INTRODUCTION
The ASTI welcomes the invitation to contribute to the national action Plan. This partnership approach will continue to be essential to meeting the challenges laid out in the Plan. These are significant and are supported by empirical data from national and international research. The current review of the Junior Cycle curriculum is also informed by empirical research. The latter points to aspects of student disengagement from learning and the normative demands of the school as an inclusive learning community. While the ASTI does not uncritically accept all the findings of such research, it is equally conscious that, at a time of profound national crisis, all education partners must ensure that our young people continue to receive the highest quality education service.

A BALANCED APPROACH TO CHANGE
Education is a vital social good: it benefits individuals and society in many dimensions, not just in human capital formation. For example, OECD “Education at a Glance” reports now include indicators of how education contributes to social inclusion, better health outcomes for individuals and society, higher levels of civic engagement and social solidarity. Schools are vital agencies in our society; the work of teachers has an enduring impact way beyond the classroom. The national Plan is indeed predicated on this precept of the enduring impact of educational experiences on young people far into their adult lives. This Plan has to get the balance of interventions right.

At the same time, a strong note of caution requires to be made on behalf of the teaching profession. There is a genuine concern among teachers that more and more professional demands are being placed on schools without due consideration for capacity to meet such demands. Recent budget decisions have gravely undermined morale in the profession. They have undeniably impacted on the capacity of schools to take on the kind of change project envisaged in the national Plan. Targets in the Plan which are unrealistic, unduly onerous and do not take into account their daily workload will fail to motivate teachers.

The ASTI must also state a further note of caution in relation to the emphasis on standardized testing in the draft plan. There is most certainly a role for standardized testing at second level. A balanced approach must be taken, particularly given the “bad press” around the experience of such tests has in other countries. Improving literacy standards is a complex challenge and the proposals in the national plan should be considered as a package which will require external supports to schools as well as increased emphasis on upskilling teachers and ensuring early interventions for students who are experiencing difficulties.

Resourcing the Plan
Teachers will be disappointed by the lack of references to resource allocation to schools related to targets in the Plan. Schools are already under severe pressure as a result of changes in recent budgets. The increase in the pupil:teacher ratio in September 2009 has had an extremely negative impact on schools; classes are larger, schools are reducing subject options and teachers are under increased pressure to deliver more with less supports by way of resource hours allocations for SEN students, SNAs in the classroom and Year Heads to assist students experiencing difficulties. This climate is not propitious for major initiatives. The latter must be externally supported by the curriculum support service. National policy statements which fail to acknowledge these requirements will not find a resonance with teachers. Investment is the key to success in the long term.
In particular, it is astonishing that the Plan does not address the role or supply of the Learning Support teacher in schools. The allocation ratio for the Learning Support teacher has remained static since 1986! (notwithstanding additionalities to the service arising from the programme of government in Sept. 2010) The role of this teacher is defined in the 2005 Guidelines for Inclusion for SEN students as:

“The role of the learning support teacher is to provide additional teaching support to students with low achievement in literacy or mathematics and to those with mild or transient difficulties in such areas as language, motor coordination, behaviour, socialization and attention”

Over the years, the ASTI has called for the review of this service to schools so that schools could provide a meaningful literacy and numeracy support service to students experiencing difficulties.

Similarly, the Plan does not refer to the guidance & counseling service in schools. The aforementioned ESRI longitudinal research, including its most recent publication, “Behind the Scenes”, provides strong evidence of the demand for this service especially at Junior Cycle in terms of contributing to student diagnostic assessment and enabling students to develop practical study skills.

A further feature of the Plan which will cause dismay to second level teachers is the lack of reference to the holistic nature of the education service which schools seek to provide. A core pillar of this service is the pastoral care structure in schools. Year Heads are not being replaced and students who are experiencing difficulties in schools are simply not getting the support they require. The ESRI research on early schools is unambiguous on cumulative impact of the negative cycle of student difficulties leading to discipline problems leading to disengagement leading to poor educational outcomes and potential early school leaving. This cycle is averted for many students because of the availability of a Year Head.

