

I'd like to welcome you all, delegates and guests, to INTO Conference 2021.

If there is one thing, we now know it is that for our own wellbeing we should take time to remember and reflect. Colleagues, before conference starts in full, I'd like us to take a moment to remember those who have died since we last met, whether impacted directly or indirectly by COVID or other circumstances. Many of us have lost someone close at home, in school at work or in your branch.

(Pause)

It has been 14 months since the last INTO conference, can you even remember 14 months ago, there were hand sanitizers at the back, the Minister was in the room and we didn't even have to stand too far from each other at the bar. To say much has changed and lessons need to be learnt is an understatement. So where do we start. Let's start with a positive. **You matter and you make schools matter.**

The holistic support that schools provide both educationally, pastorally and socially is no surprise to the teachers and union officials among us, the wellbeing of children and their families has always been prioritised by the schools and now it's acknowledged it is not only worthy of investment but meets a desperate need. We cannot let that go. Pressure must be maintained. **The legacy of COVID has to be the empowerment of education and a commitment to invest in the future of education and that future includes the workforce as an essential and adaptable resource.**

When the pandemic closed school buildings the public dialogue focused on the 'loss' for children and young people, lost learning, lost opportunities, lost friendships. As teachers we lost our supports, our resources, we battled with new methods of teaching, our home

life and families were impacted but we carried on and INTO was there throughout. **Delegates, we know for those we teach nothing has been lost, with the right support teachers will ensure that everything is done to rebuild a child's confidence, to continue to build on the blocks of learning.** Learning is a continuum of development and growth that with freedom to prioritise and respond this generation of students could be more resilient lifelong learners. **A recovery curriculum is not a short-term fix – it is about embedding a responsive curriculum, one that fits the diverse needs of the young people we have in our classes. Looks to the future they have and provides the skills they need.** There is so much to gain. As school communities we have experienced together a huge challenge, seen the limitations and are calling for change and a re-evaluation of priorities. The independent review of education has a considerable task in front of it but now is the time to grasp that challenge and at every opportunity the voice and experience of the teacher should be listened to and woven into a plan going forward.

We cannot let pass the frank discussions about what education should and can provide for all children and young people.

We must encourage a discussion broader than the simplified cycle of protection for the forced selective system. This year forced the reluctant hand of the Minister and the private companies who are bankrolled by selection, the sky did not fall in, but the delay of the decision caused confusion. It is not for primary schools to support a system that embeds in a 10 or 11yr old's mind that they have not been selected, that their opportunities are limited. The emotional health and wellbeing of all must be prioritised. As this conference has year on year called for, the selection process must be stopped once and for all and a better, inclusive way forward invested in.

Throughout the last year teaching, learning and support continued in the best way we could, with the skills and resources we had to hand. Teachers in special schools continued face to face provision, nursery teachers welcomed children back early to support their specific needs, we all provided for vulnerable children and children of key workers. Colleagues, many of you needed to source your own CPD, deliver lessons on IT equipment that was out of date or inadequate. Often you self-funded updating equipment, buying apps, upgrading Wi-Fi. **The resourcefulness and dedication of the teaching profession maintained education through the pandemic.**

The years without investment into the continued professional development of teachers and appropriate IT equipment was unacceptable then and it is now an unavoidable issue for the Department of Education going forward. We were metaphorically thrown in the creek not only without a paddle, but for some without a canoe.

Schools emptied out the resources they had to families in need, resources that schools now desperately need replenished. The impact and reality of socio and economic deprivation is something our politicians appear to shy from addressing, while in contrast teachers went into homes and faced head-on the needs.

I know this because you have shared your experiences and raised concerns. Colleagues, your voice, experiences and knowledge are important, I'll go further, they are essential to developing provision and an education system that meets need and addresses directly the real issues and identifies solutions. A survey from the INTO is not to make you feel involved it's because as members we **are** involved. Our branch meetings, run by dedicated activists, are an opportunity to feedback to INTO about concerns and issues that are arising. They

are an opportunity to receive updated information, guidance and peer support. Let us all commit to spread the word encourage colleagues to come along to their branch and feel INTO grow even more in strength and voice.

