



# **INTO Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills**

**January 2018**

**Substitute Shortage/ Teacher Supply**

**Contact:** Deirdre O'Connor, Assistant General Secretary

**Email:** [doconnor@into.ie](mailto:doconnor@into.ie)

**Phone:** 01 8047701

## Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission in relation to the shortage of substitute teachers at primary level, and the allied and broader issue of teacher supply. The INTO is the largest teacher trade union on the island of Ireland, representing over 43,000 teachers, north and south. The issues of a reliable system of substitute cover, and proper regulation of the supply of teachers are and have been a matter of deep concern to the INTO, over a prolonged period.

## Current Shortage of Substitute Teachers

INTO is somewhat taken aback that we have been invited by the Joint Committee to address the "apparent" shortage of substitute teachers, as if there were a doubt about whether there was an issue or not. However, this would be consistent with the approach which has been adopted by Minister Richard Bruton. Addressing a question for Deputy Joan Burton (Lab) in the Dail on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2017, the Minister stated

*"In overall terms my Department does not have evidence of a recent or current general shortage of primary teachers, including for substitute positions."*

We also note that by November 2017, and in the face of persistent evidence from INTO and school management organisations, the Minister stated

*"I am aware that some schools have reported difficulties in recruiting substitute teachers at primary level. Due to the additional positions being created in 2016 and 2017, young teachers now have greater opportunities to take on permanent positions, and as a result some schools may be experiencing issues in hiring teachers to fill temporary or substitute roles".*

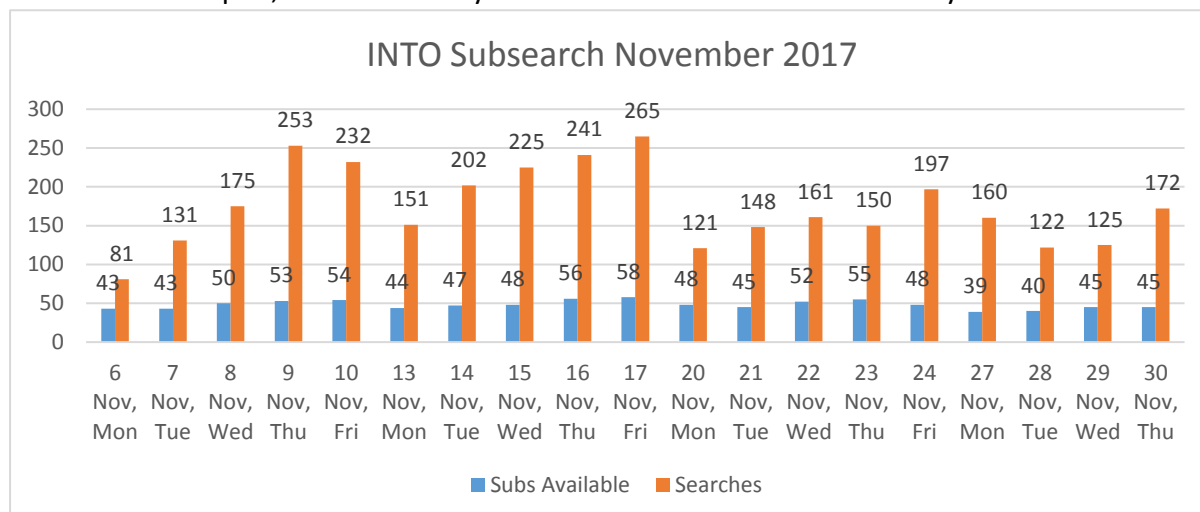
INTO assures the Committee that the problem of accessing qualified, registered substitute teachers is a real one, and one which affects schools on a daily basis.

In early November, our colleagues in the Catholic Primary School Management Association, representing Boards of Management in their employer role published the results of a survey of survey of school principals in late October 2017. 846 schools responded (30% of CPSMA membership). The key findings of the survey were that

- I. 90% of principals experienced difficulty sourcing a substitute teacher
- II. 83% of principals stated that recruiting substitute teachers this year was more difficult than in previous years
- III. between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 27<sup>th</sup> October, their schools had experienced approximately 15, 552 days of substitutable absences of which only 10,328 were covered by a registered teacher i.e. only 66%.

