



Fórsa's nationwide campaign for respect and fair conditions for all School Secretaries.

A nationwide problem.

A simple solution.

FÓRSA

Pivotal Role – But Undervalued

School Secretaries play pivotal roles in our school communities. The country's 3,500 School Secretaries are the first – and frequently – key point of contact between schools and parents, and they provide the smiling welcome that helps provide reassurance often at very stressful times for families. Secretaries are also the point of contact between the school and the Department of Education & Skills.

However, despite their pivotal roles in the school community, most School Secretaries are very poorly paid, with uncertain short-term contracts which force many of them to sign on during the summer holidays.

It's time that these vital workers in our education system are properly valued, and get just pay and conditions that are appropriate for the key roles they play in our children's education.

Pay Process

In 2015, following agreement to refer the matter, a leading industrial relations expert at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) issued an adjudication which began the process of raising the pitifully low hourly rates for many School Secretaries. The adjudication called for a 2.5% pay increase yearly over four years.

The last instalment to increase School Secretaries' pay will be made in January 2019 and while the terms of the adjudication run until 31st December of next year, the WRC has recommended that negotiations should commence between the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and Fórsa Trade Union to consider a new agreement to operate from 1st January 2020.

School Secretaries are looking for your support in furthering the process of achieving pay justice.

Profound Inequality and Precarious Employment

One of the worst aspects of the situation affecting School Secretaries is that over 10% of the cohort are paid directly by the Department on salaries varying between €24,000 to €44,711 per annum dependent on the whole time equivalent (WTE) number of teachers in the school. However, the vast majority are paid through an 'ancillary grant' paid to a school's board of management which translates into a salary of as low as €12,702 per year – slightly more than a quarter of the pay enjoyed by DES-employed Secretaries at the top of their scale.

In addition, the School Secretaries who are paid through the ancillary grant – unlike all others employed by school boards of management like teachers, special needs assistants and other school secretaries – have:

- No certainty of employment or hours of work – if school numbers drop, then School Secretaries can find that their hours or even their jobs are axed;
- No occupational pension;
- No entitlement to sick leave;
- No entitlement to pay increases resulting from public sector pay agreements;
- No incremental pay increases.

Indeed, many have to apply for social welfare during the school holidays.

Perhaps the worst part of all is that there are schools employing more than one secretary – doing exactly the same work and sharing the same premises – where one is employed on €12,702 per year and another on €44,711 per year. Indeed, the schools themselves make no distinction between the duties to be performed by these different staff – they're doing exactly the same work but have very different terms and conditions. If they were of different genders this would be illegal.

This is simply not fair and is manifestly unjust. And it is no longer acceptable in an Ireland which has the fastest growing economy in Europe.

Where did the Inequality come from?

This inequitable two-tier pay structure emerged during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The original scheme for School Secretaries – for those paid directly by the Department – was established in 1978. This allowed larger schools to appoint School Secretaries and caretakers on a full-time permanent basis. However, from late 1982 onwards, no new appointments were allowed under this scheme.

Lots of schools didn't have the numbers to appoint such staff so from 1985, under the terms of the Social Employment Scheme, these schools could now employ School Secretaries. A new scheme was introduced in the Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP) and from 1994 onwards, all new School Secretaries were employed under the PESP ancillary grant.

These secretaries are not deemed to be public servants – instead they are employees of the schools. Despite this, their already low rates of pay were cut as part of the public service pay cuts made during the earlier part of this decade. This pay cut is currently in the process of being restored.

How does School Secretaries' pay compare?

So how does the pay of School Secretaries compare with other similar workers in Ireland. Below, we've set out a comparison between school secretaries and similar workers in the public and private sectors.

Ancillary Grant School Secretaries

As low as €12,702 (Based on January 2019 hourly floor rate of €13 and avg. working hours of 18.79 per week)

Grade 3 Public Service

€22,893 to € 36,919

Private Sector Secretaries

€24,602 (average) ranging from €18,512 to €35,786

This comparison on headline pay rates doesn't tell the full story though. As was pointed out earlier, unlike their Grade 3/4 Public Service colleagues, the Ancillary Grant-funded School Secretaries don't get sick pay, pensions, incremental pay rises and many don't get paid holidays.

