes of schools, to become “network schools”. In this way, we can work out the issues, the questions, the concerns but also embrace the opportunities to ensure we serve all of our students through this approach.

One of the strengths the education system has had over the last two years in particular is the commitment and willingness of all to engage with what have been really difficult challenges. This is a huge asset which will stand to us again in this work.

I also want to be clear in saying that the alternative arrangements in place in the last two years - calculated and accredited grades - served us well at the time but are not what is envisaged for teacher assessment in the redeveloped Senior Cycle. There are important differences:

- Accredited Grades accounted for 100% of marks the student received, teacher assessment will not;
- Due to the pandemic we did not have the time or space to work with you as teachers to develop the system, through network schools we will co-construct teacher assessment with you;
- Again due to the pandemic we could not provide the professional support and development that we would want, we will provide you with the necessary CPD; and
- Finally we did not have the opportunity to evaluate our approach by introducing those arrangements in a phased way; the network schools approach by design allows us to address this element.

I know too, as a teacher, that you will all be very conscious of the need to protect the relationships at school level that you have with your students. Again, we can see internationally that those relationships can be protected and strengthened. There will be safeguards and a balance to be struck in how both the teacher and the student are protected in a teacher assessment model.

It is also unquestionably the case that significant resources will need to be made available to teachers and schools to ensure the success of redeveloping Senior Cycle. I fully recognise that schools and teachers must be resourced to have the facilities, supports and time to make this work.

We must resource the new subjects; the expansion of Transition Year availability; the integration of the Senior Cycle programmes and of course the new assessment approaches. Teachers must have time additional to their class contact time to engage in curriculum and professional development. Government is committed to putting those resources in place.

As the redevelopment of Senior Cycle takes shape we must ensure that we support its realisation and support teachers and school leaders on this journey. The demand for a redeveloped Senior Cycle has been a growing demand in recent times from all sectors of society including teaching unions. We now have in place the foundations on which to deliver Senior Cycle reform.

Finally as regards the Senior Cycle, I want to say that we will be looking very carefully with the SEC and others at how the grade inflation seen in the most recent years can be addressed in a manner that is fair to all students and which respects the integrity of the Leaving Certificate marking arrangements each year. The Leaving Certificate class of 2022 have the assurance that their grades will be at least on a par with the class of 2021 and we also now must examine how best to deliver a fair and equitable grade profile in the coming years too.

I look forward to working constructively with ASTI so that we can move forward together on these important developments.

Digital Technologies and schools

As we all know, the use of digital technologies is transforming the way we live, the way we receive information, the way we learn and the way we express ourselves. It allowed school communities to continue to teach and learn throughout school closures. In fact, studies have shown that where schools had an existing, established approach to using digital technologies in their learning, these schools were particularly well equipped to move to online platforms quickly and effectively.

While my Department has provided extensive support and advice for schools leaders and teachers to ensure continuity of learning, a great many schools, teachers and students have shown enormous innovation in embracing learning platforms, digital resources, applications and different modes of learning.

Quite literally, you found new ways to communicate and collaborate.

Given that the further development of digital skills for students, teachers and school leaders will continue to be a priority for the Department as well as the improvement of broadband connectivity, last week I launched the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027. The importance of the effective use of digital technologies in our school system is key to delivering the skills needed for our current and future learners. What is required, and what is incorporated in the stated vision of this strategy, is an education system that supports the development of competent, critically engaged and active learners. This also requires the Department and its support services to continue to ensure that teachers and school leaders have access to the necessary supports and resources to facilitate this.

An extensive consultation process was undertaken to inform the development of this strategy and I want to thank sincerely all of you who contributed both to the wider process and to the Consultative Group, on which you were represented. All of the areas raised were taken into consideration in the development of the strategy.

The strategy itself is set out under three pillars, which recognise how the various elements of our school system are involved and interlinked in supporting and progressing the use of digital technologies in our school system and how the Department can support this. As you are aware, there is some €200 million in capital investment underpinning it and €50 million in ICT grant funding has already issued to all schools. Through continued investment we will also ensure that all schools, regardless of location are provided with appropriate broadband connectivity.

By combining the continued commitment shown by teachers and schools leaders with the effective use of digital technologies in their teaching practice, I am confident we can equip young people with the key digital skills they need for life.