The INTO 'sub-search' service demonstrates the persistent demand for substitutes in the primary sector. The following table demonstrates that during November 2017, the number of searches for substitute teachers exceeded the number of subs available on each day that

schools were open, sometimes by a factor of 4 searches for every teacher available.



In response to a parliamentary question in November 2017, the DES produced the following table in relation to substitutable absences.

**Table: Number of substitutable days and number of substitutable days where no substitute claimed**

Dates	Number of substitutable days	Number of substitutable days where no substitute claimed**
1/9/2015 – 30/6/2016	939,840	65,872
1/9/2016 – 22/12/2016*	353,341	26,817

\*Half school year

\*\* Includes days where no substitute required (e.g. whole school closure for professional development) and days where substitute not due under leave arrangements (e.g. first day of *force majeure* leave)

While the figures include days for which a substitute was not due to be employed (and INTO objects strongly to the lack of cover for the first day of family illness, EPV days etc), the table clearly demonstrated that there were 65, 872 days in the 2015/16 school year when a class did not have a teacher, or special education provision was not available. It can be anticipated that the rising figure for the early months of the 2016/2017 school year will have continued to increase to the present levels. The absence of a substitute for a substitutable absence results in savings to the Exchequer. In November 2016, speaking on the Supplementary Estimates at this Committee, the Minister stated:

*“Estimated savings on primary teacher salaries of €24 million are being projected. These savings arise mainly as a result of lower than anticipated substitution costs, which are difficult to forecast owing to the complexities associated with estimating them.”*

## Impact on Schools

A number of primary principals have been forthcoming in providing examples of how this crisis situation is manifested in their own schools. The Principal of one primary school in County Meath, (with 8 mainstream classes) explained that a maternity post was advertised on Tuesday 31st of October.

*“We have had zero applicants for this position. I have not received a single reply from Text a Sub this year and on INTO Subsearch nearest sub I have seen is 35+km away. I am filling the position on a day by day basis using a retired teacher and a Hibernia student. There have been approximately 8-10 days where I had no sub. To ensure continuity for the class I have moved a full-time Learning Support teacher into 1st since midterm. This was a big ask two months in to the school year. She will take this class for the rest of the year. The subs are now covering Learning Support”.*

The problem is widespread – although it is acute in the Dublin area- and schools across the country are experiencing grave difficulty. A school in County Westmeath advertised for a Maternity Leave starting after Christmas 2017. The principal revealed that only

*“2 applications were received. One was offered a [different] post before the interview. The other applicant has been retired 2 years so will be limited by the number of days she can work before her pension is affected. My pregnant member of staff went off on Health and safety grounds from Tuesday this week. No subs on Subsearch. 18 texts went out on Text a Sub but no response whatsoever.”*

Another school in the Meath area reported details of posts not being filled this year. These include

- 1 Maternity Leave unoccupied since September
- 1 Sick Leave unoccupied since October Mid-Term
- 2 days GAM/ EAL from another school not covered since September as the other school is also short staffed

As outlined above, recruitment issues are now apparent in relation to filling maternity and other long term leaves. As of today (11/01/2018) there are 21 fixed term posts, 7 substitute posts and 34 maternity leave posts advertised on educationposts.ie. There are only 35 teachers available nationwide on Subsearch.

The impact on schools and pupils of unsubstituted absence is well established. Every teacher is familiar with the moment when their classroom door opens at 9.15am and 6 or 7 children from an absent teachers class appear with their chairs and have to be accommodated. One principal stated:

*“We have had lots of the now standard splitting classes also and in a developing school, who narrowly missed out on our second Developing Schools Post, our already super-sized classes can have 35+ pupils on split days! Principal, learning support teachers and Infant teachers once their Infants go home are now regularly standing in piecemeal to cover classes and fill the gaps. We are clustered with another local school for 10hours Learning Support per week. The shared teacher comes for 2 hours every*

*afternoon. We have had to make do without this on 8-10 afternoons this year already as she was covering classes in her base school and could not be released to us. In-class station teaching has become near impossible to organise”.*

The absence of a substitute impacts on the children in the class of the absent teacher, and those children in the classes where they are placed. It impacts on special education provision in schools, and is an additional stressor for principals and teachers. Administrative principals take up teaching duties, leaving their leadership and management duties to be carried forward. Teachers feel pressured into coming to work when they are unfit to do so. Teachers cannot be released for valuable in-service and to attend to other school related business, such as case conferences because other teachers are absent. Certain sectors in primary education, including Irish Medium Schools and special schools and classes also report particular difficulty in accessing substitutes.

