



## **ASTI Convention 2025**

**Speech by**

**ASTI President Donal Cremin**

**22<sup>nd</sup> April 2025**

Minister McEntee, distinguished guests, family, friends and colleagues. It is my honour and privilege to address you here today in Killarney as President of the ASTI. This is our 103<sup>rd</sup> Convention. Being from the Kingdom of Kerry and coming back to the Kingdom is a special occasion after a long year in Dublin.

Kerry is the tourism and, of course, the GAA capital of Ireland and we are proud to be National League title holders and look forward to July in Croke Park. Croke Park is a place of enjoyment and fun for most people, but sadly the mention of Croke Park does not bring happiness to everybody. For teachers, Croke Park means detention, disempowerment and torture. This cannot continue and I will return to this point later.

Today I want to discuss some key issues of concern to teachers, such as:

1. The Senior Cycle
2. Workload / Work Life balance
3. Social Change
4. Recruitment and Retention
5. Posts of Responsibility  
and
6. Croke Park hours

### **1. The Senior Cycle**

For many decades, we have had the Leaving Certificate. Now, it is becoming the Senior Cycle with the Additional Assessment Component in every subject.

2016 brought the Junior Cycle CBA, now, nine years later, 2025 brings the Senior Cycle AAC. From September 2025, these projects, called Additional Assessment Components or AACs, and other changes are due to begin rollout on a phased basis under 'accelerated' Leaving Certificate reform plans.

Forty years ago, in 1985, 20,000 teachers descended on Croke Park demanding a pay rise at a time of great industrial unrest in the educational sector. Forty years later, we are facing similar unrest once again because powerful people in the educational sector won't take a deep look, won't listen and definitely won't learn from previous errors. The present process is fundamentally flawed and this is no surprise as the tried-and-tested 3 'Ls' – Look, Listen and Learn - are being

ignored by decision-makers. Minister, you need to look at what is being done, listen to what is being said and learn from the process.

In our educational system, a small group of people speak with authority and claim to know what is right for everybody else. However, many of those so-called experts are people who walked away from students at the coal-face of the classroom, because they could not hack teaching, yet they now try to convince us that they know it all.

Teachers are being forced to embark on a process that is flawed, with no proper training, inadequate and poor facilities, no quality assurance, no health and safety audit and no indication of marks on examination papers.

Seven additional assessment components will cause much distress in school settings where teachers do not have the resources, the time or the training to help their students through the process. The Leaving Certificate was not the problem. The problem WAS and IS the points race. Successive governments and third level institutions have failed to tackle the woefully inadequate number of third level places, causing immense worry and anxiety to students as they compete for very limited places to enter their chosen career path. Our Leaving Certificate examination, as it presently stands, has long been internationally recognised for its high academic quality, its equity and its fairness, all of which are about to change.

Teachers believe that the present reform will lead to heavier workloads and insurmountable difficulties in authenticating students' work. Many also believe the introduction of the new project work, set to be worth 40% of a student's overall grade in a subject, will increase rather than reduce stress and workloads for students. Students will undoubtedly find themselves under massive pressure as they attempt to complete project work in many different subjects at the same time.

Teachers are not afraid of change. Change can be beneficial when implemented thoughtfully and strategically, but change cannot succeed without being open to question and challenge.

The impact of change on all members of the school community must be considered and managed effectively, so that teachers and students can adapt. This takes time and will not succeed if it is rushed.

Minister, I am once again asking that the introduction of the Senior Cycle not be rushed. It is my firm belief—and the belief of the vast majority in this room—that we now stand on a cliff edge when it comes to the future of Irish education. The decisions we are about to make will shape not just our education system, but the very fabric of Irish society and our financial wellbeing, for the next 20 years—and, quite possibly, much further into the future.

The choices made today will have far-reaching consequences for the economic development of this country for decades to come. I don't need to remind you, Minister, that Ireland's financial stability relies heavily on foreign direct investment. Hundreds of thousands of Irish people depend on multinationals for their livelihoods. Many mistakenly believe that these companies are here solely because of our low corporate tax rates, but you and I both know the truth: other countries in the world offer zero tax rates. And yet, these companies choose Ireland. Why?

They choose to locate in Ireland because we offer something far more valuable—access to a highly-educated, highly-skilled workforce. That is the cornerstone of our appeal.

If tax breaks were all that mattered, these multinationals would have long since relocated their computer component and pharmaceutical operations to the cheapest labour markets available.

But they haven't. They are here because of the quality of our people, because of our education system.

Minister, there are forces at play beyond these shores—forces that would like nothing more than to pull foreign investment away from Ireland and bring it back home. They will use tax codes and tariffs to do it. If we want these companies to stay, if we want them to weather economic storms and remain committed to Ireland, then we must offer them something unshakeable: a world-class education system.