In order to deliver the objectives under this strategy, ongoing collaboration will be required both across Government and with education stakeholders such as yourselves. I look forward to continued engagement with you, working on this important issue.

Strengthening leadership and supporting the teaching profession

I am conscious the kind of fundamental change that I have described thus far this morning will not come about without investment and the strengthening of leadership and professional supports in our schools.

Providing opportunities for all teachers to engage in leadership activity early in their careers is an essential component in developing future school leaders.

We witnessed throughout the pandemic the huge reliance on our school principals and deputy principals to deliver on every aspect of school activity and school life. I believe that strengthening leadership and supporting those in leadership is crucial for the future development and reform of our education system.

The Department is continuing to fund the provision of a wide range of support for school leaders including the Professional Development Services for Teachers and the Centre for School Leadership. There is ongoing engagement with and NAPD to look at options to make school leadership more sustainable.

We know that we must attract, support and retain the best people to be school leaders. That's why I believe it is important we encourage potential leaders to undertake leadership qualifications either before recruitment as school leaders or during the early stages of their service as school leaders. The Centre for School Leadership is already active in this space.

In terms of supporting the profession more broadly, there are a number of reforms which are intended to support the initial professional formation and the ongoing professional development of teachers.

The NCCA RSE review report in 2019 highlighted that professional development of educators is a critical factor in supporting an improvement in the quality of relationships and sexuality education.

There is a need for increased training in SPHE and RSE content and pedagogies within both primary initial teacher education and post-primary PME programmes in order to improve teacher capacity in this area.

I am strongly committed to supporting schools to educate their students to celebrate and promote diversity and inclusion of all kinds. This is an integral part of building a society that espouses respect and understanding for all in the community. I am pleased to announce today that I am putting in place a new postgraduate course to be developed for teachers in post-primary schools teaching Social, Personal and Health Education, and Relationships and Sexuality Education. Schools and teachers will be supported to access the upskilling programme and course fees will be covered by Department funding

The learning for participants will be grounded in an approach that affirms the right of children and young people to a comprehensive and inclusive SPHE and RSE programme that is inclusive of all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious beliefs, social classes and abilities/disabilities. While the acquisition of specialist knowledge is important, the development of other core competencies particular to teaching SPHE/RSE are equally critical. In this context, a focus on teachers' own personal development and on the development of a skill-set that is needed for the SPHE and RSE classroom is a key requirement of any upskilling course. All modules should take cognisance of the relationship between these three core competencies: personal development, skills and knowledge.

The Department also promotes the quality of teaching and learning through the provision of continuing professional development and supports for teachers and school leaders. The professional development needs of teachers are met through the provision of an induction programme for newly-qualified teachers, dedicated support for school leaders, national CPD for curricular and policy reform, and ongoing support for teachers. The integration of four different support services into one single service is now underway. This should provide a more coherent and streamlined experience for teachers with a one stop shop approach.

I acknowledge the issues, exacerbated by Covid 19 substitution pressures that have faced schools in filling posts particularly in certain subjects at post-primary level.

This is a combination of various factors being addressed by the Teacher Supply Action Plan and a recognised need to increase the attractiveness and value of the profession. There are positive signs with an increased interest in the CAO for teaching this year. I will continue to work with the ASTI and other unions to implement pragmatic ways of addressing this complex problem.

Building an inclusive school system for all

It is of the utmost importance to me personally and to this Government that we achieve a fairer, more inclusive and compassionate society and that spirit I believe should also pervade our schools.

I think it is important that children with special educational needs should be included where possible and appropriate in mainstream settings. But to be fair to school communities, this should go hand in hand with coherent strategies and resourcing to support and help students and staff in this context.

Funding is of course hugely important and my Department, this year, will spend over €2 Billion, or over 25% of its total educational budget, on providing additional supports for children with special educational needs.

This helps to support children in mainstream classrooms and to provide for circumstances where children require more specialised interventions, special school or special class places.

To make sure our policy and statutory framework appropriately reflects current needs, the EPSEN Act is to be reviewed. This review will help ensure that our laws reflect current policy and international norms on provision and inclusion.

There are now 607 special classes at post primary level and demand is likely to grow further.

I will ensure that the necessary teaching and SNA supports are provided to support the placement of young people in post primary schools.