### **Why is there a shortage of primary teachers at present?**

The issue of teacher supply is a complex one, and this has been addressed most recently in the Teaching Council report “Striking the Balance- Teacher Supply in Ireland: Technical Working Group Report” (December 2015). We will address this Report at the end of this submission. However, what is clear is that we are approaching the predicted peak of primary pupil numbers. Most recent (2016/2017) statistics show 558, 314 pupils in primary schools, with a predicted peak of 567,369 for 2018. Increasing demographics, the requirement to provide proper support and services for children with special needs, and the need to reduce class sizes at primary level to accepted norms has led to an increase in the number of primary teacher posts to 35,669 in 2017. This year’s budget projects 37,603 teaching posts in primary schools by the end of 2018. The number of teachers qualifying at primary level has remained relatively stable at about 1, 900 per annum, with a significant dip in 2015 due to a change in the duration of BEd course. (see Table 2, Pg13 Striking the Balance). Retirement numbers are also relatively stable (538 in 2016).

It appears to INTO that economic factors are encouraging teachers to make choices about where they teach, and that this is having a significant impact on availability of teachers. Cuts to teachers’ pay, particularly for new entrants to teaching since 2011 have reduced teachers’ ability to make ends meet, particularly in respect of accommodation costs. Highly educated and well regarded Irish primary teachers are in demand abroad, and can earn the equivalent of their salary in Ireland tax-free and often with no accommodation costs. Many primary teachers view a period abroad as the only way to gather a deposit and get a foot on the property ladder. While specific numbers are not readily available, it is clear that there are hundreds of Irish primary teachers in the Middle East alone. Indeed representatives from the various Higher Education Institutions have confirmed that there are active attempts from employment agencies to recruit graduates to work abroad.

Accommodation costs are also impacting on teacher supply in particular areas. Like all public services, the heaviest demand for teachers is in urban areas, and in the east of the country Areas with high accommodation costs find it more difficult to recruit and retain substitute teachers. Principals in the Dublin area have reported engaging substitutes for long term work

(eg maternity leaves) and having those teachers come back to them to say that they cannot take up this work, as they cannot find accommodation.

The Minister has outlined a number of actions he has undertaken to address the issue. These include a welcome extension of the number of days that a teacher can substitute while on career break from 40 to 90. The INTO can see further scope for extending this number, on the basis that while teachers take career breaks for family or caring responsibilities, many welcome the opportunity to do some work during the period. We also suggest exploring whether job sharing teachers could undertake limited substitution work. As an all- island union, INTO recognises that there is a surplus of teachers in Northern Ireland, due to scathing budget cuts which are impacting on school staffing. The Teaching Council must ensure that there is a cost-effective, smooth and timely process for the registration of teachers from Northern Ireland, so that they can undertake work in the Republic. Finally, we welcome the Migrant teacher Project being initiated by Marino Institute of Education, and look forward to its development.

Other measures suggested are less likely to address the problem. For example, the Minister has urged retiring teachers to maintain their Teaching Council registration and work as substitutes. INTO is supportive of our retired colleagues who wish to return to work, in a situation where no registered teacher is available. However, such teachers, when they return to work after retirement are treated as new entrant teachers for the purposes of pay, and are paid at the post 2011 daily rate. For many teachers who retire at the top of the scale, this a huge disincentive to undertake substitute work. The Minister also suggested that student teachers be employed as substitutes. This may be appropriate at certain times of the year, but pressurising full-time students to work while completing their studies is not appropriate.

INTO also rejects outright any proposals that shortfalls in substitution be made up through the employment of unqualified personnel. The enactment of Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act, which means that only registered teachers may be paid from state funds was long sought and hard fought. There can be no dilution of the quality of teaching for pupils.

