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ASTI President

Address to
ASTI Convention

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Is é mo phribhléid agus mo mhór onóir, mar Uachtarán Chumann na Meánmhúinteoirí Éire, fáilte a chur romhaibh go léir inniu go dtí ár gcruinniú bliaintiúil seo, don cheathrú uair is céad.

Minister, Distinguished Guests, Family, Friends, and Colleagues

It is my honour to address you in Wexford as ASTI President at our 104th Convention.

Minister Naughton, we welcome your presence today at your first ASTI Convention. We are pleased you are here to listen to teachers' voices, the expert practitioners on the ground. Engagement between policymakers and practitioners is essential; the strength of our education system depends on a shared understanding; the daily realities of our members' working lives involve growing complexities, stress and little time.

I will discuss key issues of concern to teachers, namely:

1. The Senior Cycle / Junior Cycle
2. Workload / Psycho Social Risks
3. Recruitment and Retention
4. Extra hours, Croke Park hours, and S&S
5. Social Change/ Guidance / Parental Leave
6. Career Progression (or lack of) - Posts of Responsibility

1. The Senior Cycle

Minister, I stand here representing a membership which prioritises the integrity of our education system, students' futures, and the national and international reputation of the Leaving Certificate over any interest in pay adjustments.

We recognise that stability and excellence of schools are fundamental to Ireland's global standing and its ability to attract direct foreign investment, however we find ourselves at a crossroads where foundations are being undermined.

ASTI members have demonstrated immense restraint and commitment to industrial peace by engaging with the Public Service Agreement. Yet, the results of recent ballots— 68% rejected implementation support measures and 67% voted in favour of industrial action—reflect a grave and critical concern.

Teachers were asked a simple question: do you believe the supports are adequate?

They replied No!

Members want legitimate concerns addressed, and want improved targeted supports for students. ASTI members have fully honoured commitment to the Public Service Agreement 2024-26 and engaged fully with Senior Cycle Redevelopment, despite apprehensions.

We have acted with integrity and focus. The current trajectory of Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR) is demonstrating growing pains. Previous calls for a one-year pause were dismissed, yet now Tranche 2 and 3 subjects Accounting, English, and Maths are paused indefinitely, proving that this "accelerated" timeline **was unsustainable**.

Minister, this reform promised "Equity and Excellence," but it embeds greater inequality and compromises excellence. The high-stakes nature of Leaving Certificate remains unchanged; it still serves as the primary entrance exam for third-level education through the CAO system.

Far from reducing stress, new requirements for Additional Assessment Components (AAC) worth a minimum of 40% in every subject have piled massive pressure on students and teachers. This 40% weighting is educationally unsound and is in stark contrast to international practices, for example the International Baccalaureate's 20% internal assessment model.

Furthermore, will we witness the birth of a "grind school" explosion?

When 40% of a grade is determined by project reports completed outside the classroom, the social divide widens; affluent families can afford private grinds costing upwards of €850 annually; high-end laptops, and premium Generative AI subscriptions like ChatGPT Plus or Claude Pro. This creates an un-even playing field where the integrity of the exam is completely compromised.

Teachers are being asked to authenticate work they cannot possibly verify, as out-of-class written reports are highly susceptible to AI generation and external influence. While third-level institutions move toward presentation-based models to combat AI, this Senior Cycle Redevelopment inexplicably moves in the opposite direction.

The infrastructure deficit in our schools further exacerbates this inequality. We cannot expect to deliver a 21st-century curriculum in dilapidated 20th-century facilities with a chronic lack of specialist rooms, science laboratories, equipment, safe-storage and reliable broadband. Minister Naughton, the €48 million investment in the new DEIS Strategy to 2035 and DEIS Implementation 2026-2028, along with

the new DEIS Plus Scheme are most welcome and necessary. We urgently need a full audit of science and IT facilities and targeted funding to bring laboratories and IT facilities up to international standards. Laboratory and IT technicians are urgently needed to support this new system.

From the educator's perspective, workloads would become unsustainable. Teachers will absorb administrative burdens of storing and digitally uploading AACs without any allocation of additional professional time for planning, preparation, and administrative duties. This "initiative overload" during the last number of years has left the teaching workforce exhausted and overwhelmed. Students will face "deadline fatigue" and burnout as they juggle multiple AACs across seven subjects.

We call for a move toward AI-resistant models, such as supervised evidence-based assessments or oral presentations. We suggest the SEC provide a user interface for students to upload their projects, fostering student agency while relieving teachers of purely administrative tasks. Teachers would provide oversight on a separate user interface.

