

HIGHLIGHTING TEACHERS' SENIOR CYCLE CONCERNS

A joint protest by the ASTI and TUI showed teachers' frustration with Senior Cycle redevelopment.



ASTI General Secretary Kieran Christie is pictured leading protesting teachers outside Coolmine Community School on November 19. Photo by Tommy Clancy, Tommy Clancy Photography.

More than 30,000 members of the ASTI and TUI joined lunchtime protests outside their schools in November, in a bid to highlight teachers' concerns over Senior Cycle redevelopment.

The nationwide protests were organised by the ASTI and TUI following a decision by the Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, to accelerate the Senior Cycle redevelopment process. Teachers' concerns include insufficient preparation and training timelines for teachers, inappropriate assessment arrangements for some of the new subject specifications, and lack of resources in schools, which has the potential to introduce new inequalities between students.

The protests received significant coverage in the national and regional media, and resulted in a request from the Department of Education for clarification on a number of ASTI/TUI concerns. Contacts between the teacher unions and the Department of Education were ongoing at the time of going to print. Prior to the protest, ASTI and TUI subject representatives and members of the two unions' executive bodies met in Mullingar to discuss Senior Cycle redevelopment, and in particular the process for the revision of Leaving Certificate subjects, including subject specifications and additional assessment components (AACs). The teacher unions' key concerns include the following.

The protests received significant coverage in the national and regional media and resulted in a request from the Department of Education for clarification on a number of ASTI/ TUI concerns.

Inequitable access to resources

Equitable access for students to resources and facilities in schools is vital to ensure an effective roll-out of new and revised Senior Cycle subject specifications.

For example, revised science specifications require increased access to laboratories, equipment and other resources. In schools where these resources are inadequate, there will be further challenges when 40% of students' Leaving Cert grade is for a laboratory-based research report.



A joint ASTI-TUI meeting of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) subject representatives took place on Saturday, November 9, 2024, in Mullingar Park Hotel, Co. Westmeath.

Rushed subject specifications

It is vital that any changes to subjects/specifications are not rushed through, are of educational benefit to students, and are based on the professional views of teachers – the practitioners tasked with implementing the changes.

The ASTI previously expressed alarm at the fact that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) subject development groups were denied access to submissions from many stakeholders (including teachers) during NCCA subject specification public consultation periods. This has weakened the redevelopment process substantially.

One size does not fit all

AACs in some revised subject specifications are being implemented without appropriate structures or consideration of how they impact both students and teachers. An insistence that AACs cannot be allocated less than 40% of

the overall marks will cause substantial problems for some subjects. While 40% or more works for some subjects, it does not work for others.

Insufficient preparation time

The scheduled release of subject guidelines, AAC guidelines, and sample examination materials lacks an adequate lead-in period. This jeopardises the quality of teacher preparation, professional learning opportunities, and resourcing prior to the introduction of new subjects and specifications.

AI concerns

Teachers have expressed concerns about the potential use of AI in project/research work and the implications of this for Leaving Cert assessment integrity and fairness.

Keep up with the ASTI’s Senior Cycle campaign at www.asti.ie



THE SORRY SAGA OF LEAVING CERTIFICATE ORAL EXAMINATIONS

ASTI General Secretary KIERAN CHRISTIE outlines some of the findings of SEC research into the holding of Leaving Cert oral examinations during the Easter holidays.

In a previous edition of *ASTIR*, I highlighted the world in which the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) lives, whereby it organises consultation processes for the introduction of new subject specifications and then refuses to share the stakeholder submissions with the NCCA Subject Development Groups. The sorry saga underpinning the recent announcement of the continuation of scheduling of Leaving Certificate oral examinations at Easter falls uncannily into a similar bracket. Members will recall that the move to Easter scheduling was originally negotiated as a Covid-19 measure. On March 29, 2022, Minister Foley abandoned all pretence in that regard and effectively announced it as a measure in perpetuity in the context of her announcement of the programme for Senior Cycle redevelopment.

Difficulties

Following self-evident difficulties with the measure in the first year – for instance, the Music Practical Performance Test has been taken out of the arrangements – the Minister and the State Examinations Commission (SEC) decided to take stock. A review of the timing of the orals was requested by the Minister to provide advice to the Department.

While the SEC announced continuance of the arrangements for 2023, it stated that a “more extensive evaluation involving engagement with all stakeholders is required to fully assess the impact of holding the oral examinations at Easter”. Crucially, we were told that “this evaluation ... will be completed in order to advise the Minister on the timing of the oral examinations in 2024 and beyond”.

