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# **TUI President’s Address to Minister for Education and youth,**

# **Helen McEntee, TD**

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**David Waters, TUI President**

**Wednesday 23rd April 2025**

# **Congress Speech to Minister for Education, Helen McEntee, TD**

Thank you, Minister. On behalf of the TUI I would like to welcome you, and your delegation, to our Annual Congress, and to congratulate you on becoming Minister for Education and Youth.

The Minister of the day addressing our members has always been a signature part of our Congress and your attendance is very much appreciated. Progress requires both of us to work collaboratively and that is why it is so important that policy makers and practitioners meet on occasions such as these.

Over the past year we have met your Department on a wide range of issues, and while we didn’t always agree with each other, I must acknowledge that both sides always operated with sincerity and integrity.

## **Senior Cycle**

Minister, there can be no doubt that the impending Senior Cycle Redevelopment, is priority number one for our second level members. Let me be clear from the start, teachers welcome progress. We welcome innovation. We welcome opportunities to enhance education and foster a system that prepares our students for an ever-evolving world. But progress must be built on genuine consultation, realistic planning, and practical implementation. Unfortunately, the current plans for Senior Cycle Redevelopment fall well short of this.

## **Delay**

That is why your decision not to delay the accelerated introduction of Senior Cycle Redevelopment is deeply disappointing and, we believe a serious mistake. Given the enormous logistical and educational challenges, a similar failure to delay tranche 2 may bring schools beyond breaking point. Teachers are already struggling, due to the lack of critical information, inadequate resources, and poor quality training. Reckless haste will only make matters worse.

## **Intensive Talks**

Minister, we do welcome the intensive talks you convened based on the written submission made by the TUI, and we will continue to engage in those talks later next week. However, to date these have yielded very little. There are a myriad of issues facing Senior Cycle and unless we see tangible results from these negotiations, the full weight of the Union will be called into action, including possible strike action, to ensure teachers, students, and schools, are not left behind.

## **Teacher Voice**

It was teacher protests in November, before you took office, that led to these intensive talks between the Department and the TUI. Why, we ask, does it invariably require such action for the voice of the expert, the teacher, to be heard.

I acknowledge a positive shift in tone since you became Minister for Education, and there are small signs that we are being listened to - with your announcement of accepting the TUI’s proposal for more appropriate Junior Cycle grade bands, but we will reserve judgement based on the outcome of the Senior Cycle negotiations and what you deliver for teachers.

Minister, teachers have had it with flattery and blandishments. We expect - demand – that the powers that be will talk to us, not about us.

You should be cognisant of this when organising your National Convention in Education, something the TUI absolutely welcome, but I would caution, this cannot become a talking shop for every stakeholder and passerby to discuss teachers and teaching, a subject they know far too little about.

At the Department’s leadership conference this year, every stakeholder - the inspectorate, Department, students, Oide, NCCA, SEC, even the Children’s ombudsman was invited to offer his two cents about Senior Cycle, - guess which stakeholder was once again not asked for their opinion, only the expert practitioner, the teacher.

The Unions, the voice of the practitioners, need to be at the heart of Senior Cycle Redevelopment, if this is to work at all.

## **Teacher Based Assessments**

Already, on numerous occasions during this Senior Cycle journey, we, the practitioners, have had to intercept educationally unsound ideas - most critically, the attempt to introduce teacher-based assessments for Senior Cycle.

One of the most important strengths of the Leaving Certificate is its anonymity. For all its faults, at least the work of every student in the country is marked impartially and objectively, free from external influence. Once again, the experts in education, the TUI, came to the rescue.

For the avoidance of doubt Minister - in case anyone thinks it a good idea to try this again - under absolutely no circumstances will the TUI tolerate such an educationally regressive move, which would fundamentally undermine the student teacher relationship in our classrooms. Consider yourself informed, and warned, of this red line.

## **Resources**

Minister, if Senior Cyle Redevelopment is to succeed there must be a commitment to more resources, both capital and current, so that science labs can be upgraded, and the necessary equipment to implement all aspects of Senior Cycle is readily available. Presently, some schools are far better resourced than others, resulting in a huge discrepancy between lab and sports facilities from one school to another. Senior Cycle Redevelopment should be viewed as an opportunity to create a more egalitarian education system, to level the playing field. The reality is, you can introduce all the changes and redevelopment you want, but if students are still walking into the same outdated laboratories, with the same shortage of materials, with the same underdeveloped resources, this will not be a success.