I wish to highlight a comprehensive Irish Science Teachers Association (ISTA) publication – The Watts Report on the implications of AACs in Science subjects (Feb 2026). This reports major systematic shortfalls in infrastructure and AACs.

Minister, have you read and reviewed these reports?

We seek a resolution where all parties feel listened to, where the reputation of the Leaving Certificate as a fair and trusted system is preserved for the sake of our students and our country.

Junior Cycle Framework (UL longitudinal survey)

Furthermore, why implement the Senior equivalent without reviewing Junior Cycle?

Senior Cycle is being redeveloped without a comprehensive review of Junior Cycle framework that came before it. We have received four interim reports from the Junior Cycle University of Limerick study but no final report has been released, why not?

Why are we implementing the senior equivalent before we have fully assessed the Junior version? Or, fixed any faults or weaknesses identified by the UL study.

A critical issue is the abandonment of Higher, Ordinary, and Foundation levels in the Junior Cycle, which serves no one.

We need to return to Higher and Ordinary levels in all subjects, with a Foundation level for Irish, English, and Maths.

It is not students' fault when there is no level to suit their specific needs. While Level 2 programmes exist, they are unsuitable for many students who would find Ordinary level papers perfectly appropriate, especially in challenging subjects like Science or languages.

True inclusion cannot exist if the exam system is designed in a way that denies pupils a realistic chance to pass, effectively excluding them.

We must address workloads and stress levels within schools. The requirement of two Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) per subject at Junior Cycle created significant pressure. Yet, we are now introducing AACs to all subjects for the Senior Cycle.

It took ten years to change grading bands in JC, we hope that "Early Rapid Reviews" fix identified issues within a single two-year cycle. We moved forward with Senior Cycle without addressing fundamental failures of the Junior Cycle framework.

Why have lessons not been learned?

2. Workload / Psycho Social Risks (PSR)

Overload, stress and burnout as evidenced, are an integral part of the working lives of teachers. This is not a sustainable position. Stress is a hazard, a growing risk, for a myriad of reasons as stated in this speech. This is the reality of working lives of teachers in schools. Just as an overburdened power tool, without a functioning overload switch will burn out, so too will teachers. They are suffering work overload and accompanying stressors. We must put in place overload switches to prevent this, and promote workplace health.

The 2005, Safety, Health and Welfare at Work, Act provides for this. It speaks of "protection from and prevention of risks to safety, health and welfare at work" and of "managing and conducting work activities in such a way as to prevent, so far as is reasonably practicable the risks." The Act places a statutory obligation on employers, to identify and assess all workplace risks, including Psycho Social Risks.

1) We are calling on all schools to comply with the 2005 Act, to carry out a Psycho Social Risk assessment – an assessment of workplace stressors - using a recognised assessment tool, such as Work Positive every two years, and a report on this to be included in all Whole School Inspections.

The European Agency for occupational Health and Safety has Psycho Social Risks (PSR) as its campaign focus for the next three years. The ASTI has led in this aspect of working life. We must join with the European Agency and start to take workplace stress seriously.

The (HSA) Health & Safety Authority's current strategy commits to collaborate with stakeholders to amplify prevention activities, "promoting compliance through advisory committees and work programmes".

2) We join with the other ICTU affiliates in seeking the establishment of an Advisory Committee for Psycho Social Risks (PSR) as part of the HSA structures.

A Department of Education document titled "*Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*," did not involve education stakeholders in preparation of the original document. Presently being updated, this must include consultation with education stakeholders.

3) We call on the Department of Education and Youth to engage with teacher representatives', and ensure that the statutory rights of teachers and staff to a safe and healthy working environment are encompassed in the updated document– schools where everyone's wellbeing can flourish.

Implementing these **three measures** would lead to a sustainable working environment with the appropriate overload switches in place to ensure a safe working environment.

Retention & Recruitment

Here we are in 2026 discussing a recruitment and retention crisis that has moved from a warning to a daily struggle in schools.

The reality for anyone entering the profession is discouraging.

Graduates must complete an expensive and unpaid two-year Professional Master in Education (PME), only to place them on a 27-point pay scale that takes years to climb; no wonder so many emigrate for better pay, and career progression elsewhere.

For those who wish to come home, we must ensure that teachers working abroad have their experience fully recognised in our incremental pay system. Penalising teachers for gaining valuable experience overseas is a self-defeating policy that keeps some of our best talent away.

