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agus Cuimsitheacha*

**Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on the topic of the
apparent shortage of qualified substitute teachers throughout the State including
issues related to recruitment and retention**

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Opening Remarks to the Oireachtas Education Committee

ACCS welcomes the establishment of the Teacher Supply Steering Group by Minister Bruton aimed at identifying teacher supply issues, the development of a programme of actions on teacher supply and to oversee the programmes implementation. We also acknowledge the work carried out by the Teaching Council facilitating focus groups of relevant stakeholders aimed at identifying difficulties relating to teacher supply and exploring potential solutions. This ongoing work is very significant and we wish those involved every success and are committed to engaging in any process aimed at alleviating the current teacher supply difficulty.

Teacher supply has been the dominant issue among principals and management teams in Community and Comprehensive schools over the last 12 months. You will note from our submission to the Committee, schools are now experiencing difficulty filling full year RPT contracts while accessing qualified teachers in the relevant subject area for casual substitution positions such as sick leave and CPD cover is next to impossible. Students and parents are now expressing concerns that classes are not being taught by qualified teachers.

The findings of the survey are consistent with that of other reports identifying shortages in all subject areas but with particular difficulties in key subject areas such as:

- Home Economics
- Modern Foreign Languages
- Mathematics
- Science and STEM subjects

What has been of some concern this academic year is the difficulty employing qualified teachers for in subject areas that traditionally had a strong supply of teachers. This is an ever-broadening list of subjects. The survey also highlights a significant fall in the number of applicants for positions advertised and on occasion the necessity to re-advertise. For example, in Gaeilge 48% of positions required re-advertising while in Spanish it was 50% and Mathematics 15%. The number of qualified candidates applying for positions has fallen substantially.

The problem appears more pronounced the further East you travel. Dublin itself has the additional dynamic of high living costs and an acute accommodation shortage. This has resulted in a trend where positions are initially accepted only for candidates to withdraw when offered alternative positions.

The Main Issues arising:

Contract Vacancies (RPT) – ie positions for a full school year

- Gaeilge: There are simply not enough applicants to fill vacancies. When the survey was completed in early October up to 20% of vacant RPT positions in Gaeilge were being filled by teachers without a qualification in Gaeilge. Gaeltacht schools and schools teaching through Gaeilge report that they cannot recruit sufficient teachers to teach all subjects through Gaeilge.
- Modern Languages: Schools have indicated that they will consider dropping a language or restricting the number of students given access to studying languages because they cannot recruit teachers of French, Spanish or German in sufficient numbers. Neither of these solutions would be beneficial for students or for broadening our language capacity as a nation.
- STEM subjects: most notably Physics, Chemistry and Maths emerged as a serious problem for several schools. Even where the vacancies were filled, the number of candidates attending for interview was less than 5 in almost all cases, and as few as 1 or 2 in 25% of Dublin schools. This is a very worrying trend if we consider the centrality of these subjects for a wide range of career choices.
- Home Economics: on completion of this survey 25% of RPT positions in the Dublin area were being filled by unqualified teachers. In the Leinster region 17% of vacancies were either vacant or schools were trying to put a variety of solutions in place to ensure that students would be taught. Limiting access to Home Economics is one of the options that schools are actively considering.
- Schools were forced to re-advertise and re-interview throughout the summer either because of insufficient applicants or because the appointed candidates withdrew from positions as they had the choice of several jobs. Especially problematic for schools was losing teachers as they were about to re-open, resulting in students being without a teacher in a specific subject for the first few weeks of term or resulting in major time-table changes which impacted on many other staff and put a huge burden of work on Principals and Deputy Principals.
- Schools in the greater Dublin are experiencing even greater difficulty in appointing and retaining teachers. Cost of living and lifestyle choices result in young graduates being reluctant to work in Dublin and also well-established teachers leaving to take up positions in other parts of the country.

Short-term vacancies

There are very few substitute teachers available during the school year. However, schools must accommodate a wide range of leave to which teachers have an entitlement; also unexpected sick leave, in-service substitution and SEC/PDST/JCT work throughout the school year. Most often schools are lucky to have someone to supervise the class and unfortunately must acknowledge that finding a subject specific substitute is almost an impossibility. Students and parents are now expressing concern that classes are not being taught.

