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Tuesday 7 February, 2017

Dear Mike,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the correspondence you received from the Cabinet Secretary for Education, dated 6 January 2017.

UNISON is disappointed with the response from the Cabinet Secretary. The letter makes reference to a subsidy of £31 towards the registration fee. The fact remains, this subsidy is not guaranteed for future years and could be withdrawn at any stage – a point we made in our recent consultation response on Education Workforce Council (EWC) registration fees. Furthermore, the registration fee level has already increased, yet the subsidy level has remained the same – so school support staff are already worse off.

Whilst we welcome the transfer of £1 million from the Revenue Support Grant to support the registration subsidy for all practitioners, this does not fully address our concerns. School support staff, many of whom are low paid, have not previously been expected to pay for any form of registration, yet there is now the expectation for them to pay an annual expense in order for them to undertake their jobs – the simple implementation of a registration cost means school support staff are financially worse off.

Support staff have reported to us that any additional costs are a burden at a time when family budgets are already stretched and reliance on ‘in work’ benefits is higher than ever. We also have growing concerns about the use of zero hour contracts and agency staff in the education sector.

Further to this, no distinction is made between full and part time members of staff. The 2015/16 Pupil Level Annual School Census for Wales shows that 51% of support staff work part-time compared to 19% of teaching staff. This highlights the disproportionate effect this decision will have on the lowest paid members of staff.

Additionally, we have ongoing concerns about the benefit school support staff get as a result of registration. It is important to note at this point, the EWC code of conduct to professional standards does not exist for school support staff. Therefore, the EWC is currently only able to provide a sub-standard service for support staff. The education system typically focuses on teaching staff – a situation UNISON sees repeatedly replicated in negotiations. This is a fundamental requirement of code of conduct that omits a significant proportion of the workforce. Without addressing the issues of disparity in the sector, there is no value to registering and so it is unreasonable to expect these workers to pay any level of registration cost, irrespective of subsidy.

UNISON also finds it very difficult to accept the Cabinet Secretary's comments:

"I believe there are clear benefits of registering this sector of the education workforce. It has enhanced their status and recognised that they play a vital and valued role in supporting teaching and learning. It also raises and maintains standards, as part of a single and coherent education workforce."

Our experience and that of school support staff generally across Wales is completely at odds with this statement and we would like to see the evidence regarding this point. Qualified teachers in schools and lecturers in further education benefit from nationally agreed terms and conditions, pay levels, progression and professional development which reflect their status. Pay levels for support staff remain low and don't recognise the level of professional commitment and dedication to their pupils that is expected of them in practice.

As noted above, there is no clarity in regard to professional boundaries of support staff roles, no professional standards, no clear structure, varied rates of pay, no standard job descriptions, and hundreds of job titles covering the same roles. Additionally, support staff have had limited access to training and development and what little that is available is susceptible to cuts.

We remain hopeful that registration will achieve the improvements the Cabinet Secretary has laid out in her letter and that there will be parity for all workers across the sector, but we are nowhere near meeting this aspiration.

In fact, this issue has been raised by UNISON once again the week commencing 30 January and addressed in a press release:

Responding to Cabinet Secretary Kirsty Williams AM's statement today on how school supply staff will be managed in future, Jess Turner, UNISON Cymru organiser for schools said,

"We believe that support staff make up to half of the supply workforce and they will feel the taskforce has completely ignored them with this announcement. To not be mentioned at all is a glaring omission which shows that despite the professional registration of teaching assistants and the crucial role all support staff play, they are again an afterthought in the education system.

"The task was to evaluate how the provision of supply staff to schools could be better managed in future and this report has failed to properly answer that question.

"This report goes against the spirit of social partnership. Even though UNISON was asked to meet with the taskforce to discuss this, there is no mention of a single one of the recommendations we made."

ENDS

An example of support staff supply work can be found on this link to the New Directions website. <http://www.new->

directions.co.uk/education/jv_office/cardiff/ Seven out of ten jobs on page one are all support staff roles yet they are not addressed in the report on school supply staff.

Lastly, we are aware that many local government workers who are required to professionally register have the cost of registration met by the employer – examples include town planners, social workers, and human resource professionals. We firmly believe this benefit should be extended to school support staff, who are also local authority employed, especially given that the workforce is dominated by low paid, part-time, women workers.

I hope you find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Jess Turner
UNISON Cymru/Wales schools lead