

Teacher conferences

Ban on untrained teachers by September

by Niall Murray
Education Correspondent

INTO — unqualified staff

PRIMARY schools will be told by Education Minister Mary Hanafin not to employ unqualified staff from next September.

This follows growing anger among teachers that thousands of children are being taught by unqualified staff.

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) annual congress passed a motion yesterday directing members not to work with personnel without teaching qualifications who are given contracts of 18 weeks or longer.

Around 400 classes are being taught by staff in this position because of difficulties finding qualified applicants.

Although the move will moderate union policy set four years ago, it should put pressure on schools to employ some of the estimated 200 qualified primary teachers staff currently without work.

Ms Hanafin told delegates in Galway she will write to school boards telling them they should only take on teachers with full qualifications in future.

"Given the doubling of teacher training places in recent years, there is no reason why there should be untrained personnel working on a long-term basis in our schools next year," she added.

As well as the 400 unqualified staff, a similar number of primary teachers hold a higher diploma to teach at second level.

The INTO executive will have to decide to which groups the directive for next September should apply and the nature of their non-cooperation with such appointments, though it is unlikely to lead to strikes.

The amended motion passed by delegates takes a firmer stance than the original proposal by the executive not to work with teachers given contracts of eight months or longer.

Executive member John Boyle said the eight-month motion was proposed to cover the catch-22 situation where schools cannot find a qualified substitute at short notice, a problem particularly common in rural areas. However, the amendment which was passed was not the most extreme, as other proposals had suggested an outright ban on working with any unqualified staff.

This would have caused particular difficulty for small rural schools, who might not have easy access to qualified substitutes to cover illness or maternity leave. Schools in disadvantaged areas also find it difficult to recruit and retain staff.

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Nessa McGowan, Castlebar, Co Mayo, at the INTO annual conference in the Corrib Great Southern Hotel, Galway.

Picture: Andrew Downes

Hanafin warms them up, then leaves them cold

by Niall Murray
Education Correspondent

INTO — Hanafin reception

THIS much was for sure. The applause was spontaneous when INTO president Austin Corcoran referred to last September's replacement of Education Minister Noel Dempsey by Mary Hanafin.

But what was uncertain was if the 750 delegates were cheering the departure of the Meath man or the arrival of the former Government chief whip to the head of the department.

Unquestionably, there is a feeling Ms Hanafin has a clear understanding of the difficulties faced by teachers in classrooms. Neither is

there any doubt about her sincerity in expressing a wish to improve the lot of pupils, particularly those less well-off or with special needs.

She spent three hours pressing the flesh and talking with primary teachers after the opening of their union's annual congress in Galway on Monday night, when delegates were more than willing to speak about their problems with overcrowded classrooms and lack of resources for children with learning disabilities.

But despite the positive

impressions of her oratory skills and the announcement of some details about her plans to tackle educational disadvantage, the lack of any measurable commitment on the INTO's prime goal to reduce class sizes left a bitter taste with delegates.

The representatives of the country's 25,000 primary teachers were not letting the wool be pulled over their eyes by the cajoling and humorous anecdotes from the TD often described as more school-marmish than ministerial.

There were smiles at her news of a scheme of unpaid sabbatical leave for teachers in disadvantaged schools, while last night's announcement to the ASTI conven-

tion of an occupational welfare service for the profession will doubtless be welcome too.

In well-managed political spin style, she will wait until a quieter week on the education front next month to grab more headlines with full details of the disadvantage plan.

While there was none of the heckling experienced by Mr Dempsey and any of his predecessors in recent years, INTO members were clearly disappointed Ms Hanafin had nothing to announce about class size reductions yesterday, apart from plans for senior classes in disadvantaged schools.

There may have been a handful of rounds of

applause in the minister's post-breakfast script, but they were only warming up for the address of general secretary John Carr.

In a polite but firm manner, he made clear to the minister the Government would not be left off the hook on delivery of its promise to reduce average class sizes for all children under the age of nine to 20 pupils.

Nor would the union accept any delay beyond mid-April on the announcement of a new

allocation scheme for staff helping children with special educational needs.

The minister is not slow to remind principals on visits to schools with leaking roofs that she is neither an engineer or an architect.

But unless she can design a strong plan to provide sufficient school staff to meet the requirements of children with special needs and significantly reduce class sizes, she will need to add a political hard hat to her wardrobe.

Early decision on special needs 'vital'

by Niall Murray
Education Correspondent

INTO — special needs

A DECISION on special needs staffing allocations must be made within weeks to end the crisis facing primary schools, Irish National Teachers' Organisation general secretary John Carr said yesterday.

Education Minister Mary Hanafin was unable to give the union's annual congress in Galway a date when they would know their allocations for next year. She said that, while it is proving difficult to find a staffing model to ensure no school loses resources, principals would be told in time to advertise positions and make appointments where necessary.

But Mr Carr reiterated the union's position that a fully integrated system of special education will never work without the addition of at least 1,000 teachers.

"We're going into a third term and schools still don't know where they stand. Pupils and their parents do not know if they will have a service this September, teachers don't know if they will have a job and boards don't know their staffing requirements," he said. "This



Mary Hanafin addresses INTO members. Picture: Andrew Downes

undue delay is unacceptable, unwarranted and wrong. The only thing holding up a final decision is the determination by Government of the number of jobs available to the Department of Education," said Mr Carr. Ms Hanafin said she is

awaiting a departmental review of the scheme announced by her predecessor Noel Dempsey last June before bringing an application for extra funding to the Department of Finance. The system would have provided a net improvement

of just 67 learning support teachers and resource teacher posts, but would also have meant a loss of resources in more than 1,300 schools.

Seán McMahon of the INTO's west Clare branch said the enrolment-based system under review is turning special needs children and their teacher into statistics.

Sheila Coyle from St Joseph's girls' primary school in Mountmellick, Co Laois, said the system is discriminatory because it gives more teaching staff to boys' schools.

Ms Hanafin said she will be asking her department to consider how the role and potential of the country's 108 special schools and 654 special classes can be optimised.

Delegates passed a motion seeking a dual enrolment scheme for some children with special needs to allow them spend a number of hours a week or certain weeks in the year availing of therapies and equipment available in special schools.

International students 'get little for massive fees'

by Michael Brennan

USI conference

INTERNATIONAL students are paying massive fees of up to €15,000 a year to third-level institutions but getting very little in return, The Union of Students of Ireland (USI) said yesterday.

The union said the students were being treated identically to their Irish counterparts, with no account taken of their special needs.

"We're calling on the col-

leges to properly address the needs of international students," said president Ben Archibald.

He said that a systematic approach had to be put in place which would include mentoring for students, support services and even halal meat for the large numbers of Muslim

Malaysian students.

USI is to debate a motion on the issue at its annual conference in Ennis this weekend. More than 240 delegates are attending.

According to the Higher Education Authority, there were students from more than 150 countries in Irish colleges in 2002, including 662 Malaysians, 225 Chinese and 99 Indians.

Mr Archibald said that students studying medicine were paying up to €15,000

each year in fees.

"They're paying massive fees so this is a serious issue," he said.

He said there would also be motions about the problem of mental illness in college.

"There is a level of serious depression and serious stress among young people and the suicide rate has skyrocketed. We want to get Government to identify this as a serious problem," Mr Archibald added.

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