

Speech – ASTI

**** 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 dtus mo bhuiochas a ghabhail as ucht an ama agus an deis seo a thabhairt dom chun bualadh agus chun labhairt libh inniu.

Distinguished guests ladies and gentlemen I would like to begin by expressing my sincere thanks to your General Secretary Kieran Christie and President Miriam Duggan for the invitation to speak to you all here today for your conference, thank you both.

The American historian and journalist Henry Adams once wrote “A teacher affects eternity; he can never truly tell where his influence stops.”

In Ireland it is heartening to note that over the past 2 years there has been an increase of more than 20% in applications for teacher training through the CAO system. We know from research teachers are trusted professionals that are at the very centre of what is globally considered a high quality education experience. We know too from research that the quality of teaching is the major contributing factor to educational outcomes for students. In Ireland, we are more than fortunate to attract entrants to teaching all of whom are of a very high calibre. However, I am conscious we must ensure that we build a strong career pathway for all teachers so that they stay within our education system. We must also ensure that their calibre is copper-fastened throughout their career with opportunities for continuous professional development and for reflection, collaboration and innovation.

My ambition is to achieve this through:

- Strengthening and reforming continuous professional development and initial teacher education.
- Working collaboratively with teachers across all areas of policy including curriculum, assessment, inclusion and supporting diversity in the classroom.
- Considering how we reward and support teachers to do their very important work.
- And in so doing, creating the conditions to enhance the recruitment and retention of teachers in our schools.

There have been two major developments this year that will, as they roll out, support and sustain the continued excellence of the teaching profession in this country.

Last month (28th March) saw the publication of the Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement: *Reflecting on a decade of change and creating a vision for the future.*

The policy statement reflects on a significant period of change for the provision of initial teacher education (ITE) in Ireland and sets out a vision for initial teacher education to 2030.

It draws from a comprehensive consultation process with a range of stakeholders, including policy makers, higher education institutions providing ITE, management bodies, unions, students, teachers and various advocacy groups in the areas of inclusion and special educational needs, along with a review of recent relevant research, to develop its vision which is that:

"All student teachers in Ireland will experience high quality initial teacher education,..... to equip them.... to embrace the constantly evolving challenges of supporting all learners in the 21st century, underpinned by reflective practice, professional collaboration, research, creativity and wellbeing."

As I have already acknowledged, we are deeply fortunate in Ireland to have a highly skilled, engaged, and committed teaching workforce. It is without doubt of immense benefit to our children and young people and to our society as a whole. I am very clear that we must continue investing in the quality of our profession, and initial teacher education is a vital step in this regard.

My overarching objective in developing the Initial Teacher Education Policy statement is to improve the overall quality of initial teacher education in Ireland through practical measures which will improve available evidence and enhance the already strong collaboration within the sector. This will ensure that our newly qualified teachers have the necessary tools to support them in their aim to inspire, enlighten and prepare pupils and students to succeed in life.

I am also keenly aware of how important it is to promote the quality of teaching and learning through the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) and supports for teachers and principals.

The professional development needs of our teachers are currently delivered by four support services. PDST, JCT, NIPT and the CSL. A litany of acronyms!!

Last year, the Department initiated a project to integrate these four Teacher Education funded Support Services into one single Integrated Support Service. Work is at an advanced stage for the integration of these four Support Services and on 1st September 2023 a new integrated support service named ‘**Oide**’ will be established.

The vision for this new integrated support service is to support the professional learning of teachers and school leaders in Ireland through the development of high quality, innovative and responsive professional learning that enables them to meet the educational needs of all learners in a changing world.

We are all conscious in the Education Sector of the need to ensure students are equipped to meet the challenges of our time and indeed the challenges of tomorrow. To do this effectively, I know we are all conscious of the need to have an education system that is relevant, forward thinking and reflective of the skills, talents and ambitions of our young people.

In this regard one of the biggest changes that will occur in post primary schools over the coming years will be the reform of Senior Cycle.

As your President discussed with me recently, I am more than conscious however, that introducing significant change at senior cycle needs to be thought through carefully. I consider it essential to ensure that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), State Examinations Commission (SEC), the Department and schools can work through the changes with all stakeholders over a sustained period of time.

I announced earlier this year the appointment of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Programme Delivery Board chaired by Dr Harold Hislop.

We have also established the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Partners' Forum. This partnership engagement group underpins the collaboration necessary to support implementation, and where appropriate, further developments under the programme. I know that ASTI will play an active and proactive role as part of this Forum, and I look forward to your positive and proactive engagement as we go forward together. Of course formal structures are essential but I hope too there will be many more informal conversations and engagements with ASTI members and teachers in the coming months also.

I am conscious that the area of inclusion and special education is one of huge interest for the ASTI. For 2023, the special education budget has been substantially increased by over 10% on last year, meaning that for 2023 the Department of Education will spend over €2.6 billion on special education, representing nearly 30% of the Department's entire allocation.

Among other initiatives, this funding means that for the first time ever there will be over 19,000 teachers working in the area of special education and over 20,000 Special Needs Assistants (SNAs).

Together there are almost 40,000 qualified and committed people in schools who are focused wholly and exclusively on supporting children with special educational needs.

Again, while the Department provides these resources to schools, I know it takes a huge amount of commitment and work from individual teachers at school level to support our children and young people with additional needs. I again wish to express my sincere gratitude for all that you do in this regard.