## **Artificial Intelligence**

Minister, just before you took office, the SEC published guidelines that allow students to use AI providing they reference it. This is one of the most staggeringly naïve decisions I have ever seen. AI is ever evolving, and if it offers a sliver of advantage to students, they will use it. There is no comparison, to researching something and then referencing your research, to artificially generating your whole answer which you have played no active role in creating. We cannot compromise the academic integrity of the Leaving Cert, and it will be completely torn asunder if AI is allowed run rampant through the education system. Minister, you might as well give every student the 40% now.

We have reports of third level institutions moving back to assessing students solely on examinations, due to concerns about assessment integrity, due to AI. AI has a role to play but that role must be carefully defined and regulated. Therefore, the TUI has asked you to establish a dedicated taskforce involving the Department, the Unions, the SEC and the NCCA to develop robust protocols around the ethical use of AI and to monitor AI’s development in education into the future.

## **Additional Assessment Components (AAC)**

We also have a serious concern around the insistence that a minimum of 40% must be allocated to Additional Assessment Components. This exacerbates the AI problem and has the potential to increase inequality in our education system. Those with the cultural capital and financial support at home will make hay with the high percentage value of an AAC; advantage will be heaped on advantage and the marginalised will be distanced even further.

We saw this disparity very clearly during COVID when disadvantaged students struggled because of digital resource deficits. There will be no equality for them if 40% of their grade is now reliant on facilities that they don’t have access to. Senior Cycle Redevelopment cannot become yet another preserve of the privileged.

That is why the TUI believes there must be a more bespoke model, where the subject development group decides on the appropriate percentage for the AAC. What is applicable in Chemistry, does not necessarily fit with English or Maths. This one size fits all, formulaic structure of specifications is quite frankly, ridiculous.

Minister, a review of the 40% model and a subject time audit to see if it is even possible to cover the course in the context of a 40% AAC is absolutely vital, if teacher trust in the redevelopment process is to be ensured.

## **Pupil Teacher Ratio**

Minister, no matter how well-intentioned the plans, the reality is unavoidable. Our class sizes are too large, and teachers’ workload is too demanding. Expecting them to implement significant curricular changes, with new methodologies and resources, while maintaining the high standards we pride ourselves on, is simply unrealistic under current conditions. Particularly, in DEIS schools where resources at home for students are not as readily available. A reduction in the Pupil Teacher Ratio for Senior Cycle could have a profoundly beneficial effect on the future prospects of countless students.

## **Time**

Minister, the resource in shortest supply, is time. Regrettably, to date, TUI’s advice and warnings in this regard have been ignored. If teachers are to implement the new Senior Cycle and meet the new demands that are being placed on them and their students, then there must be a reduction in overall class contact time.

We already have some of the largest class sizes in Europe and invest less than 1% of GDP in Post Primary education, which is shamefully inadequate. If the ambitions for Senior Cycle Redevelopment are to be realised—if we are serious about creating an education system that values all students, recognising the full range of their abilities and talents—then teachers must be given the time to do it right. This is the commitment we need from you, Minister.

## **SCR Delivery**

Put simply, Minister, we need you to deliver for us, if we are to deliver for you. If you are facing opposition from DPER to finance the necessary resources needed – use your political influence with your cabinet colleagues. If you are facing opposition within your own Department – use your electoral mandate to insist teachers’ demands are met. If you are facing opposition from the Management Bodies – use your office to strictly get them in line. We, not they, do the teaching, deliver the goods. They cannot strike, we can.

## **Workload**

Minister, we are facing a crisis in workload across all education sectors, courtesy of the incessant demand for reports, the constant stream of emails, the pointless committees, laborious bureaucracy and the marking mountain that follows us home every evening. There was a time when the primary job of a teacher was *teaching*. We were allowed to focus on the classroom, engage with our students, and create those moments of inspiration and joy that make this job so rewarding.

But over the years, new demands have crept in, with ever more bureaucracy which is making the job just too hard. Administrators may need data for reports. Departments may want documentation for accountability, but teachers need time to teach. Not everything can be put on a spreadsheet. Arguably, the most important work done in a school consists of the intangible aspects of school life that happen every day. The building of relationships, the interest in a young person’s life, the begging, borrowing and stealing to keep the football team going, the endless nights’ practice for the school play, even the chats at breakfast club, which make sure so many of our students start the day with a decent meal and a sense of belonging.

Teachers are tired of being sidelined, Minister. They are tired of being ignored, they are tired of being overworked and they are tired of endless nonsensical initiatives. Minister our members want their profession back – and their personal lives. In order to fulfil this very reasonable ambition you will hear them - and the TUI – on their behalf, deploy that most powerful of words ‘no’.