The recent ACCS survey results, below, indicate the difficulties experienced by schools in recruiting substitute teachers.

Temporary Vacancies 2016/2017 - Main Areas of Difficulty

Subject	Qualified	Unqualified	Vacant
Gaeilge	28%	62%	10%
French	34%	61%	5%
Maths	37%	50%	13%
Spanish	27%	55%	18%
German	20%	70%	10%
Biology	60%	30%	10%
Guidance	33%	34%	33%
Home Economics	33%	52%	14%

Qualified = qualified in subject area

Unqualified = unqualified in subject area

Vacant = unable to get a subject teacher, supervision of class put in place.

Almost all schools reference serious difficulties in recruiting casual/short term substitutes, especially as the year goes on.

The majority of schools have had to advertise temporary vacancies a number of times – some with ongoing advertisements and no applicants.

A number of schools stated that they are heavily dependent on their PME (Professional Masters in Education) students filling temporary and casual vacancies.

Schools are regularly trying to re-organise timetables, being forced to switch teachers from classes they have been teaching long-term and fill gaps with whatever subs are available. This is disruptive to students and teachers alike and puts a severe administration burden on the school.

Towards solutions – possible actions for consideration

This is a complex and challenging issue with no instant or single solution. Solutions, once identified will take time to activate, the benefits of which will take a number of years to realise.

Therefore, we would suggest both short-term measures, which might alleviate the problem while longer term solutions are considered, will be necessary. Among the issue we believe merit consideration are the following:

- Recognise that a four-year degree programme, followed by a two year PME is acting as a disincentive to entry into the teaching profession. Teaching in Ireland has always been recognised for the high quality of its teachers. These teachers were fully qualified/trained within a maximum of 4yrs and yet delivered the highest standards of education to students. Lengthening degree programmes and initial teacher training may have the unintended consequence of reducing both the quantity and quality of applicants. Teacher training is now competing with other degree programmes, shorter in duration, with highly attractive and wide-ranging employment opportunities.
- We strongly feel that the second year of the PME is unnecessary and needs to be re-considered. However, even in its current format, year two could be recognised as a year where students could be employed on contract and paid for an agreed number of hours; possibly in the region of 10hrs weekly. Not alone would it alleviate some of the teacher supply problem, but also would alleviate some of the financial difficulties the longer training period presents for students.
- Defer the proposed extension of concurrent degree programmes from 4 to 5 yrs in St Angela's and UL from Sept 2018. Given the critical shortage of Home Economics teachers it does not make sense to create a year without graduates and also further disincentive students from choosing to teach due to extended training periods.
- Lift restrictions on retired teachers in the short-term to enable those willing to return to the work force to do so.
- Expand the number of concurrent degree programmes for undergraduates wishing to pursue a career in teaching. Rather than complete a general degree, followed by a PME, undergraduates should have the option of direct entry to a degree programme which includes teaching training. A limited number of such programmes already exist, producing high standard graduates, who along with their degree qualification, have gained invaluable classroom experience over a 3 or 4 year period.
- Commence a programme of up-skilling/re-training teachers currently employed but with subjects for which there may be an over-supply. The model used to upskill Maths teachers through UL could be used as a model to incentivise teachers to teach Gaeilge and Modern Languages.
- Certificate level courses in Special Education Needs could be offered at undergraduate level, thereby increasing the number of graduates with a qualification and knowledge in this area.
- Offer optional certificate level modular programme at undergraduate level giving graduates the basic language capacity to teach through the medium of Gaeilge. Graduates generally have no exposure to Gaeilge after completing Leaving Certificate (many of whom have completed higher level Gaeilge at second level) and do not feel competent to apply for positions which require them to teach through the medium of Gaeilge. Further supports could also be developed to support those

teaching through Gaeilge. These might include the production of a wide range of subject specific teaching resources in Gaeilge, whereby those not fluent in the language would be better equipped/prepared for the classroom.