OBSERVATIONS ON SPECIFIC AREAS OF PLAN

DEFINITIONS
The ASTI endorses the definitions of literacy and numeracy in the Plan. Implicit in them is a definition of education as empowering individuals. Good literacy and numeracy skills are central to all learning. Students cannot access the curriculum without strong skills in both areas. Indeed, their capacity to make informed choices on issues which will affect their adult lives across the domains of health, financial well being, active citizenship, etc, will be affected by their overall level of educational achievement, including their literacy and numeracy skills.

TARGETS IN PLAN FOR ACHIEVEMENT BY 2020
The ASTI supports the approach to setting and achieving targets set out on pages 11 & 12. The reference to the DEIS strategy is critical. The latter has been in place in almost one-third of second level schools since 2005. The experience of DEIS schools in planning, target setting, using review instruments (retention & attendance; literacy & numeracy; examination attainment) has been varied. The current DEIS Evaluation should be used to identify what factors affect schools’ capacity to engage in this core work and to assess the implications for the national literacy and numeracy plan.

TEACHER EDUCATION/INDUCTION

PGDE to become 2-year programme, 2nd Year in schools – part of induction period. The ASTI supports this proposal which is also contained in the draft policy on the continuum of teacher education from the Teaching Council. The key concerns for the ASTI is that teachers in Year 2 would receive an adequate remuneration to recognize their work in schools as is currently the case in the Scottish induction model.
It its submission to the Teaching Council, the ASTI has also underlined that the current induction support programme provided by the Education Centres is unacceptable in many respects, not least because of its out-of-school location and its lack of provision for engagement with the teacher education departments. The ASTI would not be supportive a mandatory induction programme based on this model.

**Within this 2\(^{nd}\) year/induction model,** literacy and numeracy should be core areas, as should classroom management, differentiation and teaching across the spectrum of need, especially for students with learning disabilities.

The ASTI supports the proposal that all teachers, **irrespective of their subject specialism,** should be required to demonstrate proficiency in developing literacy and numeracy skills, as relevant in their subject specialism. Such skills should be formulated a holistic manner and should be integrated into a broader repertoire of core teaching skills such as assessment for learning, classroom differentiation, ICT skills and multi-cultural understanding. These observations are also relevant to the proposal that **all trainee teachers complete mandatory units in literacy and related assessment.**

**Extend 4-year B.Ed to wider range of subjects:** The ASTI supports this proposal.

**CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Continuing professional development is central to a quality teaching profession. The Teaching Council’s draft policy on the continuum contains important directions in this regard. The publication of its Framework for CPD will address issues in relation to teachers’ professional learning, supports for such learning, supports for schools as learning communities, etc.

The proposal for teachers of English and Irish to engage in **20 hours CPD on literacy every 5 years** will be best addressed within the forthcoming framework. It would also be important to include provision for numeracy CPD within this framework. The role of the curriculum support service – PDST – will be critical in providing a national inservice programme in this regard. **Access for all teachers to CPD in literacy and numeracy** will also be best addressed within the context of the forthcoming Teaching Council framework. In its submission to the continuum paper, the ASTI underlined its concern that a balanced approach be taken in relation to teachers’ professional learning and their annual registration requirements. An approach with links continuous professional learning to annual registration without taking into consideration a range of factors which affect teachers’ capacity to engage in professional learning would be counter productive and only serve to diminish the motivation and morale of teachers.

The expertise now available to the Junior Certificate Schools’ Programme in whole school approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy should be considered as a key resource for a system-wide approach to CPD in literacy and numeracy.