That is why I say, with absolute seriousness: when you tamper with education, you're not just meddling with pedagogy. You're gambling with our collective future.

Now Minister, you believe you are right. Your department believes it is right and that the concerns we raise are unfounded. But surely, we can agree on this: when we change something, the goal must always be to improve it. Change for its own sake—or worse, change that leads to regression—is not progress. No one in this room is afraid of change. We welcome it. But change must be well-considered, equitable, and just.

All we have asked for at this time —what the ASTI has lobbied for—is simple, a one-year pause, a brief moment to reflect, to ask the necessary questions, to foresee and address potential challenges before they arise, to give schools time to prepare and to give teachers the proper training they deserve. Is it really so unreasonable that teachers are reluctant to face students in classrooms next September without clear guidance?

A Cork man, although it pains me slightly to quote him - Roy Keane - has a memorable phrase: "Fail to prepare, prepare to fail." Minister, we have failed to prepare.

Another Irish icon, Johnny Logan, once asked, "What's another year?" In this case, that year could mean everything.

Let me briefly highlight a few of the key problems with the proposed Senior Cycle:

a. The One-Size-Fits-All Project Model

This approach is deeply problematic. Our members in subject development groups have told us that this issue wasn't even open for discussion. How can we claim to have an inclusive, consultative process if fundamental questions aren't allowed?

b. Project Work and the Risk of Corruption

Projects conducted outside the classroom are vulnerable to outside influence. We have long known this.

Other jurisdictions either restrict project work or significantly reduce its impact on final grades. Research suggests that anything above a weighting of 18% can distort outcomes. And yet, in 2025—at a time when AI tools are widely accessible—you are implementing a model with a 40% weighting for project

work. What sense does that make, especially when planning a system that is meant to last for 20 years? What will AI look like in 2045?

Minister, in the present circumstances teachers cannot possibly take responsibility for signing off on any AAC as the students' own work. It would be impossible for any teacher to know whether or not the work was AI generated and it would be completely unacceptable to attempt to put that impossible burden on us.

### c. Widening Inequality

Research consistently shows that students from wealthier backgrounds perform better in project work. Whether it is access to additional help, better technology, or simply more resources, the outcome is the same: you are baking inequality into the system. That is not acceptable.

Minister, in September 1966, Donogh O'Malley made a courageous decision that forever changed Irish education. History has judged him kindly, and rightly so. He understood the transformative power of education. Today, you stand at a similar crossroads. This moment will define your legacy.

There is a long-standing belief in the Department of Education that teachers will always "get it over the line", that we will always be there to plug the gaps, to hold the line. Minister, I must be honest with you. This time, I'm not so sure we can. This time, you may be on your own.

In 2016, at this very conference, a former ASTI president stood on this stage and warned the then Minister about the flaws in the Junior Cycle reforms. We were told we were wrong—dismissed as naysayers and Luddites. Yet, the independent review by the University of Limerick has now confirmed what we predicted. Every issue we raised came to pass.

Are you really about to make the same mistakes again? Are you once again not going to listen to teachers? Is it really possible that I will be quoted in 10 years as having warned you? Except this time, the stakes are much higher. This time, we're talking about the Senior Cycle—an examination with life-altering consequences for students, and profound implications for Ireland's small, open economy.

Minister, we are not against reform. We are not against progress. But we are against rushing forward blindly. Let us take one year. Let us prepare. Let us get this right, because if we don't, the cost will be far greater than a delay. It will be a legacy of inequality, of missed opportunity, and of failure. It will be your legacy.

## **2. Workload/Work Life Balance**

I am very concerned about teachers' mental health and well-being. Teachers should be able to work in a positive environment where they are respected, valued and affirmed, yet instead they are forced to spend excessive time on non-teaching tasks including paper work, form filling, emails, and out of hours tasks that have little effect on the quality of teaching and learning, but have a negative impact on the quality of teachers' working lives. All teachers have a fundamental right to disconnect after their day's work and not answer any emails or tick the box exercises outside of their working day.

Teachers are bereft of time and cannot give time to individual students because of too much 'admin' and too much external control. As a first step, it is well beyond time to remove the six extra hours that were added to the Supervision & Substitution scheme, which brought the total from 37 to 43 hours.

In a forth coming ASTI survey, 83% of teachers are experiencing stress; 41% described this as 'a high level of stress'. The heavy workload placed on teachers is impacting on their teaching, their health and on student learning.

Work life balance is not about a contract of work. It is about the dignity of human beings. It is about fairness and equity, supporting family life and community life. It is about the teacher as a person.

