

School Sector Climate Action Mandate

ASTI Submission, December 2022

Opening observations

The ASTI appreciates the opportunity to submit its views on the School Sector Climate Action Mandate. This Mandate represents the commencement of what will, and must be, a transformative roadmap for schools. While we also appreciate that this Mandate is part of the wider Public Sector Climate Action Mandate, itself based on the legally binding 2021 Climate Action Plan commitments on reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 51% in 2030, the ASTI is of the view that meaningful prior consultation should have taken place.

Consultation is very important for a number of reasons: it deepens knowledge; builds consensus; identifies potential barriers and unintended consequences; it creates a community-wide synergy around goals. While the actions in this first Mandate are not radical and, in many instances are already happening in schools, it is not helpful if a perception is created wherein this Mandate is yet another initiative adding to the system-wide fatigue with innovation overload. It is also erroneous to assume that school patron bodies and Boards of Management are fully apprised of the extent of the change which must occur over the next seven years up to 2030. There is a need for a wider communications strategy by the Department at the level of school patrons because what must happen at school level has profound implications for every level of educational leadership, starting at the top, and for every aspect of school buildings and ‘stock’, ownership of which not in the hands of the state.

Boards of Management and school Principals, in particular, are required to immediately focus on the requirements for policy development, procurement reviews, school transport issues, etc, as laid out in Section 3 – Schools Ways of Working. In essence, all of this means more work for school principals. Their workload and role are already unsustainable and it is concerning that the Department considers that extra-capacity is not required in terms of the school leadership team. The world is facing a climate *crisis* and this first Mandate will require rapid, deep, systemic change driven by collective action in schools across several domains – carbon emissions, renewable energies, sustainable school buildings, school transport – not to mention curriculum and the cultural changes required in the second national strategy on sustainable development (ESD to 2030). ¹ The commitment by the Department of

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8c8bb-esd-to-2030-second-national-strategy-on-education-for-sustainable-development/>

Education to allocate additional school leadership posts to schools would send out the clearest signal that schools will be supported to deliver on their Mandate actions and in meeting the actions within the 5 Priority Areas. It is worth listing the latter to comprehend the multi-dimensional nature of the response expected, indeed, required from schools. They are: advancing policy, transforming learning environments, building capacities of educators, empowering and mobilising young people, accelerating local level actions. The ASTI is not optimistic that the necessary progress will be made on either the Mandate or the Strategy in the absence of adequate leadership capacity in schools.

Section 2: Our Schools

Asking schools to include an energy/sustainable Champion in the current post system is inadequate because this system is already over-burdened. Moreover, not all schools are enabled to provide dedicated time for the discharge of post duties. Additional posts need to be created to drive this Mandate and ESD to 2030. Moreover, it is facile to suggest that energy/environmental tasks are synonymous with transformative goals and new normative cultures specified in the latter. At the very least, some distinction needs to be made around what school communities can achieve and what infrastructural/physical stock changes need to be put in place.

Recognising young people as key contributors to sustainable futures is critical. ESD to 2030 contains important actions in this regard. The ASTI also recommends that the Department closely examine the outcome of the UNESCO series of climate change education events at the recent United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 27), including the launch of global survey report on youth demands for climate change education and the Greening Education Partnership.²

CPD for teachers is critical. However, a more ambitious approach to developing teachers' professional capital is required given the existential nature of the climate crisis. Supporting teacher professionalism has many dimensions and is not confined to teacher CPD. Hargreaves and Fullan's concept of teachers' professional capital is relevant in this regard, comprehending as it does human, social and decisional dimensions.³ Supporting teacher professionalism requires an approach that aims to develop and integrate these three dimensions.⁴ Practically speaking, teachers need opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills; to collaborate with colleagues to actualise their knowledge and skills; space and

² <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/sustainable-development/cop27>

³ A Hargreaves and M Fullan (2012) *Professional Capital: transforming teaching in every school* (Ontario)

⁴ <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/eazines-archive/eazines-2017/5d77d38d-f8b1-4f77-bac2-117ee166e39e.htm>

time to reflect on their practice. Curriculum change cannot take place without dedicated professional time for teachers to 'grow' each form of capital.

Section 3: Schools Way of Working

As noted above, the fundamental issue for the ASTI as regards the necessary actions in this section is who will actually do this work? For example, engaging in Green Schools requires detailed application forms and the latter take time. Projects such as Green Schools are really valuable in schools and underpin many curriculum goals as well as providing space for students to work together, connect with nature, develop relationships with the wider community, etc. These important outcomes are only realised when the project is led by passionate and knowledgeable teachers. Unfortunately, annual commissioned research by the ASTI points to workload having a hugely negative impact on teachers' morale, wellbeing and motivation to engage in these wider educational activities.⁵ For the ASTI, the solutions are evident: reduced class size; provision of adequate professional time; the right to disconnect; and adequate number of posts in schools.

Section 4: School buildings

The actions in this section are necessary but the ASTI must again underline the fact that actually getting this work done typically falls on the school principal during holiday time. This situation cannot continue: the Department must consult with principals' and their representative organisations on how best to delegate this essentially technical/construction work to suitably qualified personnel.

Section 5: School transport

The ASTI notes the statements in this section. In future iterations, there needs to be better alignment between sustainable school transport and wider school policies such as SPHE goals, for example, importance of physical exercise, sport and community engagement.

Concluding observations

The publication of the first School Sector Climate Action Mandate is an important milestone in meeting Ireland's binding commitments on reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 51% in seven years' time. There is no time to waste in terms of addressing the climate crisis. The ASTI's main concern with this first Mandate is the lack of consideration of capacity of schools to discharge the multiple actions.

⁵ <https://www.asti.ie/news-campaigns/latest-news/survey-finds-increased-work-demands-impacting-teachers-job-satisfaction/>