



Fórsa Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on the status of non-teaching staff in schools Tuesday 9th April 2019

Fórsa welcomes the opportunity to address the Committee on the status of non - teaching staff within our schools sector. The Committee has already received our detailed submission on this subject which encompassed problems affecting School Secretaries and Caretakers, Special Needs Assistants, Staff in Education Centres and the School Completion Service. In this opening statement I will focus on the urgent need to address the problems facing our School Secretaries and Caretakers, if time allows I will address other issues in discussion with Committee members.

The Fórsa 'Support our Secretaries' campaign is unusual, it is unusual because it is rare to find an issue raised by a trade union that has seemingly universal support amongst the public, parents, students, colleagues and also across so many political parties.

The lack of public service status for the vast majority of School Secretaries results in low pay, precarious insecure employment, lack of pension provision, lack of sick pay and no holiday pay. These problems can be resolved by transferring School Secretaries and Caretakers onto public service conditions of employment as is the case for the 10% of such staff employed by Education and Training Boards.

Any objective assessment of the employment status of School Secretaries would result in the conclusion that as a group they have been taken for granted, undervalued and ignored both within the schools sector and the political world for far too long.

Many of our members who have worked in schools all their career believe that their work was never valued, that especially in smaller schools, dealing with administration was viewed as something of a vocational obligation not meriting recognition or even fair employment rights. Such perspectives may have been commonplace 50 or 60 years ago but the employment model has not kept pace with the development of our education system and the increasingly complex demands placed on School Secretaries who now carry very significant levels of responsibility within our schools in areas including accounting, banking and audit queries.

It could never have been the intention of policy makers in 1994 to engineer a two tier pay system where those employed by the then VECs (now Education and Training Boards) would remain and continue as public servants, with job security, pension rights and public service pay scales, whilst the 90% of staff paid through the Ancillary grant were left on locally determined conditions of service, required to sign on in the summer months, without access to occupational sick pay, pensions or job security.

Two of the key findings from an independent study commissioned by IMPACT during the 2014 arbitration process were that there was no material difference whatsoever in the work undertaken by 'Department-paid' secretaries and 'ancillary grant funded' secretaries, and that the degree of responsibility for many secretaries would in a public service setting be considered to be at a higher level than the clerical officer scale.

Fórsa believes that the time is right to address this inequality, to ensure that the School Secretary processing complex data on pay and pension rights for teaching colleagues can also access the same themselves, to ensure that as colleagues say goodbye when the school year ends the Secretary is provided with holiday pay in the same way as teaching colleagues, rather than being compelled to claim job seekers benefit for the weeks when there is no pay from the school.

Some progress has been made, in 2015 the union secured the first collective agreement covering pay for Grant funded Secretaries and Caretakers. That agreement expires at the end of this year. Our original claim for public service status was not conceded and whilst the pay award of 2.5% per year represented the first guaranteed pay increase since 1994 for these staff, it did not resolve the central problem that the Department of Education and Skills refuses to recognise staff as public servants in the same manner as teachers and others in the education sector are recognised.

Within any negotiation an employer has to be mindful of rules, precedent and costs, this engagement is no different.

The Committee will be aware that as School Secretaries and Caretakers are not deemed to be public servants they are outside the scope of the Public Services Stability Agreement. Therefore granting them public service status will not breach the terms of the PSSA because they are not part of the Agreement. Granting them public service status will not set any precedents that will cause the PSSA to come under pressure. The costs of conceding public service status are small. The Department estimated the cost of moving staff to public service pay-scales as between €4.5 and €5 million in 2015. This represents a very small proportion the budget for the Department of Education and Skills which was some €10.8 billion in 2019.

Fórsa has formally requested that the Department of Education and Skills agrees to meet to open pay negotiations on an agreement to come into effect once the current deal expires at the end of the

year. Our letters have been acknowledged but the Department has not chosen to engage with us formally or informally on what new deal will replace the existing agreement. This is disappointing to say the least. We are concerned that the goodwill within the political system, including the positive statements from Minister McHugh, have not been reflected in the approach of the Department.

Meanwhile the lottery on employment rights for School Secretaries and Caretakers continues. Parents are currently voting on which school patron they would prefer, the outcome of that process determines if within those new schools, Secretaries and Caretakers will be public servants in an ETB school or if they will continue as second class employees outside the ETB sector paid through the Ancillary grant. This lottery is not acceptable, it is archaic, unfair and should end.

The Support our Secretaries' campaign is designed to highlight the injustices of the current employment model. It is designed to highlight the value of the work carried out by our members. We have tried to convey the esteem in which Secretaries are held by local communities, school colleagues, students and the tens of thousands of parents who trust implicitly the advice of the School Secretary. As a parent myself one call that I always answer is the one from our School Secretary.

In summary I ask that the Committee endorses this Campaign to regularise the employment status of Grant funded School Secretaries and Caretakers. The cost is small, the ask from the employer is small, but the benefits of changing the unfair system will be felt in 90% of our schools across the Country.

If our campaign succeeds, we will see an end the current situation whereby the secretary who after working for 28 years in the same school, who is an integral part of her school community will not retire this year with no pension provision.

Public service designation will ensure that the secretary working side by side with her Department-paid colleague, with the same duties and the same responsibilities but vastly different terms and conditions would finally be paid the same.

The secretary who falls seriously ill and doesn't have the most basic safety net of sick pay would be provided with occupational sick pay in the same way as every other staff group in the schools community.

The many secretaries who feel that signing-on over the summer months is the most degrading part of all the many injustices they face, would finally be paid during the holiday period and would finally be recognised as a valued member of the school community.

On behalf of the members we represent I thank you for allowing us the opportunity of setting out the relevant issues.

