

Response by TUI President David Waters to Minister Norma Foley - TUI Annual Congress 2024, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> April

Thank you, Minister, and at the outset can I formally welcome you and your delegation to Congress 2024. It is a long-standing tradition that the Minister for Education and senior officials of the Department attend TUI Congress, and your attendance is very much appreciated. Over the past year we have worked with each other in a variety of fora, and whilst we did not always agree with each other, both sides -acted in good faith, and that must be acknowledged.

### *Gaza*

Minister, before I speak about the Irish education system and the role both the TUI and the Department have played in it, I would just like to reflect on the horrors that we are all witnessing in Gaza. As an education union, our primary focus has been on the suffering of children, and teachers throughout the region. Whether that be the horrific actions of Hamas on October 7<sup>th</sup>, or the continued indiscriminate carnage inflicted on the Palestinian people by the Israeli Defence Forces ever since. I think Irish people have been particularly shaken by the scale of the violence. Minister, I know that you will join us in its condemnation. On behalf of Congress, I ask that you, and your cabinet colleagues, redouble your efforts, do everything in your power, to help secure an immediate ceasefire, to get humanitarian aid into Gaza and to assist in achieving long-lasting peace in the region based on a stable, viable two-state solution.

### *Senior Cycle*

Minister, one of the major impasses of the last year has been in relation to Senior Cycle. Completely avoidable conflict between the TUI and your Department has exacerbated tensions around the efficacy of the new-look Senior Cycle. It started with the proposal to have Paper 1 in English and Irish brought forward to 5<sup>th</sup> year, despite the TUI, our colleagues in ASTI, our students as represented by ISSU and the relevant subject associations INOTE and An Gréasán, expressing grave concerns about its educational validity. Thankfully, sense prevailed, and credit must be given to you for reconsidering the proposal.

Then we come to the suggestion of Teacher Based Assessments. Firstly, on behalf of the TUI, I absolutely welcome the decision to shelve Teacher Based Assessments. However, it would be remiss of me not to express our frustration that teachers still have to battle, time and time again, this idea of marking our own students for state certification purposes. The Leaving Cert, for all its faults, has one great strength, and that is the anonymity for both the learner and the marker. We have consistently made clear in all fora, over a number of years, that any attempt to move to teacher-based assessments would not only be regressive educationally but would also forever damage the relationship between student and teacher in our classrooms, and undermine the very thing that underpins the Leaving Certificate's deserved reputation for excellence – public trust.

You stated that this decision was down to AI and its possible effects on education. We welcome your prudence in this regard as both necessary and timely. I don't doubt for a minute the power of AI, especially Generative AI. I have seen it in action,

and it is very impressive. It is undoubtedly something that we will have to assess and address on a continuing basis.

However, Minister, I also don't doubt the power of tens of thousands of teachers, who strenuously object to the idea. Had AI not emerged as an issue, moving to teacher-based assessments would still be a terrible idea. That is why it is extremely disappointing that you claim AI to be the sole reason for your announcement, and that teachers' professional views didn't figure at all into your decision. Let me be clear, regardless of whatever conclusions are drawn from the SEC research on AI, the TUI are unwavering on this issue, we will not mark our own students for the Leaving Cert.

It is important to state that we are not against change or good, new, innovative ideas, but we are against change for change's sake. Moreover, even good change must be resourced to be good. We have recently seen the creation of two new subjects, Drama, Film and Theatre Studies, and Climate Action and Sustainable Development. Both have the potential to enhance the student experience and to foster creativity, collaborative action, critical thinking, social awareness, empathy and global citizenship. They have the potential to enrich the Senior Cycle, but there are critical questions that remain unanswered. Who is deemed qualified to teach these new subjects? How will they be assessed? What kind of resources will be available for the new subjects? How will equitable access be assured, so that the new subjects do not become just yet another preserve of the privileged? Barring the recent, and welcome announcement of increased allocation to schools who take on these

subjects, we are in the dark. This lack of information, paralleled with the acceleration of the new Senior Cycle is extremely concerning.

The TUI is proud to be a union full of committed educationalists. We believe in the principles of high-quality education for all and have engaged at every opportunity we could to help devise a successful Senior Cycle programme. However, it is regrettable and worrying that the practitioner's voice is often seen as an unwelcome one. It is often forgotten that we are the experts.

Teachers know what will work, and what won't work in our classrooms. We are not some idle bystanders, to be just brushed aside. Only recently at your Senior Cycle event in Croke Park, Minister, you addressed school leaders, the SEC did, the NCCA did, the inspectorate did, the students did, guess which stakeholder was not asked to voice their opinion - Teachers.