### **Supply Panels**

It is the long standing view of INTO that the only sustainable way of providing substitute cover for short term absences is a proper supply panel. Pressure for supply panels grew through the early 90's and in 1993, 3 pilot panels were established in Ballymun/Finglas, Limerick City and North Mayo. The scheme was extended to 17 areas and made permanent in 1997. The purpose of the scheme was to provide cover for short term absences through the appointment of teachers to the relevant panels. It also provided for improved conditions of employment for substitute teachers. In 2002, the DES initiated a review of the scheme, which was published in June 2006. The review found that:

*“The Scheme is generally considered by stakeholders to be successful from an educational point of view, particularly where availability issues have not affected levels of service delivery. The Scheme, however, is relatively expensive in terms of the cost per day of substitution, particularly when compared with the daily rates being*

*paid to casual substitutes. Overhead costs and average rates of utilisation of supply teachers on substitution are significant factors in this regard”*

However, it went on to state

*“Simple discontinuance is not, we believe, a satisfactory option. It does have the apparent benefit of lowering substitution costs in the short term. It does nothing, however, to address the current issues around the general quality of casual substitute teaching and the difficulties of providing substitution in areas that are most in need. Neither does it address concerns about the potential risks in casual substitution”.*

The review went on to recommend that in the short term, the scheme be continued and reformed, that the potential for agency supply be investigated and that the scheme be formally reviewed within 3-5 years. However, neither the needed reforms nor the review were implemented, and in Budget 2010, it was announced that the scheme would be ceased from the start of the 2010/2011 school year. The decision was condemned at the INTO Congress in 2010 and the matter was the subject of a debate in the Seanad, but the scheme ceased and the remaining teachers on the scheme were redeployed.

It has been the consistent view of INTO that a reformed supply panel is the only way to ensure a proper system of substitution. Many of the administrative issues identified by the review would be resolved through the use of improved communications and technology. The On-Line Claim System (OLCS) has improved the recording of absences and substitution, and would provide improved monitoring of the system. Improved communications through mobile phones and social media would assist with the placement of teachers earlier in the day. Consideration could 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.

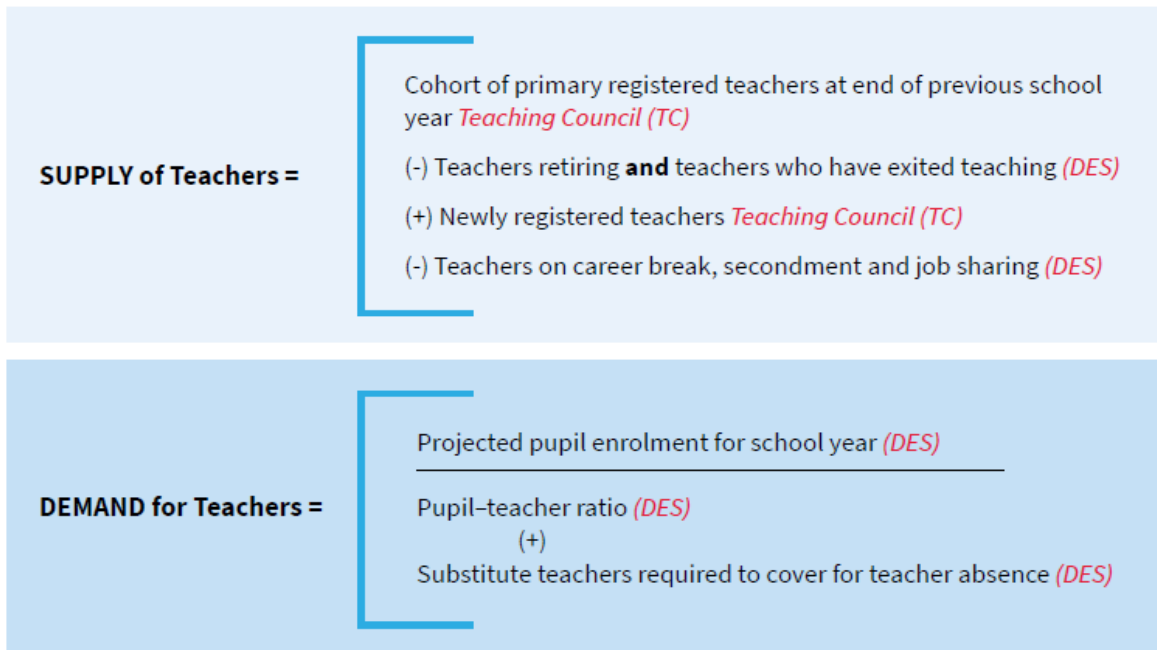
All front line services require a proper system of cover for absence. Primary schools are no different. A proper system of supply panels is required in order to ensure that finding a substitute is not subject to the natural variations which occur in teacher supply on a cyclical basis.