- The current perception of teaching as a career is not positive. There is a lack of awareness of the employment opportunities, particularly in the subject areas experiencing shortages. A well-directed public awareness campaign may secure an increase in the numbers applying for teaching as a profession.
- Terms and conditions of employment must be such to compete with careers in other professions. Pay, opportunities for professional development and promotional prospects must be reviewed.

Consideration might be given to identifying particular Target Groups. To that end:

- We must recognise that education is now a global employment market and that graduates are increasingly taking up international employment opportunities. Competition from these markets will only increase. Currently, a significant number of Irish graduates are working abroad. A concerted effort could be made to facilitate some of these people to return to teaching in Ireland. Already in the UK private companies are engaged in managing such 'return pathways' for graduates wishing to return to the UK. A similar model, public or private would merit consideration. In doing so, we must consider what would incentivise such graduates to return from countries where pay, conditions and lifestyle are highly attractive.
- Currently in private sector employment there are many people who, given the opportunity, would consider transferring to the teaching profession if the opportunity to do so existed. Teaching, as a lifestyle choice may be very attractive alternative for a cohort of highly professional, hardworking graduates, seeking a different and in some cases a more 'family friendly' working environment. This would require an investment in 'fast track' conversion courses of a short duration, either grant supported, or tax relief supported to encourage and enable this transition. How often do we hear people say that they regretted not entering the teaching profession but now feel there is 'no way in' other than starting from scratch again?
- Many immigrants to Ireland are qualified teachers but would say that they experience a lot of difficulty when trying to register in Ireland. This issue needs to be addressed so that unnecessary barriers, administrative and financial, are removed.

Comment on Recommendations in the Report ‘Striking the Balance – Teacher Supply in Ireland: Technical Working Group Report’

Recommendation 1 – Establishment of a Standing Group.

ACCS would strongly support the recommendation to establish a Standing Group. There is an urgent need for one body to work with all the stakeholders to identify teacher supply needs and co-ordinate provision to ensure that there is stability in teacher supply going forward. The current problem is both complex and challenging, with no single or instant solution. But one body needs to have on-going oversight of the issue over a number of years whereby existing and emerging needs can be identified and managed. A process has to be put in place to annually identify and address teacher supply needs. A Standing Group, as recommended, would have the capacity to gather up-to-date data, identify emerging needs and make provision for future supply needs in co-operation with all ITE providers.

Recommendation 2 – Specific issues in Irish medium schools, in Gaeltacht schools and in Special Schools

As identified earlier in this submission, the issues related to teaching Gaeilge and through Gaeilge need urgent addressing in a co-ordinated and effective manner. We would support this recommendation.

Recommendations 3 and 5 – Data and Resources

Up-to-date data is central to considering a plan of action and we would support a process that allows annual collection of data. A process is needed to identify on an on-going basis such factors as potential growth/decline in schools, numbers eligible for retirement from the profession, emerging needs etc. The format for collection of data needs to be mindful not to put a big burden on schools. Nor can this work be done in an ad-hoc fashion and therefore needs to be adequately resourced. The suggested five-year period would be sensible as it would allow a Working Group time to properly identify the issues and put a meaningful plan of action in place.

Recommendation 6 – Collaboration

The balance between under and over supply in subject areas must be addressed. It serves neither graduates or schools. Stability of supply can only be achieved if there is co-operation between all providers and if the process is independently monitored. Obviously there are a great deal of sensitivities to be considered here. An independent process is required to oversee and co-ordinate teacher supply.

Conclusion

The Technical Working Group report was completed in December 2015 and recognised the need for immediate actions to be undertaken in the area of Teacher Supply. Since then the situation has seriously deteriorated to the point where schools cannot provide uninterrupted student tuition. Now, there is urgent need to put in place a range of short-term measures to alleviate the problem while more medium to long-term processes are being developed. The immediate establishment of the recommended Standing Group could facilitate the commencement of this process.

But perhaps the current 'problem' might have its benefits. Perhaps it gives us the opportunity to 're-imagine' teaching in all its facets. For decades we could possibly assume that the teaching profession would automatically attract high-calibre under-graduates,