Teachers, take care of your selves. Prioritise your own health and, although your time in school is very busy, always look out for your colleagues. To those of you in management, I say, never micro manage. It is doomed to fail. Build trust and allow teachers to express themselves in their own unique and individual ways. Everybody is different and everybody needs their own personal space in an ever-changing society and the busy world we live in.

A happy, contented teacher creates a happy atmosphere for a happy, contented pupil and thus a happy, contented parent and a better school community.

### **3. Social Change**

Our country and our society are changing at a rapid rate. We say a 'Céad Míle Fáilte' to all the students entering our country from many parts of the world. However, the welcoming of different nationalities in recent years has created an unprecedented amount of work and pressure, nowhere more so than in our schools, where resources are stretched to breaking point.

Students are becoming isolated, spending more time on devices rather than socialising. Teenage years were always traumatic, but are more so now.

Social media and the social media influencers are causing havoc for the young generation and the government is doing little about it. Urgent action is needed from the powers-that-be to help adolescents manage an unregulated and deeply dangerous online system.

We are one of the richest countries in the world, yet the lack of housing and support for young parents is appalling. One student goes home to a regular home environment while another goes to a hotel room where they are squashed with other family members into a single room. And, just to be clear, Minister, both of these students will be asked to do the same AAC. The way our society treats some people in our country is unfair, inequitable and shameful. Yet, the education system is expected to fix all ills and teachers try valiantly to cover over the cracks by trying to create a safe, supportive and comfortable environment in their classrooms.

### **4. Recruitment and Retention**

Why, oh why, are our young teachers leaving?

The following eight points may help to answer that question.

- (1) Some teachers are waiting six or more years for a CID and may get only a contract for a few hours a week. They then have to supplement their pay with another part-time job.
- (2) Incremental Credit – it takes 27 years to reach the top of the salary scale.
- (3) The cost of rental accommodation in Ireland is unsustainable. In Dublin, Cork and Galway, for instance, rent is now €2,000 per month, if a rental property can be found.



- (4) Many young teachers cannot get a mortgage and cannot get on to the property ladder in their 30s and even into their 40s because of their limited incomes. Is it reasonable or acceptable that somebody must move home to live with their parents for economic reasons, having obtained a professional qualification, after spending up to six years in college at huge cost, even though they are now employed as a teacher?
- (5) Teachers are often forced to live a long distance from work, due to the accommodation crisis. They are then hit by the high cost of travel and motoring expenses.
- (6) Remote work is not an option for teachers at second level.
- (7) The Professional Masters in Education, the PME, is now a two-year course and costs €15,000 to €16,000.
- (8) Restrictions on parental leave. Teachers have to take parental leave in seven week blocks, as compared with the rest of the Public Service where parents can take one day a week. This is completely inequitable. It is unfair and an injustice to teachers, both female and male.  
The one day a week option would also be more beneficial to the students in the classroom, as it would provide continuity throughout the year.

This is just a sample of the reasons why young people are not joining our profession.

It is hard to fault them when they choose to go abroad for a few years after they qualify. The next obstacle comes when they wish to return. They will not get incremental credit at second level, but at primary level, they will. Where is the equity there?

Before I begin to offer some solutions, I want to acknowledge and welcome your announcement yesterday, Minister, that CIDs will now be awarded to teachers after one year of teaching. This appears to be a positive step forward.

However, we need to see the detail of how this will be applied in schools and I have three major concerns.

Firstly, can teachers still be let go after completing a year's service in the school at the discretion of the Board of Management, without any indication of probationary issues? If that remains the case, then it is not actually permanency after one year.

Secondly, will it be a contract for full hours or just more of the same, with some teachers on CID contracts of meagre hours for years on end?

Thirdly, how will your initiative affect career breaks for teachers? Will career breaks now be awarded, as was originally intended, for up to five years? Or will some Boards of Management still be allowed to insist that people on career breaks return after one year, to prevent the replacement teacher from accessing a CID? That restriction is a major disservice to teachers who wish to avail of a career break. It is a serious injustice, as compared to the rest of the public service.

If these three issues are not resolved, Minister, very little will have changed, your initiative will have very little impact.

Now I will put forward five solutions to the recruitment and retention problem.

- (1) As I have just outlined, your initiative on CIDs needs to go much further. We firmly believe that, from day one, teachers must be offered a permanent full-time contract, on full hours, subject to probation, with no hidden wriggle room or small print. This would allow teachers to settle into teaching early in life, obtain a mortgage and be more likely to stay in the system.
- (2) When teachers return from teaching overseas, their experience, knowledge and expertise should be immediately recognised and acknowledged within the incremental pay scale.
- (3) The 27-year incremental scale needs to be reduced to, at most, 20 years during the lifetime of this government, so that teachers will have a reasonable pension when they reach 66 years, as pension levels are now based on career-averaged earnings.
- (4) Year two of the PME course should become an apprenticeship model, where student teachers are attached to a school for 15 hours per week and paid for their work.

