

ASTI Submission
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills
The Status of Non-Teaching Staff in Schools
March 2019

Introduction

The ASTI commends the decision by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills to examine the status of non-teaching staff in schools. Schools are complex social institutions whose mission is focused on the education and wellbeing of young people. Teachers constitute the core professional staffing of schools. However, schools cannot effectively operate without the work on non-teaching staff. Typically, the latter include school secretaries, caretakers and cleaners, and Special Needs Assistants. In this submission, the ASTI will make observation on each category of staff but it would also underline the need to re-consider the language currently utilised. Given the expanding nature of the work of schools and concomitant increase in administration, it would be more appropriate to use the term education support personnel. The latter better communicates the nature of their work in schools and also the fact that they are increasingly enjoined in Departmental policies as regards the implementation of whole-school practices, e.g., anti-bullying procedures, child protection and safeguarding procedures, school attendance strategies, school completion programmes.

School secretaries and caretakers

The status of school secretaries and caretakers is not the same across the three second-level sectors. ETBI and community and comprehensive schools and colleges receive funding in aggregate form – Block Grant and annual budget allocation respectively. On the other hand, the funding of these services in voluntary secondary schools is based on a capitation grant. It is a matter for each school to apply this funding as it sees fit. There is strong anecdotal evidence, underpinned by the work of other trade unions representing non-teaching staff, that the conditions of work are insecure and the salary is based on an hourly rate. According to Forsa, some school secretaries in the voluntary secondary sector earn as little as 13, 000 per annum and must revert to social protection income support during holidays and sick days. Most have no entitlement to pension rights. From a trade union point of view, it is unacceptable that workers doing the same job do not receive the same pay. ASTI fully believes that there should be common salary scale for all school secretaries with standard benefits such as sick pay, holiday pay, pension rights and public sector leave entitlements.

Special Needs Assistants

The introduction of Special Needs Assistants Scheme to support students with special educational needs has been central to the goal of providing inclusive education. The objective of the Scheme is to meet students' care needs and to support students' independent living and social skills. Their work in schools is highly valued and they contribute significantly to other areas of school life beyond their work with individual students. At the same time, in line with emerging understandings of special educational needs and disability more generally, it is appropriate that the purpose and operation of the scheme is subject to review. The 2018 NCSE Policy Paper provides advice to the Minister on a new school inclusion model to provide supports to students with additional care needs. The ASTI notes the Paper's recommendations. The following recommendations are particularly important:

- 1) A front-loaded model so that SNA posts are in the school when the students need them
- 2) Renaming SNAs as Inclusion Support Assistants to better reflect their role in the school
- 3) Creation of regional NCSE support teams comprising a range of professional roles speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, behaviour support therapists and specialist teachers
- 4) Introduction of pilot in-school speech and language therapy demonstration project
- 5) Delivery of health supports to students with complex physical needs, including a nurse-led service
- 6) A national training programme for current SNAs who do not have the Level 5 training certification

Conclusion

Schools are highly complex social institutions whose role is continually expanding to meet new societal challenges and a constantly evolving normative and legislative environment. Schools cannot meet the requirements of society if their funding model does not take into account the complexity of the work undertaken. Non-teaching staff are essential support staff in these complex environments. Their status must be acknowledged and funding mechanisms for schools must be reviewed to ensure that no sector is disadvantaged in terms of its capacity to provide decent working conditions for valued members of staff.