Even when teachers stay, the "casualisation" of the job is a major hurdle. Last year's announcement of a one-year CID was a step forward, but a contract is only useful if it comes with full hours. You cannot build a life or pay rent on a part-time, fixed-term basis. New teachers need full hours from day one of appointment.

Another factor making a teaching career unattractive is the high Pupil-Teacher Ratio in Ireland. Pushing classes to 30 students increases workload and stress to unsustainable levels. When our brightest students look for career paths, they want a profession that offers manageable work-life balance and the ability to actually teach, not just manage a crowded room. Currently, the Pupil Teacher Ratio is a direct barrier to making teaching a sustainable career.

This also affects students. Because of teacher shortages, schools are cutting subjects, meaning less choice for students. Classes are crowded with more mixed-ability and common-level classes; there are not enough teachers to staff separate Higher Level streams. In some cases, crucial Special Needs resources are diverted to just keep general classrooms supervised.

Previous Ministerial responses, like upskilling existing staff or employing retired teachers, are temporary patches, the underlying issues remain. We must half the PME to one year and fix promotion structures, fix the long pay scale, large class sizes and unsustainable workloads.

Another important issue for teacher retention, work life balance and equity is the block release model of parental leave. Other sectors have moved toward more flexible "day-a-week" models, teaching remains one of the few professions where "Block Release" is the standard. This lack of flexibility in parental leave entitlement is a "disincentive" driving teachers from the profession.

Young teachers drown under a workload of "initiative overload" and Croke Park hours. Many feel they cannot say no to unpaid extra hours and work, because they worry about whether their contract will be renewed next year. This undermines the professional, voluntary spirit of teaching.

If we want a qualified teacher in front of every class, we have to make this a career worth joining and staying in. That means full hours, a shorter pay scale, a fair Pupil Teacher Ratio, and a training process that does not put people in substantial debt before they even start their career.

Croke Park Hours, Additional hours and S&S Hours

Minister, we must revisit and reimagine the additional hours expected of teachers in post-primary schools — not to reduce commitment, but to restore balance, trust, and professionalism.

The 33 Croke Park Hours, introduced during austerity, added to an existing 12 hours from previous agreements, totalling 45 hours of unpaid extra work. This has become a source of anger as workload and time demands have increased.

The Supervision and Substitution scheme requires 43 hours annually, including 6 Haddington Road Hours that were never returned, unlike many other sectors. Some teachers were permitted to opt out of S&S at a financial cost, this facility is no longer available — further highlighting issues of inequity across the profession.

These hours do not represent collaboration, but a lack of trust and value.

Teachers fully support and deliver essential school activities—parent-teacher meetings, staff meetings, subject department meetings, and open nights—professionally and willingly.

Teaching is a vocation. Teachers give far beyond timetabled hours through extra support for students and wide-ranging extracurricular involvement.

They have also taken part in significant Junior and Senior Cycle reform, investing substantial additional time and energy to implement change.

During COVID-19, teachers quickly adapted to online teaching and returned to classrooms earlier than many sectors to ensure education continued, while supporting students through an exceptionally challenging period.

Given these contributions and a myriad more, it is both fair and reasonable that additional hours are revisited and returned. This is not a concession, but recognition of what teachers have already delivered. It would play an important role in addressing workload, and in reducing teacher stress and burnout.

We call on you Minister to act on this as a clear meaningful acknowledgment of the value teachers bring to students and our education system.

If we want a strong sustainable system, teachers must feel trusted, respected, and properly valued.

You may even be remembered as the best Minister for Education since the great Donogh O'Malley for getting rid of the Croke Park Hours!

3. Social Change

We gather at a time of global uncertainty. Conflict, displacement, digital manipulation, social media saturation, and economic pressures shape the lives of many pupils.

These issues inevitably manifest themselves in increasingly diverse classrooms, reflecting a changing Ireland and a changing world.

Diversity enriches our school communities, but also brings additional responsibilities. Teachers are fully committed to supporting students from different backgrounds, but inclusion without adequate resources, training, funding, and time is not inclusion – **it is tokenism.**

In Irish post-primary schools, guidance is a vital pillar of student success, yet the current Student-to-Guidance counsellor ratio is stretched too thin. Current figures show ratios as high as 1:583 in non-DEIS schools, in stark contrast to the international best practice ratio of 1:350.