**BUILDING CAPACITY OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

The **quality of school leadership** is absolutely vital to the achievement of every education policy goal. Schools need vision, commitment and great expertise from Principals and others in management positions to create an effective teaching and learning climate. Again the ASTI would refer to the DEIS review and the lessons that can be learned in terms of school leadership, school planning and development. **Self-evaluation is** central to the latter processes. In this regard, it may be useful to revisit the 2003 DES guide, *Looking at our School*, to include specific (online) templates for planning, assessing and tracking of literacy and numeracy across all class and year groups. Leadership development programmes for **aspiring Principals** should include units on whole-school approaches to supporting literacy and numeracy development.
The ASTI agrees with the statement that the “curriculum cannot mediate all the issues that are of relevance to young people” (p.25) At second level in particular, there is a feeling that every social problem is referred back to the school as the front line of society’s response. This critique is increasingly expressed in the discussions on the Junior Cycle review. The implementation of the national literacy and numeracy plan should be integrated into the roll-out of the new Junior Cycle curriculum. The well-identified problems of transition from primary to second level, in particular the discontinuities in learning experiences, will be best addressed in the new curriculum framework.

One of the deficiencies in transition is the lack of formal data on pupils as they move from primary to second level. The Report Card Templates issued by the NCCA in 2009 are excellent. First Year students enrolled in second level schools should be required to provide a copy of their 6th Class report to the school. Each second level teacher should receive copies of the report card on each student in their classes. Such a measure would be an essential first step in addressing the problem outlined on page 26 whereby second level teachers have insufficient knowledge or understanding of “the prior learning of students in reading and numeracy when they are planning and teaching subject lessons”.

ASTI supports the proposals to continue to roll-out Project Maths in Section 4.7. The support model provided for this Project is in line with the ASTI’s statement on the need to invest in change processes in schools.

The proposal to review the JC English syllabus is timely, given the overall review of the Junior Cycle. The ASTI supports the proposal to prioritise the development of literacy and numeracy across all subject areas in the new Junior Cycle curriculum. This will require whole-school approaches, including inservice training.

TARGETING LEARNERS AT RISK

DEIS targets areas of greatest need. It is an important aspect of overall Departmental policy for social inclusion and combating educational disadvantage. However, the ASTI has consistently pointed out that the majority of students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not in DEIS schools. This fact was most recently borne out in a 2009 ESRI Report which found that “a significant proportion of the potential target group do not fall within the remit of the DEIS second level scheme” * In addition to the measures contained in the Plan, the needs of these disadvantaged students would best be met in smaller classes, especially in the core areas of Irish, English and Mathematics.

* ESRI, “Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage”, May 2009

The ASTI supports the analysis of disparities in migrant students’ communicative and academic language skills. Competence in the former can mask serious deficiencies in the latter. Moreover, the latter is not as easily required as it involves the acquisition of the more complex skills sets reading and writing in a foreign language. For this very reason, the ASTI is adamant that EAL teachers are still required in schools. The decision in Budget ’10 to reduce the number of these teachers by over a third over the next four years will impose serious hardships on migrant students at second level. Without solid reading and writing and numeracy skills in the English language, they will find their school work very challenging and invariably, as is the experience to date, this will lead to under-achievement among migrant students.

The ASTI acknowledges that excellent resources are now available to schools for teaching English across the curriculum. However good the content of teaching resources, teachers still need inservice training by their peers in how to effectively implement the strategies, etc, in such resources. In this context, the ASTI supports the allocation of funding to CPD to support teachers’ learning in this important area.

The ASTI has consistently advocated that measures should be in place to track the achievement of migrant students.
FOSTERING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The ASTI accepts the broad analysis provided in Section 6. Second level teachers typically view themselves as subject specialists. The “culture change” which is envisaged in the national plan will require time and consistent support. New normative cultures will have a patchy emergence if schools do not get supports in terms of whole school inservice, availability of external advice and training, high quality and relevant test materials, etc.

One of the most important ingredients in successful change processes is confidence. As noted in the NCCA document, “Leading and Supporting Change in Schools”, change takes place when teachers believe in the rationale for change and when they consider that the changes are relevant and will enhance learning. This confidence factor will be critical in supporting the introduction of measures to gather evidence of learning, including the use of standardized tests, and the usage of such evidence for planning for school improvement.