The ASTI opposed the continuation of the oral examinations during the Easter break post Covid-19 and the representatives of the student body, the Irish Second-level Students’ Union (ISSU), while initially in favour of the arrangements, changed their position in the teeth of having experience of them, and are now firmly opposed.

While the SEC announced continuance of the arrangements for 2023, it stated that a “more extensive evaluation involving engagement with all stakeholders is required to fully assess the impact of holding the oral examinations at Easter”.

Research

Around this time, the ASTI became aware of plans within the SEC to commission the University of Galway to undertake a survey of relevant stakeholders. This survey went live in October/November 2023. A report on this survey was completed in November 2023 but we then began to hear that, in addition to the survey, a multi-site case study would be undertaken. That put the kibosh on any prospects that the SEC would honour its commitment that an evaluation would be “completed in order to advise the Minister on the timing of the oral examinations in 2024 and beyond”.

In December 2024, the Minister announced that following advice from the SEC, the Leaving Certificate language oral examinations would continue to be delivered during the Easter holidays, under the same timing model as applied from 2022 to 2024, until the 2026/2027 school year.

All of this makes one curious as to what the research undertaken by the Education Department of the University of Galway threw up.

Survey findings

The survey had 11,200 respondents, comprising parents (22%), students (48%), teachers and teaching examiners (22%), principals and deputy principals (3%), and others (4%) (rounding applied). The standout finding is that the majority preference was for Leaving Certificate oral examinations to take place prior to Easter and during term time:

- only 15% of parents expressed a preference for “outside term time during the Easter holidays”,
- 19% of students under 18 years expressed a preference for “outside term time during the Easter holidays”,
- 29% of students over 18 years expressed a preference for “outside term time during the Easter holidays”,
- 17% of teachers and teaching examiners expressed a preference for “outside term time during the Easter holidays”, and
- 49% of deputy principals/principals expressed a preference for “outside term time during the Easter holidays”.

Bizarrely, with reference to deputy principals/principals, the report states: “however, a majority, almost 49%, chose outside school time during the Easter holidays...” Go figure! (I think it should have been described as a large minority or maybe a plurality, but what would I know.) When the picture emerged as above, one could see the need to continue to build on the lack of clarity and push forward with a multi-site case study as an imperative!

Multi-site case study

The multi-site case study involved research at eight school sites in relation to “the impact of conducting the oral examinations during Easter time in 2024 and the preferred timing going forward”. Schools were recruited by “convenience sampling”. In practice, this meant that “schools which had links to the researchers were contacted by email and/or phone call initially”. Out of the eight schools, 32 teachers, 42 students, 10 parents, six principals and four deputy principals took part. Surprisingly, in one of the schools, the principal was the only participant. In four of the schools there were no parent participants.

Again, the “majority preference for Leaving Certificate oral examinations to take place prior to Easter and during term time” emerged in this aspect of the study. Amazingly, the report states that “as was the case with the first phase of the study, the only group to unanimously oppose this term-time preference were the principals and deputy principals, who favoured keeping the exams during Easter time”. That 49% majority in the first phase had now, it seems, morphed into unanimity! However, I think we can take it that all 10 principals/deputy principals who participated in the multi-site case study were clear in their expressed preference. Not even the niceties associated with the proper use of language escaped being a hapless casualty in this whole imbroglio.

The SEC noted “the challenges and issues associated with the timing; the outcomes of the research work; and the experience of delivering the oral examinations during term time and in the Easter holidays over the past

The voices of the students’ union, teacher unions, survey respondents and multi-site case study participants count for nought – save for the six principals and four deputy principals in the multi-site case study.

number of years”. They stated: “On balance we consider that candidates’ interests will be best served by the least possible interruption to their teaching and learning, and by as much assurance as possible that the SEC can deliver examinations and assessment to the published timeframes”.

The voices of the students’ union, teacher unions, survey respondents and multi-site case study participants count for nought – save for the six principals and four deputy principals in the multi-site case study. Precisely what part of the word ‘NO’ is not understood remains a mystery.

It seems we are stuck with the same arrangements for the next three years “subject to review after the conclusion of the 2027 examinations”. I’m sure that will go well, a 49% certainty I suspect, although in the tragicomedy genre, sequels rarely live up to expectations!

More information

For more information on the survey carried out by the University of Galway and the research findings, please use the links below.

Timing of Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations Executive Summary:
www.asti.ie/document-library/timing-of-leaving-certificate-oral-examinations/

Timing of Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations Survey Findings
www.asti.ie/document-library/timing-of-leaving-certificate-oral-examinations-survey-findings/



ASTI and TUI members at the recent Senior Cycle protest are pictured outside Loreto Community School in Milford, Co. Donegal. Photo by Clive Wasson, CW Photos Limited.