No to bureaucracy, no to increased workload, no to measuring intangibles, no to overbearing inspections, no to managerial diktat, no to authoritarian management, no to the forever “on”, 24/7 culture, no to new initiatives without resources, no to anything without consultation and agreement with the TUI.

Minister, there has been a fundamental shift over the last ten years, between the Department and teachers, and that is trust. Trusting us to our jobs. You Minister, at the start of a new government, have the chance to repair that trust, so seize that opportunity and remember not everything is measurable, nor should it be, and allow us to do our jobs, and teach.

## **Posts of Responsibility**

Minister, the crisis in workload in education is not inevitable or unfixable. There are immediate measures that would help alleviate some of the problems. Most notably, the full restoration of posts of responsibility to 2009 pre-austerity levels, which is something your Department is committed to since 2016. Sixteen years on since FEMPI’s scorched-earth moratorium, and nine years since the Department agreed to repair the damage caused, it is high time to restore schools to their full complement of posts, to reinstate comprehensive pastoral supports for students and to distribute leadership across the school community. The net results will be higher morale for staff, more efficiently run schools, reduction in stress levels and a better service to students.

In 2012, key allowances were also callously and foolishly axed, causing wounds to the system that have never recovered. You, Minister, have a clear chance to aid in the recovery of the Irish language by restoration of the island and Gaeltacht allowances for teachers.

## **Croke Park**

Minister, nothing expresses the void of meaninglessness quite like the Croke Park Hours. Most people in this room will have lost the will to live on countless occasions due to Croke Park.

Minister, teachers go beyond the call of duty every day and yet this volunteerism is taken completely for granted. As someone who has spent his whole career involved in extra-curricular activities, it is with a heavy heart that I say this, but the attitude towards teachers’ time and this metric-frenzy where every minute must be catalogued is destroying volunteerism.

Eventually the well will run dry, and the amazing hidden curriculum that energises schools every day up and down the country may stop. All because teachers are forced to sit in rooms and perform daft data exercises that have no real bearing on their working lives, or, on the welfare of their students. The ultimate losers, in fact, are the students and the wider community.

Minister, these hours are a relic of austerity and must be removed.

## **Industrial Action**

Minister, the TUI was forced this year to ballot our members in the ETB sector. We could no longer tolerate the spreading tendency of ETB management, at various senior levels, making unilateral changes that increased the workload of our members, altered established practices, and deviated from the terms of collective agreements. An overwhelming mandate was given by members, with 94% voting in favour of taking industrial action.

The TUI prides itself on trying to resolve matters locally, which is why it was so egregious that one of the main management bodies showed total disregard for our members and established procedures. Circular letters were being ignored, and national agreements torn up because the local management felt it didn’t suit them. This will not be tolerated by the TUI.

There are elements of collective agreements that we have entered, that I would like to remove, but I can’t. The TUI honours the agreements it signs, and we fully expect our counterparts to do the same.

Outrageously, some in the ETB sector felt sufficiently emboldened and empowered, to defy not alone this union, but your Department and the previous Minister, and go rogue. This is something, Minister, you are going to have to be cognisant of and address.

Thankfully, there is hope for the sector, and, as a result of the mandate provided by our ballot, negotiations with ETBI have commenced. There is an opportunity for industrial peace within the ETB sector, but it is one all the ETBs must grasp. I am asking you, to ensure that any future deviations from agreed procedures will be dealt with swiftly and decisively.

## **Recruitment and Retention**

**1 year CID**

Minister, it is truly staggering, that I have to address the issue of teacher supply again at Congress 2025. The TUI has warned about this crisis for over a decade. This was forecast well in advance and yet numerous governments have chosen to do nothing to about it.

Second level teachers typically secure their first paid employment at age 25/26. However, only 26% of teachers start on full hours. To put it another way, three quarters of all teachers start with part-time work, often on low hours. Minister, this is a national disgrace, a betrayal of those we encourage into the profession. Moreover, only 11% start on permanent contracts which means that, in addition to being part-time, nine in ten teachers have no credit-worthiness, cannot secure mortgages, and have to defer key life decisions for as long as they remain in financial limbo. What a welcome to the profession!

If teachers are to put roots down in a community and work in schools for the long term, then permanent contracts and a reduction to a 1-year CID for teachers are essential to alleviate this crisis. Therefore, I welcome your decision to accept, and implement, the written proposal made by the TUI, that a teacher should become eligible for a CID following one year of fixed term service. However, it is ironic you have chosen to delay this initiative by one year – and not Senior Cycle, meaning many current members will not benefit from it. That being said, our incisive and deliverable solutions to the recruitment and retention crisis have been ignored for long enough, so this is a positive, impactful step forward, and I applaud this measure.