An INTO survey at the start of the school year on the personal impact of blended learning enabled us to share our fears, concerns, success. COVID has impacted differently on all of us. To those of us who have found this time too difficult, the last 14 months do not define you as a teacher. We have been through a crisis, we are hopefully emerging from it, we all have a role to play in the future. Responses received from members have fed directly into the demands INTO made to DE, EA and other employing authorities and the guidance that was provided to all members, to make a manageable and safe working environment at home and in school.

Throughout the past 14 months INTO has taken every opportunity to sincerely and deliberately to contribute and assist DE and the employing authorities in writing guidance that is practical and relevant. It has not been an easy relationship, at times frustrating, when communications go to schools repeatedly on a Friday evening, when requests for responses to guidance only has a few hours to turn around but there has been a positive impact.

**When the expertise and knowledge of schools is drawn on through proactive working with trade unions positive, purposeful and sustainable paths are found.** Going forward a collaborative approach between DE, employing authorities and trade unions is worth investing in. The reality of the classroom demands change and delegates, we are ready to inform and drive forward positive change in education and subsequently implement what will work.

In an early example INTO highlighted to the Department the call from members to address the technological divide, a “virtual classroom” meant nothing if there was no internet, no device, no investment.

Colleagues at a time of worldwide pandemic you stepped up and INTO has been at the forefront on your behalf of pushing the Minister, DE, and employing authorities to recognise the responsibility they had to keep all safe from the risks we faced, to address today’s needs and plan to provide for the future.

To improve the future of education and our work environment, lessons must be learnt and opportunities for change grasped.

School leaders have faced challenges that have pushed many to levels of stress that have made them reconsider whether they can carry on. Most recently the demands and communications from Minister Weir, the Department of Education, the Education Authority, the PHA and parents have all compounded to highlight a crisis.

Investment is not always directly financial for the reward to be immeasurable. INTO will demand through the review of principal and vice principal workload an investment in the work life balance, health and wellbeing of all school leaders. Delegates those of you leading schools, until such time as the review concludes, must put in place what you need to manage your workload and ensure a sustainable work life balance. The current pressures simply shall not continue.

School communities are reliant not only on the leaders of today but those aspiring to be in the future. School communities are reliant on us all.

Teachers providing substitute cover have been a backbone to teaching over the last year. Substitute teachers have kept schools open; classes running and enabled the Engage programme to be delivered and planned for expansion. INTO worked with DE to ensure that no difference was made to a teacher whether permanent, temporary or on a daily contract regarding COVID absence, safety guidance and financial support. With NITC maternity pay has been improved by extending the period of calculation for pay. Whether permanent or temporary our membership of the INTO is the same. Concerns about the safety of teachers who were moving from school to school, class to class could not be dismissed and INTO was and remains forceful at every opportunity to clearly communicate the needs and rights of teachers who are not afforded a contract. INTO focuses on all members, all 50,000 – as members we are equal in provision and fight. Our President Joe McKeown has expressed not only in words but also actions, INTO as a whole Ireland union with shared knowledge, challenges, objectives and strength in numbers.

I have spent enough time looking back over the challenges of the last year. It is time for us all to brace ourselves and our school communities for a future that is progressive, manageable and dare I say enjoyable. The steps forward in pay restoration achieved over the last year have sent a positive and welcome message, the prioritising of addressing workload will enable teaching to be a sustainable profession.