### **“Striking the Balance- Teacher Supply in Ireland ”**

The issue of teacher supply is a complex one. The Teaching Council ( the Council) is charged with advising the Minister on teacher supply and as a key part of this work, a Technical Working Group (TWG) was established by the Council to analyse the arrangements for the planning for the teacher workforce in Ireland. The Report of the TWG “Striking the Balance, Teacher Supply in Ireland” was completed in December 2015, and forwarded by the Council to the Minister early in 2016. Despite many calls for its publication (by INTO and others), the Minister did not publish the Report until June 2017.

In respect of primary education, the Report focusses on the development of a model of primary teacher supply. The TWG carried out a comprehensive analysis of the relevant data with regard to the supply of and demand for primary teachers. The following table from Pg 10 of the Report outlines their model:

Figure 1 - The elements of a teacher supply and demand model



INTO commends the TWG on their data collation, and broadly endorses the model proposed as a model which can be used for planning teacher supply. Using that model, the TWG estimated that demand for primary teachers would peak at 40,461 whole time equivalent (WTE) posts in 2018. However, the TWG accepted that further work would need to be done on the model to ensure its accuracy, and indeed some of the figures would already need to be adjusted to take account of the reduction in the pupil teacher ratio, and increased uptake of leaves such as career breaks, secondments and job sharing. Notably, the Report recognises at about 5,000 WTE posts are required in the system yearly, to cover for statutory leaves (sick leave, maternity, paternity, parental and carer's leaves) as well as short term substitution for principals' release days and professional development etc. Planning of teacher supply must include this realistic figure.

The TWG concluded that a valid and effective model for projecting teacher demand and supply at primary level can be developed, but that the assumption and inputs would have to be reviewed annually. It proposes a Standing Group on Teacher Supply (comprised of the DES, HEA and the Teaching Council) to build on the work of the TWG. INTO believes that the teacher unions have a valuable role to play in this work and should be included in any such Standing Group. The TWG further recommends that appropriate resources be provided to the DES and the Teaching Council to develop a working model of teacher supply. In relation to primary schools, the TWG recommends that the current substitute system be reviewed with a view to improving its efficiency for schools and teachers. In the current situation, this work is urgently required, and INTO believes that the development of a supply panel system is an appropriate one.

INTO endorses these recommendations, and would like to see an impetus behind action on this matter from the DES and the Teaching Council. We note that the Council convened a Forum on Teacher Supply in October, and that this Forum will meet again in February. At the



Forum, stakeholders identified that actions that they could take on teacher supply, but there is a clear need for a commitment from the DES to provide resources for the further development of a model to ensure a proper supply of teachers in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Primary teaching in Ireland continues to attract the brightest and best school leavers and graduates. The INTO believes that the issues of teacher supply and substitution are complex, and recognises that they do not operate independently of wider factors in the economy, such as pay, migration and housing. The following actions must be taken:

- The restoration of pay equality for new entrant teachers, and a resolution of the housing crisis will be necessary to ensure that primary teaching continues to be an attractive profession, and that the excellent graduates produced by the Higher Education Institutions can be retained to teach in Ireland.
- The establishment of panels of supply teachers to cover all areas of the country is vital. A pilot should be established in the short term. The recommendations of the Striking the Balance report, including the establishment of a Standing Committee on Teacher Supply must be implemented.
- The following options must be explored in the short term,:
  - Extending the number of days subbing which can be done by teachers on career break;
  - Allowing job sharing teachers to substitute on their days not scheduled for work;
  - Addressing the issue of remuneration for retired teachers undertaking work;
  - Ensuring efficient and timely registration of teachers from Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions who wish to work in the Republic.
  - Extending the current principals' release day clusters to all schools with teaching principals.