

Chairperson, Northern Secretary, General Secretary, colleagues,

It is indeed an honour and a privilege to be with you today, even in this virtual format. I speak today on behalf of 50,000 teachers throughout the island of Ireland, bringing our collective wisdom and experience to address the many challenges we face.

Together we represent teachers in every county and in every area of education. There are INTO members involved at pre-school, primary, post primary and third level education on this island. This gives a depth and breadth to our contribution which cannot be equaled. When **we** speak about education, we speak with authority, experience and expertise. That experience and expertise was most evident in recent times as **you** played **your** part throughout the pandemic. You kept your schools open, you supported all children, especially the most vulnerable children, and you continued to provide high quality education, both remotely and face to face. I applaud and salute your commitment, dedication, and resilience during these trying times and I urge you to keep going until the brighter days are here again.

Your capacity to cope with adversity should not come as a surprise to anyone. Teachers and principals in Northern Ireland have provided a world class education service in the most difficult circumstances for many decades. As the clouds of Covid begin to clear, we know that other dark clouds of uncertainty are gathering on the horizon. You will continue to need the support and solidarity of all 50,000 teachers in the INTO in the days and months ahead.

You will also need an Education Authority that understands the particular problems that affect schools in Northern Ireland and a Minister who is willing to seek solutions and source funding to implement them. It is not acceptable that schools continue to face uncertainty regarding the funding of Covid related supports and the financing of the necessary investments in digital technology. This uncertainty places particular pressures on already over-worked principals and teachers.

Brexit will continue to transform all our lives in the years ahead as relationships are re-defined and the need for interdependence conflicts with desires for independence. Its impact will be felt most keenly in Northern Ireland. Teachers and other workers are deeply concerned about the impact of Brexit on their employment conditions, the economic impact and, most importantly, on the potential catastrophic effect on community relations. Those in authority have a particular responsibility to ensure that a political event that was neither sought by nor approved by so many in Northern Ireland is not allowed to reverse the progress of recent decades.

The continued use of Transfer Tests for pupils transferring to post primary schools remains a blight on the educational landscape in this area. It is simply unacceptable to impose such a high stakes exam on children in their pre-teenage years. It is our considered professional opinion that Transfer Testing, as practiced here is educationally unsound and emotionally damaging for our pupils. The time has long since come to end the process of academic selection in Northern Ireland.

We are also concerned about the emotional well-being of our LGBT+ colleagues. There are approximately 5,000 LGBT+ teachers on this island, 1,000 of them in Northern Ireland. In a survey conducted by the INTO Equality Committee, only 12% of LGBT+ teachers in the North of Ireland have declared their orientation in their school community. Clearly those teachers do not feel safe in their schools. That needs to change.

There is, therefore, a need for stated affirmation and a commitment to equal opportunities, treatment and inclusion by school management and teacher employers to counteract this lack of confidence and comfort. There is also a need for appropriate training and support to empower teachers, management, and other stakeholders to create more inclusive LGBT+ schools.

All boards of governors should publicly affirm their regard for, and support the implementation of, existing equality legislation in the Northern Ireland. It is time that all schools clearly state: "LGBT+ teachers are welcome here". I would encourage all primary schools in Ireland to identify ways to demonstrate their inclusivity.

Schools can do this in any or all of the following ways:

- Displaying LGBT+ staff room guidance posters in the staff room.
- Entering the INTO "Different families, Same Love" competition.
- Making LGBT+ inclusive books available in class libraries.
- Flying the Pride Flag during the month of June this year.

These would be clear signals of your support for LGBT+ teachers and pupils.

On behalf of all teachers, especially INTO members in Northern Ireland, I want to declare our support for a safe environment for children and our teaching colleagues in Palestine. We were all appalled by the horrific stories of the atrocities inflicted on the Palestinian people and, in particular the suffering endured by so many Palestinian children, in recent weeks.

The support and solidarity shown by INTO members involved in the Trade Union Friends of Palestine is an expression of the concerns of this organisation. While a ceasefire is welcome, the certainty of a safe homeland is a basic human right which must be acknowledged.

Finally, in spite of the many challenges ahead, we can face the future with confidence in our own abilities. We know that we have achieved much and overcome many difficulties. We also know that, with proper support, we can achieve even more.