We have a proven track record when it comes to educational reform. The removal of ringfencing of LCA, and the development of a new Senior Cycle programme for L2LP students are all TUI ideas. Any meaningful reform needs to engage teachers. Their voice – your voice, delegates, as articulated by the TUI, needs to be paramount if we are to have any progress in the Irish education sector. Teachers are aware of the pitfalls and opportunities that a new course present. They know more than anyone what should be enhanced and what shouldn't. What should be embraced and what shouldn't. What should be encouraged and what shouldn't. Quite frankly Minister, ad hoc announcements without any consultation with us not only inhibits Senior Cycle

Redevelopment, but it is also disrespectful to the teachers who are going to be delivering it.

However, more recently, it must be acknowledged a more inclusive approach is being shown by you, and your department and the TUI did get a chance to make a presentation on our views and concerns to the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Board. Whilst I suspect, you do not agree with everything that we have presented, it is important that you hear it, and on foot of that presentation made by the TUI, I must welcome the further announcements made by you Minister, on specification scaffolding, which was something of great concern to teachers, on sample papers and marking schemes being available before the introduction of Senior Cycle, on CPD being provided for teachers before the implementation of Senior Cycle, and the increased allocation for schools taking on new subjects. These are the types of announcements, and this is the type of information, that teachers and schools need to hear.

One of the biggest unanswered questions is that of resourcing. Minister, we are continually compared to Finland – perceived, as the paragon of educational virtues. Yet rarely is there a comparison between how the Finnish government resources education, and how the Irish government resources education. Finland invests just under 7% of GDP into education each year. Minister, we don't even do half that, and less than 1% goes to post primary education. Despite this chronic underfunding, Ireland continually punches well above its weight in all international metrics -

because of the quality of its teachers. The recent PISA scores confirmed that the Department is getting remarkably good bang for its buck.

If the aspirations of the new Senior Cycle are to be truly achieved, and we are to create a system that values students of all abilities, and fosters all the talents and skills they possess - not just the academic ones – then teachers need time to prepare and deliver it. This is what we expect to hear from you Minister.

Regardless of anyone's lofty ambitions, reality will always win the day. Our pupil teacher ratio is far too high, and teachers' class contact time is far too long. Delivering a new specification, with new resources, through new methodologies, to the high standards we are accustomed to, is not possible when you have 30 students in an inclusive classroom. Perhaps we do need to follow our Finnish brethren, and radically reduce class sizes and teachers' timetables. 40 minutes professional time was granted to teachers to resource reform of Junior Cycle. It is only logical that extensive change at Senior Cycle will need far more than that to have any chance of success.

Appropriate and generous resourcing is essential for successful redevelopment at Senior Cycle. Adequate funding must be provided for all schools, big or small, urban or rural. Equality and equity need to be at the centre of this. If you decide to follow the path of previous pilot subjects, we could end up in a situation where the new bright and shiny schools that volunteer for these programmes get all the new resources, and the rest of the country is left with nothing. It has not gone unnoticed

that many schools were “volunteered” into previous networks by school management without any meaningful consultation with staff. That is not a sustainable option. There is a great irony in that we are now embarking on a study into AI and yet it takes 40 minutes to turn on a computer in my own school. Schools are already at the pin of their collar. Teachers are already overburdened with workload. Such seismic change cannot be done on the cheap.

### *Workload*

Speaking of workload, Minister, what is currently happening in schools is completely unsustainable. The union has abundant evidence from up and down the country of over-burdened teachers, including principal teachers, and rising rates of burnout. In any given school a teacher has to develop schemes of work, literacy plans, numeracy plans, teaching and learning plans, differentiation plans, lesson plans, department plans, SEN plans, CBAs, formative assessment plans, summative assessment plans, digital plans, self-school evaluation plans, extra-curricular activities, retention plans, attainment plans, JCT, NCCA, UDL Plans, attendance plans,

community plans, behavioural plans, pastoral care plans, DEIS plans, inclusion plans, student support plans - and we haven't even entered the classroom yet. Minister, is it any wonder we have a recruitment and retention crisis?

We cannot keep making the profession unattractive, by adding swathes of needless bureaucracy and paperwork. We cannot continue to have our members – teachers, including principal teachers, at high and increasing risk for health issues, due to work overload in the education sector. We cannot continue to tear teachers away from their primary goal, teaching.

