

IPPN CEO Páirc Clerkin Opening Statement re. Substitute Teacher Shortage

I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation and the opportunity to speak today in relation to the shortage of substitute teachers in our primary schools. As the CEO of the Irish Primary Principals' Network, I can confirm that this is among the most pressing issues affect primary schools, and school leaders, at present.

There are **many possible explanations** for the reduced number of substitute teachers, including population growth, regulation - which can restrict the availability of teachers, economic factors, improved Pupil/Teacher ratios as well as the high proportion of teachers taking early retirement.

While many schools have had significant difficulty finding available suitably-qualified substitute teachers, certain school types have severe difficulty, including schools who teach through Gaeilge, special schools, island schools, those situated in remote locations and one-teacher schools.

EVIDENCE

There is direct evidence that the situation has become increasingly challenging, and is getting much worse over time. This is confirmed through:

1. **IPPN's consultation** with school leaders, both directly at our conferences and in surveys we undertook in relation to substitute teacher availability – in 2015, 2016 and 2018. Our most recent survey in January confirmed that 42% of schools failed on ten or more occasions to find a substitute teacher.
2. The **CPSMA** also reports that 90% of their schools have had difficulty, since September, in finding substitutes.
3. The **Teaching Council** report *Striking the Balance* also noted significant issues in relation to primary education, including the fact only 64% of absences were claimed for by schools. A key conclusion in the report noted '*significant concerns regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the current substitute teacher system*' and that '*there is a risk that this dysfunction can have a negative impact on the quality of pupil learning.*' IPPN shares those concerns. Schools, particularly principals, are dealing with the shortfall, and with the consequences.

IMPACT ON SCHOOLS

1. The biggest impact of the shortage of substitute teachers is on the **children and their learning**, which does suffer, particularly in the case of longer-term absences.
2. There is a workload impact on the principal, which means their attention is drawn away from leading teaching and learning. In the case of the 59% teaching principals, the situation is far worse, as their own teaching also suffers.
3. Schools are considering revising policies affecting teachers' professional learning opportunities e.g. career breaks, EPV days, secondments and job-sharing.
4. Principals are making decisions that are frankly distasteful, such as asking resource teachers to cover for absences, teaching classes themselves, splitting classes and, in extreme cases, hiring unqualified/partially-qualified people to teach pupils. This is far from ideal. Parents understandably ask challenging questions, and there are no easy answers.

IPPN RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of potential solutions that would at least alleviate the shortage of substitute teachers over the next few years, while the crisis is at its worst:

1. **Supply Teacher Panels** - to ensure trained subs are available regionally - would offer security to new graduates and provide cover for the leadership days of teaching principals. Restoring pay equality for new entrants to the profession would also help retain newly-qualified teachers in Ireland.
2. **4th Year B. Ed. Students** - IPPN strongly believes that the teaching practice element of the fourth year should be considered as an *internship*. This would allow for greater flexibility in the redeployment of host teachers, including to cover for their colleagues' absences.
3. **Job-sharing** - Teachers who are job-sharing should be allowed to provide substitute cover outside of their existing contracted hours, should they so wish - they are currently prohibited from doing so if their contract is in their school.
4. **Allowing more flexibility** in relation to allowing teachers qualified in other jurisdictions, as well as retired teachers, to undertake substitute teaching would alleviate the crisis.
5. **Clearing redeployment panels** earlier and ensuring all teachers seeking work register with EducationPosts.ie and TextaSub would also help.

The DES has taken a number of measures to address the issues relating to the shortage of substitute teachers in the *short term*. However, more needs to be done if schools are to see an improvement in the challenges they face in this regard, particularly in the longer term. This requires collaboration between the DES, the Teaching Council and the teacher training colleges to ensure an adequate supply of trained teachers in the future.