**PME**

Minister, now that we are in lockstep with our initiatives on how to tackle teacher supply, let me remind you of our other solutions to the recruitment and retention crisis.

Firstly, the absurdity of the 2-year PME needs to stop. It was introduced based on widely discredited data and only serves to reduce the attractiveness of the profession. The direct and opportunity costs of doing the 2-year PME are prohibitively high and the professional benefit highly questionable.

Even the measures designed to soften the financial blow, flattered to deceive. For example, the €2,000 refund scheme, which was only available for one year, turned out, after tax, to be in reality an €800 refund scheme. This is a negligible alleviation in the context of a 2-year course that costs between 12-15 thousand euro and that involves forgoing a year of paid employment.

The 2-year PME completely prices out anyone who might want to return to education or embark on a career change. Saving up to do a one-year course might be possible for some, but two years is an absolute impossibility for most. A recent TUI survey found that 78% of teachers feel they couldn’t afford to enter the profession if they were starting their career today.

Our research demonstrates that 20% of schools have had to drop subjects due to the lack of availability of teachers. This is nothing short of catastrophic for students. Reducing the PME programme to one year would release approximately 1,400 teachers into the system which would offer real support to schools, particular in this era of radical reform in Senior Cycle.

**Incremental Credit**

Minister, we have approximately 4,500 Irish teachers working abroad, in places like Dubai and Australia. Yet we are doing nothing to bring them home. Ireland cannot compete with the lifestyle in some of these countries. However, while we may not be able to offer tax free salaries or free accommodation, we could at least make sure someone is not impoverished on their return. It is ludicrous that someone with 5 to 10 years teaching experience must start on point 1 of the salary scale. Quite rightly, Primary school teachers receive incremental credit for their work abroad. Absurdly, second level teachers do not. Why not Minister?

The TUI has consistently argued for incremental credit for teaching experience, so that, if teachers do choose to come home, they can afford to live here. This is a very basic request and doesn’t even factor in the opportunity cost of repatriation. If we want people to join and remain in the profession, then we must make it attractive.

Minister, you have a chance to make a real impact on education in your term of office. Start by making sure every classroom has a teacher in it. You have taken one bold step. I would urge you now to take two others - issue the circular on incremental credit and halve the duration of the PME.

**Special Education**

Minister, I think it is important to note that teachers have demonstrated impressive adaptability and inventiveness in recent years. In a period of austerity with little to no extra resources we have fully adapted to an inclusive classroom. Despite the workload implications, teachers could see the value of their schools being truly integrated. For this to work into the future, and for our students to receive the best possible school experience it is vital that all supports needed are available. This is why the role of SEN Coordinator, and an L1L2 Programme Coordinator for Senior Cycle need to be full posts of responsibility, additional to the current schedule of posts.

I think we would all agree that the very idea of there not being sufficient school places for students with additional needs is an absolute outrage, and the fact that parents have to lobby politicians, broadcast their stories on the radio and camp outside the Dáil just so their child can receive appropriate schooling, in a country of our wealth, is nothing short of a disgrace.

Waiting times for assessments are reported to be endless. Everyone in this room knows how important early intervention is. These crucial assessments will dictate the access to resources and supports for students and are pivotal for their progression through school. Minister, a lot of promises were made during the last election campaign. If you are to achieve anything in your term of office, make sure the most vulnerable in our society receive a full educational experience with all the resources needed, and that they are not treated just as an add on to the education sector.

Minister, parents shouldn’t have to feel thankful that they got their child assessed, or a place in school. This is a fundamental right, and it needs to start being thought of that way.

**Pension Equality**

Minister, thankfully we have started to emerge from a lost decade in the education sector. Myself and my colleagues who started teaching post 2011 saw the introduction of a new discriminatory pay scale. At the height of pay discrimination, implemented by your party’s government, the pay gap was nearly 30% between a pre and post 2012 entrant. That is a staggering difference, and when I reflect on it, it is amazing the system managed to survive it.

Minister, it is important for you to know, that the only reason pay equality was addressed at all, was because of the TUI. There was never an appetite from government to resolve this. Without constant and relentless campaigning from the TUI for a decade, including strike action, we would still be enduring it. It was eventually consigned to history because second level teachers, in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, gave up part of a 1% pay rise to finally bridge the pay gap for their colleagues. That is what teachers did for each other. I say all of this, not as a history lesson, but because a second element to pay discrimination has not been addressed.