Due to current in quota status, guidance provision in many non-DEIS schools is now lower than during the 2005–2012 period. This is deeply concerning.

When one professional is responsible for nearly 600 students, the "safe space" needed for mental health support and career coaching becomes a bottleneck rather than a bridge.

Strengthening this provision is about ensuring counsellors have the dedicated time to reach students. By lowering ratios, we move from reactive crisis management to proactive support, ensuring no student's future or well-being falls through the cracks.

Digital protection and Digital Rights

In Ireland, digital abuse of post-primary teachers has evolved from occasional "Rate My Teacher" comments into a sophisticated and persistent challenge. This issue is a priority for the ASTI and should be for the Department of Education, especially following the full implementation of the Bí Cineálta (Be Kind) anti-bullying procedures.

Post-primary teachers suffer from digital abuse through social media Non-Consensual Recording in Classrooms, Impersonation and Cyberbullying. The "always-on" nature of digital abuse means teachers often feel they can no longer escape the classroom.

A 2024 survey indicated that approximately one in five (20%) of second-level teachers has experienced work-related cyberbullying, leading to increased rates of burnout and anxiety.

Students and society are grappling with the impact of social media, digital abuse, and malign influence, such as the “manosphere”.

Awareness, training and guidance are essential tools for this modern issue. Supports must be put in place for victim abuse.

The landscape changed significantly with the establishment of Coimisiún na Meán (Ireland's media regulator). Under the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, platforms are now legally required to have a "notice and takedown" mechanism.

If a teacher reports harmful content and the platform fails to act, a formal complaint can be lodged with the regulator.

Coco's Law (2020) remains the primary tool for prosecuting severe harassment. Distributing "harmful communications" with intent to cause harm is a criminal offence in Ireland, punishable by up to two years in prison.

The ASTI has developed a Digital Rights Hub on its website, containing links and advice for teachers in this regard.

I acknowledge the ASTI Digital Rights Committee, and contributions from Convention speakers, and others. I know of several upsetting incidents of digital abuse to teachers and we, as ASTI members, stand with, and support them.

L1/L2 and SEN

We welcome the development of Senior Cycle Level 1 and Level 2 learning programmes which recognise the diverse needs of students. This represents an important step towards a more inclusive Senior Cycle.

However, we are deeply disappointed that students on these programmes are subject to a verification process rather than a formal state examination. This raises concerns regarding its credibility, consistency, and recognition of the achievements.

It risks creating a two-tier system at Senior Cycle. There is clear precedent within the State Examinations Commission for the assessment of practical and coursework components, for example in subjects such as Construction Studies and Art where students' work is externally assessed and standardised. A similar approach should be applied to these programmes to ensure fairness, consistency, and parity of esteem.

While the allocation of additional administrative hours for special educational needs is a positive step, it is insufficient.

Every school requires a qualified SENCO to coordinate provision, support teachers and ensure that inclusion is delivered effectively. Presently, this role exists on an informal basis frequently carried out by teachers with additional qualifications, but without clear recognition, defined responsibilities or appropriate support.

This lack of structure makes the role unattractive and unsustainable. If we are serious about inclusion we must invest in the people who are central to delivering it. Without a properly recognised and supported SENCO role, there remains a clear gap between policy ambition and classroom reality.

4. Career Progression (of lack of) - Posts of Responsibility

We remain in austerity regarding promotion and career progression in schools. Restoration of the post system has not been completed.

In 2008, approximately 52% of post-primary teachers held a Post of Responsibility as a percentage of total staff. Today, in 2026, that has dropped to around 32%.

While our workforce has grown significantly to meet rising student numbers, the number of promotional posts has not come close to keeping pace.

We are asking one-third of our staff to carry a leadership workload that was once shared by more than half. To compound matters, schools have become much more complex places, but are expected to be the panacea for these issues.

Due to the reduction of posts, staffrooms have turned into places of competition rather than collaboration; the application process often feels like a lottery, leaving experienced teachers feeling overlooked.

Colleagues who entered teaching during the long moratorium are a lost generation. Colleagues have provided years of "free" leadership and mentoring, yet they find the window for formal recognition remains unfairly narrow as they reach the peak of their careers.

We call on Minister Naughton to value "experience" and ensure the promotional structure is genuinely fair. For this to happen, a trusted appeal process, that includes "fairness" as a specific ground for appeal, is essential.

It must be transparent at every stage, with an appeals mechanism, that is functional and fit for purpose.

