

## **An Comhchoiste um Oideachas agus Scileanna**

**Dé Mairt 27 Meitheamh 2017**

### **The adequacy of training and supports available to providers of special needs education and education in DEIS schools**

**Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith, Assistant General Secretary, INTO**

#### **Opening Statement**

Is mise Deirbhile Nic Craith, Ard Rúnaí Cúnta le Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann. Táim freagrach as cúrsaí oideachais agus taighde in ard oifig an Chumainn.

In my opening statement I wish to focus on a few points.

All newly qualified teachers will have completed modules in special education and inclusion as part of the reconfigured initial teacher education courses. However, teachers will always need to build on their professional and pedagogical knowledge though out their careers.

The post-graduate diploma courses in special education offered by the Colleges of Education (as per Circulars 002, 003, 004 / 2017) are of high quality and in demand. These courses are supported by the Department of Education for teachers in special education posts. In the context of a policy of inclusion, all teachers should have the opportunity to benefit from post-graduate courses in special education that are state funded and supported.

The Special Education Support Service (SESS) established and funded by the Department of Education and Skills provided professional development opportunities to teachers. The SESS is currently staffed by teachers on secondment. The recently established Inclusion Support Service within the National Council for Special Education will include the SESS and the Visiting Teacher Service for children with hearing or visual impairment. It is essential that experienced teachers continue to be recruited as part of the Inclusion Support Service. Therefore the terms and conditions of future employees of the Inclusion Support Service must be attractive to experienced teachers with specialist knowledge in special education.

In addition to courses in special education, tailored professional support and advice should be available to schools where they have identified particular needs within their own community.

The provision of therapy related services, such as speech therapy, emotional counselling and mental health support, is currently inadequate, causing a lot of frustration for both teachers and pupils. Primary schools do not have access at present to behaviour support, even though this is an area where primary schools need increasing support.

Having access to professional development and support is essential to teacher wellbeing as the complexity of needs in classrooms grows. A sabbatical leave scheme for teachers, as promised in DEIS must be enacted upon.

Local projects supported by philanthropic funding enabled disadvantaged schools to enhance educational provision to the school community, however, a reliance on philanthropic funding is not sustainable long term. The Department of Education must take responsibility for all funding of DEIS support programmes.

Regular professional development has been lacking in recent years for Home School Community Liaison Programme, School Completion Programme and Early Start and needs to be restored.

Early intervention is crucial for both children with special educational needs and children at risk of social and educational disadvantage. Early Start is a high quality, intensive, early intervention educational programme for children most at risk of educational disadvantage and should be expanded to all DEIS Band One schools.

We need more support for Traveller Pupils. The loss of the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers has left a lacuna in the system. The Educational Welfare Service should be given additional resources to support Traveller families and schools with a high concentration of Traveller families should have additional Home School Community Liaison teachers. Support for Traveller pupils should also be more explicit in the new allocation model for special education posts.

Finally, class size.

Almost all primary school classrooms now include children with special education needs. It is unacceptable that we still have primary classes with more than 30 pupils, including children with special educational needs. Smaller class sizes are essential to support inclusion. The PTR in special schools and classes needs to be revisited in the context that they now include pupils with far more complex needs than envisaged in 1993.

DEIS Band One schools have a more favourable teacher pupil ratio than non-DEIS schools but DEIS Band Two schools do not. It is the view of the INTO that the PTR that applied in 'Breaking the Cycle' of 15:1 in junior classes should continue to apply to the most disadvantaged schools. The current DEIS Band One ratio of 20:1 in junior classes and 24:1 in senior classes should apply to all other DEIS schools.

Go raibh maith agaibh.