In 2013, new entrants into the public service, including teachers, were burdened with an eviscerated pension regime, compared to their colleagues. The new career averaging pension scheme affects teachers very acutely as teachers have the longest pay scale in the public sector and have limited promotional opportunities.

Minister, the TUI solved pay inequality. You and your colleagues in government must solve pension inequality. The speed to which you tackle this crisis will be testament to your commitment to the sector.

**Housing**

Minister, there is also a much wider issue at play. For post 2013 entrants, pensions are a little pointless, if they are based on you owning your own home.

The depressing reality is that your party have been in government for nearly 15 years in one guise or another, and yet homelessness figures have increased to unconscionable rates, and the mere concept of entering the housing market for our members is as wild a pipedream as ever before.

I ask you, Minister, what is a teacher who started their career in 2013 to do when they retire if they don’t own their own home? How does your government expect them to live? Where does your government expect them to live? Will they be simply cut adrift once they retire.

Minister, I have said it before, and I will say it again, and continue to say it, until radical change starts happening in this country, the housing crisis is a national disgrace, it is the misbegotten product of policy that excessively relies on, and rewards, the private sector, and it is destroying the livelihoods of our members and the hopes and aspirations of our students.

**Gaza**

Minister, across the globe we are witnessing a frightening trend, a resurgence of far-right movements fuelled by fear, misinformation, and divisive rhetoric. This chilling shift can be seen in many countries, including Israel, where the Netanyahu government has long abandoned any civility or moral compass as evidenced by the continued murderous bombing of Gaza. The once held hope for a ceasefire and peace within the region, has been callously dismantled by IDF bombs with no regard for civilian casualties.

I know you will join Congress, Minister, in condemning the brutality of these attacks. However, I would want you to do more. I want you and your cabinet colleagues, to take decisive and clear action that confirms that Ireland remains on the side of the oppressed and the downtrodden. To emphasise that we are not just a vessel of empty words on the international stage, but a country who embraces the bravery of our own past and openly stands in defiance of tyranny.

On behalf of Congress, I want to you to honour your election commitment, and pass the Occupied Territories Bill.

**Rise of the Far Right**

Minister, right-wing movements are not isolated to any one country. Whether it is Putin, Orban, Le Pen, Meloni, Wilders or Trump, the cause of civility and a just society is in real peril. This is a concern to us, both as trade unionists and educators.

Where the far-right is gaining traction, they are exploiting economic inequalities, cultural anxieties, and disillusionment with traditional politics. The consequences of this are profound—particularly for education, freedom of thought, and the democratic values we hold dear.

In the United States and Argentina, there is a concentrated assault on the public education systems and on educators. In the US, grotesquely, the remit provided to the Secretary of Education is to abolish her department! Minister, I am sure you will agree, that education is the cornerstone of all human progress. To both stem the rise of ideologies of hatred and to promote the ideals of decency and democracy, Ireland must make sure the education system has a position of primacy.

Ireland has an extraordinary education system. We outperform most other countries on a consistent basis, despite the chronic underfunding and lack of resources. There is one main reason for this, its teachers and lecturers. So, in this era, where many governments want to silence educators, the TUI insists that you, and your cabinet colleagues, listen to the voice of the practitioners, the experts in the room, and radically increase investment in education.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Minister, you are at the beginning of your tenure as the Minister for Education and Youth. This is a rare opportunity, as you now lead a department and system, that consistently overachieves. However, imagine what our system could achieve if we resourced it properly.

* Imagine if we invested the 7% GDP that Finland invests in education.
* Imagine if every school had proper IT infrastructure.
* Imagine if every school had an appropriate, sustainable building
* Imagine if no school had buckets in the corridor collecting rainwater.
* Imagine if every student got the necessary supports to ensure they had an enriched educational experience.
* Imagine if background or class was no longer an inhibiting factor in educational attainment.
* Imagine if equity and equality were the core principle in every decision within the department.
* Imagine if every school had the necessary resources to implement all of the Department’s grand plans.
* Imagine if every teacher started on full hours and could afford to live locally to their school.
* Imagine a system with less bureaucracy, giving teachers the time to teach.
* Imagine a system that valued and respected the voice and opinion of teachers.

Minister, this is not some wild, far-flung fantasy; this is possible, but you do need to fund it.

If you are as committed as we are to ensuring we build this future for our education system, then I have no doubt, and am fully confident, we will achieve great things together.

Thank you.