For all of us the demands and pressures in schools had, pre-COVID, already been on a trajectory that was distracting from the classroom teaching and learning, focusing instead on data driven recording, administration, and non-educational accountability. **We were being distracted.** As education has moved through the immense challenges

of COVID it is to be welcomed that the Minister of Education in the North has facilitated a report into underachievement and started the process of an independent review of education. There is the opportunity to establish an education system that is responsive to the children we have in front of us and not the children the system wishes were there. **Every child is entitled to a purposeful and responsive education and every teacher is entitled to the resources to deliver it.**

Many concerns INTO have highlighted before had been put on hold, reprioritised, like addressing our crumbling schools' estate, the domination by selective schools, the significant gaps in SEN provision and school closures but in the review and exploration of education into the future let us call for a rethink of previously accepted ideas. Community is what has got us through COVID. Small schools are the lifeblood of a community. Previous intentions to look at the sustainability of schools has disregarded the fundamental concept of value added, the gains outweighing the cost.

Colleagues I said earlier that lessons need to be learnt and that includes by us. It is the responsibility of each and every one of us to ensure the improvements gained in work life balance are implemented to the full. Our terms and conditions are there to protect and support us. For example, already we have the right and expectation of Directed Time Budgets. These not only ensure a work life balance but with the now guaranteed minimum 10% planning preparation and assessment for every teacher, we are afforded the time to focus on teaching again. I have welcomed the open discussion with EA regarding time budgets, it is this open and honest discussion without agenda but focused on getting it right that has shown how we should be moving forward, together.

A new leadership at the ETI is clearly communicating a change in their agenda, a supportive and collaborative approach achieves far more than previous strategies. The open communication between the ETI and teaching unions is a positive message for us all for the future. The commitment from ETI to discuss with NITC the forward plan before resuming inspections enables a joint, meaningful way forward. Colleagues, let us take this open approach at face value, let us help create an inspection process that supports us all, is appropriate and proportionate and progresses education.

At every conference I have attended I have spoken with passion about the challenges and failings that have impacted on the provision for Special Educational Needs. SEN has been a focus of my 25-year teaching career. My greatest disappointment this year is that I have not impacted as much as I had hoped but it isn't for the want of trying and I believe that continuing clear messages to DE and EA which not only highlight issues but most importantly propose solutions is the way forward.

What has been holding education and teachers back and what could launch us into a positive future? It's simple. Investment.

Education is referred to as a cost.

Education is not a cost it is an investment.

What has been the impact of a lack of investment...

- The need for a report on underachievement. Many of the issues I have covered today are within it. I know them not because of the report but because they are the experiences of me as a teacher in the classroom. There were no surprises in it for those of us in schools. The real benefit of all reports are the



actions that come out of it. To put it crudely putting your money where your mouth is.

- A second impact is the collapse of provision for those with a special educational need and a denial of the long-term effects. NICCY, NIAO and PAC reports have identified numerous concerns and the EA is working to address them but there are additional long terms issues to consider. Ensuring the statementing timescales are met is only half of the challenge, front line provision is essential, there must be a significant increase in the teaching and support provision available. Teachers teach, to use them as only advisors may tick a box, but it continues to fail to meet needs. A stark study identified that speech and language communication needs were prevalent amongst young offenders (66-90% have low language skills). Lack of investment in education is directly impacting the life chances of young people and increasing cost in our judicial system. Investing in education directly reduces costs elsewhere.
- Class size has increased and must be addressed.
- Another impact of lack of investment is a school's estate that is, for many, not fit for purpose. COVID guidance could not be transferred from the page to the classroom. Overcrowded classes made social distancing impossible, ventilation a challenge and resources already limited severely lacking.

I could go on; you have probably listed so much more.

At the start of this I said much has changed – we are all responsible for ensuring that the changes are developed and maintained.

Today I have spoken to you virtually but with absolute sincerity as I have at every meeting throughout my year as Chair of the INTO.

Moving forward we stand strong as members of the only all-Ireland teachers' union. INTO are immediately responsive to the needs of the membership as individuals and as a collective. INTO is well placed to inform the changes needed in education in the immediate, short and longer term. I call on representatives from the other stakeholders in education to ensure that a legacy from COVID is a collaborative partnership with the teaching and non-teaching trade unions to ensure that the much needed and purposeful change is brought about and sustainable.

In moving forward in education, we move forward better together.