### *Posts of Responsibility*

This is why Minister, there must be a restoration of posts of responsibility to -2009, pre-austerity levels. Indeed, this is a requirement under the agreement freely entered into by your Department with the TUI in September 2016. All additions have been welcomed by the TUI, in particular the 500 AP2s announced in the budget, and recently confirmed by your department, that schools can start filling these posts immediately after Easter for commencement in September. However, full restoration means full restoration.

A house minus a roof is not restored. Minister, schools cannot keep working on a piecemeal basis. The percentage of teachers with posts of responsibility is currently far below the 52% mark of 2009. The TUI warned previously of the foolishness of creating additional Deputy Principal positions as opposed to restoring AP1 and AP2 posts. The chance to distribute leadership amongst staff, delegate responsibilities and boost morale in schools was unfortunately thrown away. Now our concerns of an



unsustainable workload have come to fruition. If our collective aim is to have the best education system available, that looks after both the educational and pastoral needs of our students then urgent action is needed. The TUI will be watching the next budget with very keen interest. We will judge your commitment to our schools, our teachers and our students by your practical commitment to the restoration of Posts of Responsibility. Fifteen years on from the appalling damage of the FEMPI-era austerity moratorium and eight years on from your Department's commitment to make good the damage, this is not an unreasonable basis for judgement.

### *Books*

Minister, I must give great credit to you for the announcement of free second level books for Junior Cycle. When you examine the cost of it, it's a wonder how no previous minister did this before, but they didn't, you did, and as a union that represents a large cohort of schools from lower socio-economic backgrounds, I applaud this measure.

This will have a real impact on the lives of families, who are struggling in the current financial climate. That being said, the TUI does have a lot of concerns and questions about how this is to be implemented at a practical level. The administration of this new scheme will be colossal, adequate funding must be provided for this to work smoothly. It cannot just land on principals and teachers to just find a way to resolve it. Unfortunately, there are increasing reports from schools who feel they cannot take on this extra burden as they grapple with the procurement process. I ask you

Minister, to aid every school as much as you can to avoid the increasing of an already onerous workload, and to ensure this scheme becomes a reality.

### *Teacher Supply*

Minister, the TUI, as you know, has been outspoken and warned, many times on why we will, and have, a recruitment and retention crisis in education. More importantly, we have consistently offered solutions to the crisis. Whilst we recognise and welcome the €2,000 refund for 2<sup>nd</sup> year PME students, as any financial help is greatly appreciated, the 2-year PME still 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 2 years is an absolute impossibility for most.

There is a cyclical problem occurring in education. We have a 2-year PME programme, we have a severe teacher recruitment and retention crisis, so, in order to keep schools in any way operational we use these 2<sup>nd</sup> year PME students to plug the gap. Some of these students even have their own timetables, Minister. Halving the duration of the PME, would release approximately 1,400 teachers into the system. I would like to quote a former teacher and someone you know well, the Tánaiste Micheal Martin, who said,

*"If you're working class or your income is limited to what your family can do, the idea of the masters in teaching will be a daunting financial prospect. I think we should be alive to revisiting all that. Pure educationists might say we need two years, but I'm not convinced. I do think we perhaps have to look at, particularly at the post-primary*

*level, that masters process, and the two-year timeline and whether we can shorten that.”*

I couldn't agree more with the Tánaiste. I am one of the lucky ones, I was part of one of the last cohorts that completed their training in one year. A lot of people in this room did it in one year, Minister you probably did it in one year. As teachers, we are all just as capable as those who did a 2-year course. The second year is not an educational panacea, it looks more like a vanity project of the Teaching Council.

Minister, I have raised the issue of giving incremental credit for teaching service in non-EU countries with you directly, and it has also repeatedly come up at the Teachers' Conciliation Council. We were told that this had gone to DPER for consideration, and after months of querying for updates, we later found out that this had not actually happened. Despite how you square that circle, there is no reason why the Department of Education cannot seek approval now for such a scheme. We have just shy of 4,000 qualified teachers in places like Dubai. They are offered benefits that the Irish state just cannot compete with at the moment, tax free salaries, houses, food allowances, the list goes on.