This will bring around 3,000 PME students into the education system. Initially, the PME student can co-teach and then after a period of mentoring, they can teach on their own. Time is required for this to occur in a school setting and the Department must provide a reduced timetable

for existing teachers. A good starting point would be a reduction to 20 hours per week class contact time from the current 21 hours 20 minutes.

- (5) Minister, in your office around the oval table, I passionately put forward the case for teachers to be allowed take Parental Leave on a one day per week basis, rather than en bloc.

This would allow students to have consistent teaching, with the same teacher in front of them all year long. It is cost neutral and would bring teaching in line with the rest of the public service. It would provide for a more holistic family life for those with young children.

My daughter works in the HSE and can take one day a week of parental leave. My daughter-in-law in private industry can take two half days per week. Family life improves and society in general improves.

Minister, I await your speech to learn if I was listened to and if action is being taken in this area.

## **5. Posts of Responsibility**

Minister, I call on you to be the first minister in recent years to listen to the teachers' voice. Teachers are your greatest asset. If you mind your assets and invest wisely, growth will occur and provide an unbelievable service to future generations of young people in Ireland. Incentives need to be created where teachers have progression in their careers.

There is an inadequate number of Posts of Responsibility. The work must still be done, so it is delegated to teachers in addition to their normal workload. An immediate substantial increase in the number of Posts of Responsibility is the way forward.

When visiting a school recently, a Principal asked me to make a case for another Deputy Principal for the school. In response, I asked if seven AP1 posts would not be more valuable. In saying this, I was using a common sense, mathematical approach. Let me explain my thinking using the following scenario.

Picture two school gates, Gate A and Gate B - twenty tonnes of sand are dropped at each gate at 7am and the gates must be cleared on time for the students to

enter the school. One Deputy Principal is given a shovel and sent to Gate A. Seven AP1 post holders are each given a shovel and sent to Gate B. Minister, which gate do you think will be cleared first, so that students can enter at 9 o'clock?

In any business, seven people can do more work than one person. Seven heads and 14 hands are always better than one head and two hands. This would be a cost neutral measure, but would lead to far more productivity and, more importantly, the admin problem in schools would be solved immediately.

I rest my case, Minister. Restore the number of Posts of Responsibility to pre-2007 levels, the number of posts that were in schools before the austerity cuts were implemented 18 years ago.

## **6. Croke Park Hours**

Let me now return to the Croke Park hours – the thorn in the side of every teacher. They must be removed. Teachers are flexible and are willing to undertake necessary activities, such as:

- meeting parents to discuss their children's progress.
- a planning day at the start of the school year, if it of high quality,
- three by one hour staff meetings for the running of the school
- an open evening of four hours.

All other hours must be on a trust basis, where the teacher has the autonomy to manage these hours in a way that best suits their individual circumstances.

To summarise, the educational sector is encountering many problems, as I have already mentioned. A shortage of teachers, unequal treatment of some students who cannot get their subject choices, because there is no teacher to teach those subjects – an inequality which should be of major concern to society – the pressures of social media, mobile phones, class sizes, lack of time, a fast-paced world, violence, climate change, and the new world order of aggression and tariffs.

AI is expected to displace many jobs, particularly those of cleaners, doctors and teachers. A new, robotic world is developing at too fast a pace. Have we progressed? I would say “yes”, but at a huge cost.

In education, we need a clear strategy in the face of such challenges. I am certain that a common-sense approach is what works best. Listen to the people who are working on the ground. Why does it always have to be a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach? Why not listen to those who are walking the walk? Teachers dedicate their lives to imparting knowledge in a compassionate way to students as human beings.

At a recent meeting I attended in the Clock Tower in the Department of Education, officials were proud of having reached a target of 92 policies developed out of 100 for this year. They felt that it was a job well done.

What about the teachers and schools who now have to implement the 92 policies? What about the time demands these policies will place on teachers and schools as they try to implement them and fit them into an already overcrowded school day?

Minister, let’s go back to basics. Provide resources and time and bring real learning back into the classroom. Let the teachers teach and let the students learn.

Professor Áine Hyland, guest speaker, I thank you for the motivation and encouragement you gave me personally some 23 years ago when I studied under your stewardship completing a Masters in Education.

Minister, I wish you well in your new role as Minister for Education and Youth, and I hope you gain some new insights this week into what teachers require. Let us work to increase the number of things on which we can agree and reduce the number of things on which we differ, for the sake of our educational system.

I wish you the very best for what lies ahead and please, please “Make teaching great again”.

To guests, family, friends and colleagues, I thank you for listening to me today and I hope you have a lovely evening.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.