



Aoife Mitchell
Department of Education and Skills

17th December 2018

Dear Ms Mitchell,

Department of Education and Skills – Strategy Statement 2019 – 2021

In response to the request for views on issues which should be reflected in the forthcoming Strategy Statement please below a brief synopsis of the main issues that Fórsa suggests are included.

National Educational Psychologist Service (NEPS)

The Programme for Government contains a clear commitment to increase the number of Educational Psychologists to 238 WTEs. The current staffing complement is 181 WTEs, indicating that only 8 new staff have been appointed since 2016. Fórsa supports the commitments contained within the Programme for Government and suggests that sanction is given to recruit sufficient new staff to reach the desired complement of 238 WTEs by the end of 2019. This objective is deliverable and would greatly assist students in need of services across the Country. We note that the NCSE Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme recommends increasing NEPS staffing and resources.

Special Needs Assistant Scheme

The publication of the NCSE Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme raises many issues of concern to Fórsa members, teachers, students and parents. The review recommends a new structure for providing specific supports to students on a multi-disciplinary basis. In the case of existing and future SNAs, the review recommends changing the job title, role, function and educational requirements for an entire staff group within the public service. This will require many existing roles to change and develop, terms and conditions of employment will have to be reviewed and a completely bespoke new educational programme is required to facilitate any transition to new Inclusion Specialist Roles.

Key to successfully managing any such significant change is consultation with relevant stakeholders including the trade union representing SNAs. Due to the complex nature of the changes suggested Fórsa suggests that a forum be established to discuss the development of this new model involving the NCSE, the Department of Education and Skills and the HSE - where issues such as the educational framework for new Inclusion Specialists can be discussed.

Fórsa does not believe that the changes suggested to the SNA scheme will succeed if consultation is restricted solely to a traditional or adversarial engagement on proposed changes to terms and conditions of employment for affected staff. We are already concerned at the lack of consultation over school pilots as we have not been consulted over increased inputs in pilot schools from our members (Allied Health Professionals) working in the HSE and formal consultation with the NCSE and the Department on the main recommendations to change the SNA scheme has not yet commenced.

We therefore suggest that the next Strategy Statement contains clear commitment to implement the recommendations of the Review by way of collaboration with all stakeholders to ensure a smooth and successful transition.

Accelerating Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions

Fórsa supports the recently published Gender Action Plan for Higher Education. We suggest that as the Action Plan seeks to utilise the Athena Swan model developed by the UK Equality Challenge Unit consideration is given to putting in place two of the key supports that underpin the work of the ECU in driving forward gender equality.

Firstly the requirement for all HEIs not to simply report on the gender balance by grade but to conduct full equal pay audits (HEIs will be required to comply with forthcoming legislation on mandatory gender pay gap reporting), secondly we suggest that all HEIs are required to ensure their pay structures are gender neutral by implementing institution wide analytical job evaluation as recommended by the ECU.

Fórsa also suggests that the Strategy encompass the need to improve gender equality for all staff not only academic staff. Whilst women represent 62% of non-academic staff they comprise only 28% of the highest paid section of the non-academic workforce. Some 81% of the highest paid professional posts are occupied by men highlighting the need for additional career development and training for women in professional, administrative and library roles across the HEIs. Fórsa suggests that our proposal, recently submitted to the HEA, for improvements in training and career development for women in these roles be included within the Strategy.

School Secretaries

Some 90% or 3,500 School Secretaries are employed directly by School Boards of Management. These staff provide a vital service within their schools to students, staff and parents, yet they are outside the scope of the terms and conditions applicable to comparable public servants,

this extends to poor pay, lack of pension provision and other shortfalls. Fórsa believes that School Secretaries should be subject to common terms and conditions akin to public servants including pension provision. There are clear benefits in seeking to recognise the contribution made by this staff group to the success of schools and students, school secretaries are a vital link between schools and local communities and are the day to day first point of contact for parents raising issues and seeking information from their school. Fórsa suggests that the new Strategy Statement should commit the Government to regularising the employment status of School Secretaries by establishing the ETB School Secretary salary scale as the common salary scale for all School Secretaries with access to comparable pension provision.

Education and Training Boards

Fórsa is disappointed that the reorganisation of the ETBs is still not complete some 4 years after new structures were established. We suggest that the Strategy Statement sets out a clear timetable for completing the restructuring of the ETBs through engagement with staff, this would ensure a degree of consistency across the ETB sector and put an end to the continuing uncertainty as to the future direction of local services.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andy Pike', written in a cursive style.

Andy Pike
National Secretary