Education, 2019

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Industrial relations and pay

In January 2019 the Central Executive Committee of the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) and the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) entered a period of ‘constructive dialogue’ with government on the issue of equal pay for post-2011 recruits. This issue has been of serious concern to the teachers’ unions. Those entering the profession have been subject to a 10 per cent cut at each point in their relevant pay scale. Qualification allowances, which had been paid to all teachers, have also been removed for new entrants.

In autumn 2018 the teachers’ unions were presented with a proposed agreement from government. This removed two points from the pay scale, allowing teachers to progress up the scale faster. However, the different pay scales remained. In a ballot of members, the Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) accepted the deal, but both INTO and ASTI rejected it. In an effort to avoid a ballot on strike action by INTO and ASTI, the government commenced further negotiations with the unions, while insisting that they could not act outside of the terms of the Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA). However, it was noted by some union officials that the settlement of the nurses’ and midwives’ dispute in February had ‘stretched, if not breached the current public pay deal’ (Miley, 2019).

In April, following prominence for the issue as a result of the unions’ national conferences, the government acknowledged that

there were outstanding issues of concern in respect of the 2018 proposals and committed to giving these matters 'full consideration either by (i) any pay review mechanism agreed by the parties or (ii) within the context of the next round of pay talks' (Miley, 2019). However, the government statement gave no indication of the time frame for any potential mid-term review.

In August ASTI General Secretary Kieran Christie noted that the 'Government must take immediate action to deliver on commitments made in April 2019 regarding new entrant pay in teaching' (ASTI, 2019). At year end, the issue appeared to be at something of a stalemate. Notwithstanding their rejection of the 2018 government offer, the unions did not ballot their members for strike action. Consequently, their members remained within the terms of the PSSA and benefited from pay restoration awards made during 2019.

In the latter part of the year, the trade union representing school secretaries, Fórsa, wrote to the Department of Education and Skills asking it to agree to use the services of the Workplace Relations Commission in an effort to resolve an ongoing dispute by school secretaries. The vast majority of school secretaries are on precarious contracts with no sick pay or pension entitlements. They want to be employed directly by the department, with better contracts and conditions.

School secretaries have been engaged in limited industrial action. Fórsa says their work-to-rule will continue until their dispute is resolved or until meaningful talks begin. The action means school secretaries are no longer working on public service systems and databases. At year end, with little progress made, Fórsa indicated that school secretaries were willing to escalate their industrial action unless the government indicated a genuine willingness to move away from the current situation whereby the vast majority of school secretaries are paid by schools themselves from ancillary and ad hoc funding (O'Kelly, 2019b).

Teacher supply issues

In November the third national consultative forum was held under the *Teacher Supply Action Plan*. In recognition of the significant challenges that some schools experience in recruiting teachers, The Teacher Supply Steering Group, chaired by the secretary general of the Department of Education and Skills, was established in 2018. The *Teacher Supply Action Plan*, developed through the work of the steering group, contains a range of priority actions.

Following engagement with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the higher education institutions (HEIs) commenced, in 2019, new post-primary Initial Teacher Education undergraduate programmes in a number of priority subject areas. More new programmes will commence in September 2020. The HEA is also seeking proposals from the HEIs in respect of courses to upskill already qualified teachers in targeted post-primary subject areas. Maths, physics and Spanish have been identified as the initial subjects and it is planned that teachers undertaking the new courses would not be required to pay fees.

The first teachers from the Migrant Teacher Project graduated in July. Thirty-four teachers who qualified in seventeen different countries completed the Migrant Teacher Project at the Marino Institute of Education. The programme was established with the aim of increasing the participation of immigrant internationally educated teachers in Irish schools. The programme gives teachers an insight into the Irish education system and equips them in transferring their own qualifications to an Irish context.

With the focus on teacher supply, funding for these initiatives was included in a €360 million, or 3.4 per cent, budget increase allocated to the Department of Education and Skills under Budget 2020. Demand for school places continues to increase in line with the increasing population. In December the Department of Education and Skills announced that enrolments rose by 8,386 across all primary and post-primary schools to a total of 930,833.

Action Plan for Education 2019

In March the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, TD, launched the *Action Plan for Education 2019*. It is Minister Joe McHugh's first action plan for education, under the department's new *Statement of Strategy 2019–21*, which was published on the same day. Priority actions identified in the plan include:

- implementing *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026*;
- increasing the number of post-primary schools in the Foreign Language Assistants scheme and uptake of the Erasmus programme;
- progressing implementation of the *Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths (STEM) Education Policy Statement 2017–2026*

and the *Implementation Plan 2017–2019*, including developing a work plan to increase the numbers of women participating in STEM;

- launching a STEM advertising campaign aimed at pupils and students, teachers, school leaders and parents to promote and drive participation in STEM subjects;
- implementing the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan* in order to close the gap in performance between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, increase retention rates of DEIS students, and increase the progression rates of DEIS students into higher education and further education and training;
- implementing the *Teacher Supply Action Plan*, including launching a Teacher Recruitment Portal to assist schools in recruiting for all teacher vacancies, including substitutes;
- making progress towards increasing the diversity of school types in order to offer parents more choice, including finalising protocols for the implementation phase of the 'Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity' process and assessing the demand for increased provision for Irish-medium schools;
- introducing a stronger complaints procedure and charter for parents and students;
- strengthening the apprenticeship and traineeship systems by enhancing the range of courses and increasing student places;
- setting up a new online marketplace for apprenticeship opportunities;
- implementing strands of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2021* and overseeing delivery of targets for institutes of technology, technological universities, colleges and universities so that higher education becomes more representative (Government of Ireland, 2019).

