

Opening Statement by INTO  
Joint Committee on Education and Skills  
Substitute Shortage/Teacher Supply  
20 February 2018

INTO welcomes this opportunity to address the Joint Committee in relation to the shortage of substitute teachers at primary level, and the broader issue of teacher supply. We were, however, taken aback at being asked to prepare a submission on the “apparent” shortage of substitute teachers, given the clear evidence of the shortage.

INTO’s own ‘sub-search’ facility shows us daily that there are many more schools looking for substitute teachers than there are qualified teachers available. A survey of principals by our colleagues at Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) found that 90% of respondents had experienced difficulty in sourcing a substitute teacher this school year. Every day we are speaking to principals and teachers, who are working at the coalface, in our schools and, let me assure the committee that, for them, there is no “apparent” shortage of substitute teachers. There is only a very real shortage.

The issues of a reliable supply of substitute cover and proper regulation of teacher supply have been of great concern to the INTO for a long time. Our submission details evidence of the problem including testimony from primary principals that have told us how the shortage of substitute teachers is impacting their schools on a daily basis. Dividing classes up and pulling special education teachers to cover for teacher absences has become standard practice in many schools. This is inadequate and unsustainable.

The issue of teacher supply is a complex one, and there are a number of factors contributing to the current substitute teacher shortage. Accommodation costs, especially in urban areas, and cuts to teachers’ pay, particularly for new entrants since 2011 are among them.

We welcome the Minister’s decision, as a short-term measure, to lift the cap on the number of days a teacher on career break can substitute. Encouraging schools to restrict career breaks, however, was offering a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist. Schools have not reported any difficulty in filling long-term absences and these contracts provide a valuable route to permanent positions for many teachers.

It is INTO’s view that the only sustainable way to assure consistent cover of short-term absences is the establishment of proper supply panels. In the nineties, a pilot scheme of substitute supply panels was established. A review of the scheme, conducted in 2002 and published in 2006, found that it was considered a success from an educational point of view but raised concerns about the cost of the scheme as it was being run at the time. The review, however, went on to say that “simple discontinuance is not...a satisfactory option.” It recommended that the scheme be continued, reformed, and

formally reviewed within 3-5 years. Neither reforms nor reviews were implemented and the scheme was ceased at the start of the 2010/11 school year.

INTO believes that many of the administrative difficulties identified by the review can be easily resolved. Advances in communication and technology, including mobile phones and social media, can facilitate quick and effective placement of teachers. Consideration could also be given to the use of part-time contracts or contracts combined with existing part-time hours or job-sharing to enhance the flexibility of delivery.

Our submission also looks at the Striking the Balance Report (2017) of the Technical Working Group established by the Teaching Council and supports its recommendation including the establishment of a Standing Committee on Teacher Supply.

We know that the issue of teacher supply is complex one and that broader economic factors affect the choices teachers make about where they teach. Our submission touches on other short-term solutions to teacher supply issues but INTO believes that pay equality and the establishment of substitute supply panels will contribute to a lasting solution. We look forward to addressing these matters further in the discussion.