

A DECENT WORKPLACE IN EDUCATION – A EUROPEAN UNION AMBITION

European initiatives on safety and health at work could help to create a decent workplace for teachers. DEIRDRE McDONALD reports.

The European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee in Education is comprised of the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE). It effectively makes the social partners co-legislators for their professional area at European level and brings together employees and employers in education to agree on how to meet the challenges facing the sector.

The Dublin round table meeting focused on the idea of a 'Decent Workplace in the Education Sector'. The meeting was working within the EU and national legal framework for occupational health and safety, which for Ireland is the Safety, Health & Welfare Act, 2005 and other employment legislation. The empirical evidence shows that the main occupational health and safety hazards in the education sector are:

- Third-party violence and harassment at the workplace. The research shows high levels of third-party violence and harassment in the education sector.
- Work-related stress, which is a psychosocial hazard. The EU research shows that workload and role overload were the main stressors. This highlights how the amount of work, together with the multiplication of the areas of responsibility and roles, constitute huge demands on teachers.

It is interesting that the factor which has the greatest influence on the perception of job satisfaction is the issue of trust and fairness, which reinforces the need for high-quality and accountable management in schools.

The input from the European Agency for Safety & Health at Work emphasised the importance of mainstreaming occupational safety and health, risk assessment and preventive measures. This basically means collection, analysis and dissemination of information in schools. The benefits of this approach mean that the management is compliant with its statutory obligations and that the workforce is empowered in relation to their working environment and how it is organised. However, this work needs to be supported at national level.

An Irish initiative

I, as chairperson of the Integrated Workplace Health Management Initiative (IWHMI), gave a presentation on the Initiative's work. The presentation demonstrated a real implementable model for developing and sustaining a decent workplace in line with the work of the European Agency for Safety & Health at Work. This is a joint union–management project with the aims of promoting the health and well-being, preventing illness and supporting return to work for workers in the education sector here in Ireland. This initiative had its genesis in the work of the ASTI Safety, Health & Welfare Committee, which I also chair.

A teacher experiences a potential health breakdown for a multiplicity of reasons. Without appropriate intervention, it is highly probable that he/she will

suffer illness, require time off work and potentially retire early due to ill health. This situation has many serious consequences for the individual teacher, the school as an organisation, students' educational experience, and the Departments of Education and Skills and Public Expenditure and Reform.

These include:

- increased stress
- health breakdown
- loss of income
- organisational disruption
- reduced capacity for organisational development
- negative impact on quality of teaching
- negative impact on educational attainment
- cost of replacement
- cost of early retirement for the individual and the exchequer.

The idea that teachers can continually absorb and deal with an increase in professional demands is pure fantasy! This situation is further exacerbated by the problem of initiative overload and inadequate resourcing within the sector. Empirical evidence demonstrates that mental health issues account for over a third of occupational health assessments (Medmark) and early retirements due to illness (Department of Education and Skills). A further quarter of these are due to musculoskeletal and circulatory disorders, two disorders which frequently have their origin in mental health matters.

The IWHMI seeks to address this problem with the development of a model in line with the approach adopted in Finland and the Netherlands for maintaining workability. This model has three strands – promotion, prevention and return to work. These strands are implemented at individual and organisation (school) level. The need for this approach has become an imperative, with those working in education having further and further demands made on them. In addition, the age of retirement for teachers is increasing significantly, to 68 years by 2028, and the ESRI proposes that it should move to 70 years.

The implementation of this methodology has many benefits for all concerned, both qualitatively and quantitatively/financially. It is a collaborative approach at European, national and individual school level, with the potential to change peoples' working life for the betterment of all involved. It truly promotes and puts into practice the concept of a decent workplace. The initiative is currently in discussion with the Teaching Council for co-funding of phase 1.

See the report on the ASTI motion on “Promoting Worker Welfare” at the ICTU Biennial Conference on page 10.

For more information on workplace safety and health, visit www.osha.europa.eu.