While the majority of students with special educational needs are supported within mainstream classes, there remains a place for specialised provision, such as special classes and special schools. For this coming school year we will have close to 3,000 special classes across primary and post-primary. At the same time, figures coming through from the National Council for Special Education and other sources show that there will be a continued need to establish new special classes, especially at post-primary level to meet the needs of those children transitioning from primary. I would like to acknowledge and thank all ASTI members who have supported and continue to support this provision.

Budget 2023 provided for additional staffing for both National Educational Psychologists and the NCSE. These new posts in the form of additional Special Educational Needs Organisers, advisors and educational psychologists will ensure that teachers and schools are better supported at local level to address the needs of children with special educational needs.

Of course, a well-educated, professional workforce is central to the provision of high quality education. The recruitment and retention of teachers is a priority area of action for the Department given the importance of ensuring that every child's experience in school is positive and that they have available to them engaged and enthused teachers to support them in their learning.

We must ensure that teaching remains an attractive profession, and this means supporting teachers and school leaders. To give just one example, ASTI Representatives have highlighted in particular middle management structures in schools to support leadership and development across all areas of school activity.

Personally, I am very clear of the need to tap into the breadth and diversity of talent, experience and knowledge that exists in every school staffroom. In this regard, I especially see the value and role of posts of responsibility in our schools. At a policy level, and subject to budgetary considerations, I have requested Department officials to explore further how this wealth of potential within the workforce can be configured to support our broader policy goals of curriculum reform, special education provision, inclusion, creativity and other ambitions.

The Department is also undertaking a comprehensive programme to support the supply of teachers. This included providing the allocated staffing resources for the 2023/24 school year to post-primary schools before the end of January to support schools in earlier recruitment.

We have provided for fully funded upskilling programmes in mathematics, physics and Spanish, and a new Irish upskilling programme is planned for 2023/24. I have also asked my officials to consider upskilling programmes in other subjects where there is a need.

Initial teacher education providers have put in place flexibilities in their programmes which have created greater capacity to assist schools in teacher supply. In this regard, I am deeply appreciative not only to the ITE providers but to their students for making themselves available to support schools.

A range of special, temporary arrangements have been put in place to create greater capacity for student teachers to provide substitute cover and the Teaching Council has introduced regulations to allow the registration of 3rd and 4th year undergraduate student teachers. Since 2022 more than 2,700 student teachers have registered with the Teaching Council under Route 5.

Other measures include:

- raising awareness amongst retired teachers of the opportunity to return to teaching on a substitute basis should they so wish;
- Increasing the number of hours that full time post primary teachers can provide substitute cover in the subject they are qualified to teach from 20 to 35 hrs.

Newly Qualified Teachers who have qualified outside of Ireland are now eligible to apply for registration and complete their induction here in Ireland. This measure is particularly relevant for primary and post-primary teachers who have studied and qualified abroad and who may wish to return to the Irish education sector.

I have spoken about some of the challenges being faced in school communities and in particular within the teaching profession.

However, I would also like to celebrate the myriad achievements that I see in schools the length and breadth of the country during my visits this year.

We can talk about inclusion, diversity and relational teaching in an abstract way but I know, in my heart, that social justice is a very important element of education and one which drives the trade union movement and its activists.

In this regard, much has been achieved but we must always strive to do more to ensure that all students and teachers are included, celebrated and listened to in our schools. I recently came across a wonderful observation by from Verna Myers, an American lawyer who advocates passionately for inclusion and diversity. She remarked “Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.”

This is an ethos which is very much evident in our schools. As I visit schools I witness first-hand how every young person's talent is nurtured and celebrated during their school experience. I met recently with the two young men who won the BT Young Scientist award this year. Wonderful, well rounded young people who are a credit to their school and to their teachers. Their success would not have been possible were it not for the generous leadership and support of individual teachers and their wider school community. Across the country I meet with Young Entrepreneurs, Musicians, Artists, Dancers, Technology Wizards, Sports Men and Women and so many many more talented and accomplished young people. All of these students are nurtured, mentored, minded and guided by their teachers and the wider school community. Without doubt, it is the great richness of the Irish Education system, that so many teachers and staff are prepared to step up to the plate to provide endless opportunities for the enrichment and personal development of our students. Thank you to the very many ASTI members who do this in schools the length and breadth of the country.

I would like to take a moment also this afternoon to express gratitude for the role our school's staff have played and continue to play in welcoming thousands of young people fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Ireland is leading the world in the proportion of children and young people from Ukraine being enrolled within the school system.

However, we all know that enrolling these students is but the first step. Teachers are working tirelessly every day, not just to teach newly arrived students but to help all young people in our classrooms to adapt to this new world. As an education sector we are fortunate beyond measure that there exists a strong culture in our schools which welcomes diversity and supports inclusiveness. Thank you all for the work you do to nurture and support this spirit in our schools.

As I begin to conclude, I would also like to acknowledge the part we all have to play in making the world a safer place. I want to especially acknowledge the work that teachers and school leaders undertake to make sure that schools in Ireland are places where children and young people feel safe, to be themselves, free from the constraints of outside worries. School staff and student alike share a responsibility to those children who just long to be included, to be one of the gang, to flourish with their friends.

I was overwhelmed this year by the positive and proactive commitment of schools and education bodies to the launch of the new anti-bullying strategy, *Cinealtás*. Kindness. I look forward to continuing to work with you and other education partners to update the anti-bullying procedures in our schools and to implement the comprehensive actions in the plan.

Finally, let me again express my appreciation for all that each one of you do to nourish and nurture the students in your care. As a nation, we are all the richer for your leadership, dedication, and commitment to excellence in education and for that I thank you. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.