DEIS schools

In January a report by the Educational Research Centre on the *DEIS Plan* was published. The evaluation shows a narrowing of the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools both in terms of performance at Junior Certificate level and retention rates. The study supports a continuation of the programme, which provides additional supports for those schools with the highest concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In May Minister McHugh launched a third call for inclusion in the School Excellence Fund, which is available to DEIS schools. The School Excellence Fund is an initiative to encourage and recognise excellence and innovation in schools. Schools are encouraged to work together to identify innovative solutions to issues which are context specific in order to establish the most effective means of addressing those issues.

Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act

The intention of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act, 2019, is to regulate the English language education sector and also to provide a route for the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland to apply to become designated as a university. Other key provisions in the legislation will allow Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to address the issue of academic cheating, to examine the corporate governance of providers, and to establish the institutes of technology as designated awarding bodies, allowing institutes of technology more autonomy over the range of programmes they deliver, up to and including masters degrees.

There are over 120,000 international language students from all over the world learning English in Ireland every year. To make it easier for prospective students to find a quality educational experience, the legislation will deliver an international education mark, which can only be used by providers that meet QQI's quality assurance. The Act also allows QQI to examine the compliance of providers with national employment law, and establishes a new Learner Protection Fund. This will ensure that students are allowed to finish their programmes of education and training in the event that their programmes cease prematurely.

The Irish language

In December Minister McHugh announced plans for the development of the first comprehensive Irish-medium education policy. The new policy will provide a framework for the delivery of high-quality Irish-medium education in schools and early-years settings outside the Gaeltacht. There are currently about 60,000 young people in Irish-medium schools in Ireland and the policy will set a target to double that. The work will be informed by national and international research

into good practice in other countries or jurisdictions, including Wales and Quebec, as well as by the initial findings of the Research and Evaluation Study on the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme.

The minister further indicated that consideration should also be given to incentives that would attract students from Gaeltacht areas to teaching and other means of increasing the supply of those with a high standard of Irish to work in Irish-medium education settings. The policy will be developed in collaboration with other relevant departments, with work overseen by an interdepartmental steering committee and supported by an advisory committee comprised of relevant stakeholders.

Western Building Systems

Remediation work continues in a significant number of Irish schools following initial structural assessment and review of forty-two schools constructed by Western Building Systems. Throughout 2019 further detailed investigations were carried out in twenty-three schools. A series of information sessions were held for parents and other stakeholders, with the structural remediation work commencing in summer 2019. In November RTÉ (O'Kelly, 2019a) reported that €40 million had been spent so far on remediation work. In addition, it was reported that legal proceedings by the Department of Education and Skills against Western Building Systems are under way in the Commercial Courts in the case of two schools – Ardgillan Community College and Tyrrelstown Educate Together. Western Building Systems is contesting the legal action brought by the department.

Performance

In October Minister McHugh announced that a new report had been published providing a snapshot of the Irish education system (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). The report offers a look back at 2018 and examines a range of areas across the education and training system, including access to higher education, graduate numbers, and further education and training enrolments. It is the first time that this information has been presented together in one report.

In December the 2018 OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results were published. The results show that Irish fifteen-year-olds are among the best in the OECD for reading literacy and perform higher than the OECD average in maths and

science. PISA takes place every three years. The PISA results in terms of literacy are particularly gratifying for Irish schools as they show that, in addition to ranking in fourth place, Ireland has significantly fewer low-performing students than the OECD average, and also that the difference between schools is less than half what it is, on average, across OECD countries (O'Brien, 2019).

Other developments

In January Minister McHugh announced additional safeguards for child protection in schools with the introduction of specialised child protection inspections. These focused and in-depth inspections, to be carried out in a sample of schools each year, will look at how school boards and staff are fulfilling their legal responsibilities in relation to the protection and safeguarding of students.

In December it was confirmed that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) had completed its review of relationships and sexuality education (RSE). The NCCA had been asked to look at a number of specific areas in respect of RSE and the curriculum in both primary and post-primary schools. Minister McHugh noted that he would give the NCCA report full consideration before confirming any further actions on RSE reform. The minister will bring his recommendations to Cabinet.

A report by Technological University Dublin and Inclusion Ireland, published in September, found that shorter school days were being imposed by Irish schools on one in four students with special needs, mostly children with autism. Schools will now be required to notify the department if they are putting a reduced timetable in place, explain why it is being used, obtain the consent of the parents and set out a plan for the pupils' return to a full school day.

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