However, what we can do, is ensure that someone who has, say, 10 years' teaching experience is not impoverished on their return to Ireland. They will not come home if they have to start at the bottom of the pay scale. To put it simply, we need teachers, and we have an abundance of them abroad, who trained and qualified in Ireland, yet

we are doing nothing to make the thought of coming home remotely attractive. This crisis will become an utter catastrophe unless serious action is taken. I have wasted many hours of my life at a series of depressing teacher supply meetings convened by the Department, where it is very evident, if it costs money, your officials don't want to know about it. Let's not forget the failure of the Shared Teacher Scheme, which resulted in the appointment of one permanent teacher. The lack of action from the Department has been outrageous and has resulted in all the engagements achieving very little and ultimately wasting everybody's time.

### *Croke Park Hours*

Speaking of wastes of time, let's talk about Croke Park Hours.

I have had some bad days in work, but nothing quite drains the soul, as when your principal introduces some unknown guest speaker to talk to you about something that has no professional, or personal relevance whatsoever.

Minister, teachers are tired. We are tired of the pointlessness of these meetings, we're tired of the box ticking culture that feeds off these hours. Teachers are naturally volunteers, we go way beyond the call of duty, week in, week out. Governments need to understand that a lot of the extra work isn't tangible, and doesn't generate a piece of data. You can't readily document the morale boost to students who get their first start for the school team, you can't write down on a spreadsheet the impact of coming in early to make sure a student is fed, you can't expect teachers and

principals to operate as if they work in a large corporation, because they don't!

These Croke Park Hours are sapping away volunteerism from schools.

Every minute, where teachers are resentfully bored to tears, erodes goodwill and loses hours of voluntary input to the school and the community. Schools can't be kept in austerity-mode forever. These hours were brought in when the country was in freefall, yet, for some misconceived reason, teachers remain tied to what would cost the government nothing to remove. In the name of wellbeing for both the teachers and students, I ask you Minister, do what no other Minister has done before, remove these hours and put the joy back into teaching.

### *Pay and Pension Equality*

Minister, even though I have been teaching for over ten years, I am technically a New Entrant. A concept as farcical as the two tier pay system itself. I started teaching in 2012, the year of the worst pay discrimination in our profession. Salaries for starting in the profession were cut by a third, and morale was on the floor. As a result of over a decade of campaigning by the TUI, including strike action in February 2020, we have done all the hard work to right this wrong. It was teachers standing together in solidarity, giving up a 1% pay rise in the teeth of a cost-of-living crisis, so that their peers and colleagues could receive the value of the PME allowance, so they could finally be viewed as equals. That's what teachers did for each other, and the wider education system. Minister, I ask what will you and your department now do for us?

Other discriminations and disincentives, however, are still in place since 2011, which have made teaching an inhospitable terrain for potential recruits. There is the very significant cost associated with the 2 year PME, the withholding of incremental recognition for the lengthy period of unpaid training, and the abolition of a wide range of allowances. This has resulted in a huge opportunity cost in potential earnings. We are only now emerging from a lost decade in education caused primarily by pay discrimination. Imagine if teachers hadn't sacrificed their own money to balance their fellow teachers' pay – if teachers had cared as little as government seemed to care - where the recruitment and retention crisis would be by now?

To top it all off Minister, those who have entered the profession since 2013 have had imposed on them an eviscerated pension regime that is much inferior to that of their colleagues. The new career averaging pension scheme affects teachers very acutely as teachers have the longest pay scale in the public sector and arguably the most miserly promotional opportunities. We can't keep denigrating and impoverishing the profession if we want to retain the teachers we have, and if we want to attract others to it. So, I ask again, what will our Department of Education do for us?

### *Housing*

There is also a bitter irony that in order for a pension to allow you retire with any dignity, you need to own your own home. Excessive rents, mean a sole pension is in no way sufficient for any comfortable standard of life after a well-earned career. Minister, on behalf of every member of the TUI, and I am not exaggerating when I say this. The abject failure of this government, and successive previous

governments, to tackle the housing crisis, is one of the great disgraces in the history of the state.

Feeble efforts have only exacerbated the problem beyond any previous comprehension. Countless workers, including teachers have had their whole livelihoods stripped from them because of crazed policies based on pure profiteering, which have broken the social contract, almost beyond repair.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude Minister, the TUI is proud of its educational values. It is proud of its social values, including the core principle of equity in and through education. We are a progressive union; we are a union that comes with solutions to problems, but we are a union with high standards, and we make no apology for calling out what we see as unjust, unequal or utterly illogical.

Ultimately, we share a common goal of making an education sector that benefits students of all abilities regardless of background; an education sector where teachers as the expert practitioners are respected, heard, and valued; an education sector that has the resources and capabilities to thrive into the future. Minister, if you are willing to work to that end, then we are more than willing to work with you. Thank you.