Crucially, we must address how time is allocated for posts, because for those who do secure a post, the reality is a heavy workload that far outweighs the remuneration for these posts.

The inconsistency in how these roles are treated must end.

It is unacceptable that some AP1 holders are granted 4 hours of release time for their work while others are not.

It is imperative that time is provided directly by the Department of Education in its allocation to schools.

It must not be allocated based on other teachers having larger classes or students having reduced subject options.

Promotion and leadership should not come at the expense of our colleagues' workload or our students' education.

To help make the profession attractive, Minister, restore post density to pre-2008 levels and provide a revised, transparent, and fair system, where teacher career progression is a respected and properly resourced career path.

New proposed Circulars on SCR Co-ordinator and L1L2 Programme Co-ordinator

In recent days, ASTI has only become aware that the preparation of two Circular Letters is at an advanced stage and may be issued to schools after this Easter break.

Both Circular letters will provide for a dedicated Post of Responsibility to support the students with Senior Cycle Redevelopment, and the Level 1 and Level 2 (L1\L2) Learning Programmes.

New Posts of Responsibility are always welcome in our schools as a vital aid in helping our students succeed.

However, these circular letters currently contain a serious problematic provision whereby **ASTI members are not eligible to apply.**

Minister, as you know, we have been working through the Senior Cycle Redevelopment implementation supports issues for several months now, under the terms of the Dispute Resolution processes of the Public Service Agreement 2024 – 2026.

The publishing of these Circulars would amount to a provocative escalation that would show little regard for the process that we are engaging with, in good faith.

I will quote from the first line of the *Public Service Agreement 2024 – 2026*:

1.1 This Agreement applies for the period 1 January 2024 to 30 June 2026. Provisions of the Building Momentum Agreement (and earlier agreements as appropriate) continue to apply, save where varied by this Agreement.

Unquote

Of course, the entire framework for promotional posts in schools is a product of a previous public Service Agreement – including eligibility criteria.

I put it to you Minister, this would be a **clear breach** of the current Public Service Agreement.

The same Public Service Agreement requires ASTI members to co-operate with Senior Cycle and Junior Cycle Reform within schools, but this measure appears to be crafted to prevent ASTI members meeting that obligation.

Minister, there are many schools in this country that I would describe as ASTI schools, where all the teachers in that school are members of the ASTI. In those schools therefore, **nobody** will be eligible to apply for these posts.

This potentially could result in the very skilled, most-suitable, dedicated, and enthusiastic teachers not being eligible to provide support for students, especially those students in most need.

This will create huge problems for management, especially in dual union schools, manifesting in increased friction, division, disharmony, and destroy staff cohesion; it will also leave certain schools with no support, for example many voluntary secondary schools.

While that would be a clear loss to the teachers in those schools, it would also be a **clear loss for the students**, and their parents or guardians.

Ultimately everything in our education system is there for students. We believe that the **student is at the centre** of everything we do in schools.

Is it appropriate then, that some students, through no fault of their own, **would be denied** these support roles?

Especially students most in need of support in the L1/L2 learning programmes.

Are you Minister willing to stand over a decision like this?

This circular would, in some schools, lead to the removal of a student resource, in order to punish the ASTI, for not accepting a package that members felt was inadequate for our education system and our students.

This would directly affect our Students and their Parents/Guardians.

ASTI members have, and continue to implement the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Programme in our schools for the good of our students and communities, despite practical issues of concern. All we seek are proper supports for students to succeed.

It is regrettable that this major support, which would really help pupils, may be denied to ASTI teachers, and to vulnerable students.

Minister, I truly do not believe that is your intention, and I ask you to revisit this proposed circular urgently.

The ASTI continues to engage within the Dispute Resolution processes in good faith.

Minister, I urge you to step back from this precipice. Let us negotiate a meaningful and workable solution to resolve this.

Meaningful reform must be grounded in trust, clarity, and proper resourcing.

At present many teachers remain concerned with the pace, scope, and practical implications of proposed changes.

There is a need for greater certainty – for students, for parents and for teachers themselves.

Reform cannot succeed without the confidence of those who have to deliver it.

We therefore call for a redoubled, concentrated, and genuine engagement with ASTI for resolution.

Finally, I will leave you with a quotation from *Malcolm X*:

“Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.”

Mar chríoch, molaim go mór an sár-obair a dhéanann sibhse, múinteoirí na tíre, ar son bhur gcuid daltaí.

Déanann sibh difríocht mhór ina saol.

Go raibh maith agaibh!