It is a tribute to post primary schools and their staff that so many children are being supported in their learning both during the school year and in the hugely expanded summer education programme that was put in place last year where eligibility criteria was extended to include post-primary children with complex needs and children at risk of educational disadvantage and significantly more children than ever before benefited as a result.

Planning work for the 2022 summer programme is ongoing and my Department will be consulting with education partners in the coming weeks.

Staying on the broader topic of inclusion, I think we would all agree that Education has the power to transform lives. Every child and young person should receive the support they need in order to develop and thrive and I have sought to increase the supports available to achieve that aim.

Last month I announced a major expansion of the DEIS programme that will see the DEIS programme extended to an additional 310 schools at a cost of €32m in 2023. As a result of this expansion, almost 1,200 schools will be included in the DEIS Programme serving over 240,000 students from September 2022. The current level of funding provided to DEIS schools highlights the Government's commitment to ensuring education becomes a proven pathway to better opportunities for all learners, especially those at risk of not maximising the benefits of education.

We know through recently published research by my Department that DEIS works. Since its introduction, the gap in retention rates to leaving certificate between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has narrowed from a gap of 16.8% for the 2001 entry cohort to approximately 8.6% for the 2014 cohort.

I hope to build on these measures in future years to ensure that every child, regardless of his or her own circumstances, can access all that education has to offer.

Ukraine Crisis Response

I have spoken today about the huge challenges faced and overcome by Irish society in general and the school system in particular over the last two years. As we emerge from that crisis, we are faced now with another great challenge. The outpouring of compassion for the peoples of Ukraine, fleeing unimaginable horror brings great credit to Ireland.

My Department is working with all relevant authorities, education partners and school communities to ensure Ukrainian children of school-going age arriving are provided with access to appropriate supports to allow them to continue their education in Ireland.

Our schools are already warmly welcoming children who have arrived from Ukraine. In tandem with this the Department has have commenced strategic planning for the potentially large numbers of children that may arrive in Ireland so that we can fully leverage existing capacity in our public services to meet the needs of these people.

My Department has moved to source a number of immediate resources and supports developed by the NCCA, NEPs and other bodies to support linguistically and culturally diverse communities in Ireland and these are being centralised for easy access. My Department is working collaboratively with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to finalise arrangements with ETBs to put in place arrangements after Easter for the recruitment of Tutors for panels to support English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) tuition. These arrangements will support adults and post-primary students from Ukraine in their English Language development. Panels will be in place in every ETB area to support all post-primary schools where needs arise.

The ETBs are hosting new regional interagency Regional Education and Language Teams and I would like to thank the ASTI for their co-operation in that respect.

We know from the OECD that it is important for young people arriving in these circumstances to be welcomed and integrated in so far as possible, and that a holistic supportive approach to their educational and pastoral needs is the hallmark of their treatment.

We as a country continue to welcome and support people fleeing from this terrible violence and I commend and acknowledge the work of people across society to help the Ukrainian families. I know that you will join me in expressing our shared solidarity with the people of Ukraine at this time.

In conclusion, I would like to wish you every success with your Congress. You have an enormous range of motions reflecting the concerns of delegates and the wider membership today. These range from individual concerns about the cost of living and the pressures on families in Ireland at the current time. The Government is aware and alive to these pressures and is considering how to build on the already significant package announced to alleviate hardship.

In terms of public service pay more generally, Building Momentum has provided opportunities through sectoral bargaining to address some of the outstanding issues being pursued by your unions throughout some of the last number of years. I understand that the fund for post primary teachers will be used in part to restore the PME allowance to newer teachers. My colleague, Minister McGrath has recently indicated that negotiations for a new agreement or extension of Building Momentum will begin shortly.

Concluding Remarks

Plato reminds us that nothing ever is, it is always becoming.

Without doubt, the Irish education system is now at a critical juncture as we seek to empower our students to both meet and embrace the challenges of the 21st Century.

We in the education sector cannot and must not stand still if our students are to meet the challenges of our time.

I am confident that there are both exciting and enriching times ahead. We are, each one of us, called upon to provide for an education system that will support and encourage our students to become the very best they can be.

Thank you for all that you have done and all you continue to do to support our students in achieving their maximum potential now and into the future.