The proposals in Section 6.9 have a role to play in improving standards of literacy and numeracy in schools. However, it would be simplistic to view them as the sole measures for securing such improvements. The information provided by standardised testing is limited to achievement results on a narrow range of tests at a specific point in time. They do not explain what factors have influenced the results. The vast literature on educational disadvantage tells us what these factors are. It also advises that responses must be holistic. Indeed, the DEIS programme is premised on such a holistic approach. This approach is well summarized in the 2009 JCSP Support Service paper on “Literacy and Numeracy Strategy”:

“Literacy development can therefore never be seen in isolation. It has to be tackled in tandem with developing personal and social skills, developing self-esteem, offer a relevant and appropriate curriculum, providing emotional support where necessary....”

A national plan which gives a central role to standardized testing but which does not refer to the range of in-schools supports for assisting students experiencing problems with learning is inherently flawed. Teachers will not have confidence in such a plan. Neither should their concerns that that they could end up “teaching to the test”, spend an inordinate amount of time “ticking boxes” and be more focused on testing rather than teaching be dismissed.

Teachers’ sense of self-efficacy and autonomy are essential dimensions of their professionalism in the classroom. The afore-mentioned policy paper from the Teaching Council refers to the practice of teaching as “one involving complex relationships and requiring different types of professional knowledge, attitudes and dispositions”. The role of standardised testing in the practice of teaching should not be inflated.

Moreover, teachers concerns that such tests could serve as proxy “league tables” for schools should also be taken on board. Unlike primary schools, there is competition between second level schools in terms of enrolment which cannot be ignored in national policy. At a time when the NCCA is commissioning research on “polarization and differentiation” at second level, it is vital that Departmental policy does not exacerbate such processes. In this regard, the ASTI would consider it highly prudent to introduce standardized testing for internal school usage and for system’s usage only at this stage.

Finally, the proposals in 6.9 also refer to national targets and benchmarks. Quantitative tools are very important in quality assurance across the education system. However, quality in education is more than quantitative results. The model of quality assurance represented by whole school evaluation, including the newly introduced Management, Leadership and Learning model, is one which aims to assure quality by promoting a culture of ongoing self-evaluation, planning, data gathering, etc, based on the norm of a collegiate professional culture in schools and a set of values and vision underpinning a community.

Enabling Parents and Communities
As noted in this section, parents play a powerful role in their children’s education. The “cultural capital” of the home is even more influential on students’ attitudes to school and learning than the economic capital. **Empowering parents** to assist their children’s learning, particularly in the early years, is a policy challenge for the Department and for schools. Much more could be done by way of training for Boards of Management on actions to support parents. Indeed, the range and quality of training overall for Boards of Management requires to be addressed in order for major change projects such as the national literacy and numeracy plan to be successfully implemented at local level.

The proposals for a **national information campaign**, the **provision of materials for parents, especially via ongoing adult literacy programmes**, are all meritorious. The proposal that policies for parental engagement be **integrated into school’s development plan** will require an examination, as recommended above, on the training provided to Boards of Management.

The proposal to support **initiatives linking** home, school and community is very important. This integrated approach is central to DEIS and other social inclusion programmes. The extension of such initiatives to a much wider spread of communities must continue to be a priority for the rationalized VEC structure. In this regard, the ASTI would recommend that the final plan would contain specific proposals on how to harness the reach and expertise in the adult education sector as a whole to support parents and empower communities.

Finally, the role of the public library service needs to be included in the final plan. This service has already extensive experience of working with our schools. It also has established very good practice in relation to supporting adult and community education initiatives.

**Conclusion**

The publication of the plan demonstrates a determination on behalf of the Department of Education & Skills to address standards in literacy and numeracy. It has many merits, not least in that it takes a comprehensive approach to the policy measures necessary to achieve objectives. This in itself is a change from previous policy documents. The plan will work if it delivers on CPD for teacher upskilling and ensures that schools have the resources and specialist learning support, resource and EAL teachers to assist students. The next education budget should not increase the pupil:teacher ratio. Having less teachers in our schools will undermine both morale and capacity to deliver a national plan.

A balanced approach is vital in relation to the role of standardized testing in driving improvements in literacy and numeracy. Such testing will provide data on achievement levels. Improving on those levels is the challenge. Teachers will respond enthusiastically if they trust the rationale for change and the instruments for change.