Impact on People's Lives

The precarious nature of the employment for the vast majority of School Secretaries has a significant impact on their lives as the case studies below show.

One of the School Secretaries – who will be retiring next year – will have worked in that school for 30 years and will receive no pension from her job;

Many School Secretaries are struggling to pay their bills – in particular expensive mortgages or rent.

Caretakers Affected Too

School Caretakers are also impacted by many of the same issues affecting School Secretaries. These are the people who keep so many of our schools going and ensure the seamless and smooth running of these very significant operations, whether that is through fixing heating

problems or sanitary issues or carrying out vital Health and Safety responsibilities.

However, despite their pivotal roles in the school community, most School Caretakers are also very poorly paid, with uncertain short-term contracts which force many of them to sign on during the summer holidays.

What needs to be done?

Fórsa Trade Union is seeking to have all of the School Secretaries and Caretakers paid from the ancillary grant put onto Grade 3 or Grade 4 dependent on WTE (whole time equivalent) teaching numbers as per Circular 37/97 of the Department's pay scale.

On a Year One basis, this would cost €4.569 million according to calculations by the Department of Education & Skills in 2014, raising to €16.343 million after 10 years and eventually €21.868 million when all staff hit the top of the scale.

However, these calculations do not take into account the modest increases which have already been paid in recent years, which would reduce the overall cost amount. We are looking for your support for this extremely modest request.

Case Studies

Kathleen O'Doherty



Kathleen O'Doherty has been School Secretary at Scoil Naomh Fiachra – outside Letterkenny, Co Donegal – for the last 22 years. The school is an extremely busy one with almost 600 pupils and over 50 staff.

Kathleen is a grant-paid School Secretary which means she will have no occupational pension when she retires and this is a real concern for Kathleen as she is only a few years from retirement.

"When I retire after loyally serving the wonderful school community at Scoil Naomh Fiachra, I won't have an occupational pension so I will depend totally on the state pension. This means that my current income of €365 per week will almost halve when I retire."

"While I'm in good health at the moment thank God, I'm concerned that if I became ill I'd find it nearly impossible to pay the healthcare costs associated with that. In addition, with just the State Pension to rely on I'm not going to be able to enjoy my

retirement and spoil my five grandchildren as my teaching colleagues in the school can do when they retire."

Claire O'Shea



Claire O'Shea works just outside the scenic village of Beaufort, Co Kerry – right in the heart of the MacGillicuddy Reeks – and is School Secretary at St Francis Special School which has 50 pupils with moderate, severe and profound

intellectual disabilities. Claire loves her work – which is very demanding – because no day is the same and there's always a new challenge to get sorted.

"While there are just only 50 pupils in the school – because of the pupils' needs – my job involves a huge amount of interaction with the parents, various therapists, doctors and of course the school's staff. This includes organising therapy for the pupils as well as medical and dental care and liaising with the parents on all of this too. On top of that there are the usual tasks of typing, printing, ordering and chasing up

materials as well as preparing wages and looking after the accounts."

Claire really enjoys the job but she is hurt by the discrimination that she faces compared to her other school colleagues.

"I work as hard as everybody else on the team and that's why it's really galling – when everyone else is discussing their plans for their summer holidays – I know that I'll be signing on instead. It's simply not fair!"

Hilary Kellett



Hilary Kellett is Secretary to Maynooth Educate Together – a school with 260 pupils in the busy North Kildare commuter town.

Hilary is nine years working in the school and two years ago she was diagnosed with breast cancer and due to extensive medical treatment was unable to attend work for 13 months.

"Getting the news of my diagnosis was a big shock to me as was knowing that I was

facing into a tough treatment programme. However, what made it worse was that my income was reduced by over 50% during this time because I had no entitlement to sick pay – unlike my teaching and SNA colleagues at work. During this time – whilst living on a greatly reduced State benefit rate – I still had to meet my daily costs of living as well as all the other expenses that actually being seriously ill entails (i.e. hospital fees, transport etc). This situation greatly compounded the stress I was already under due to having cancer.

“It is ironic that before I became a School Secretary, I had worked in the semi-State sector and there I got full pay whilst I was on maternity leave. Why can’t this same basic decency be applied to School Secretaries who also get paid from the public purse?”

Maeve Hurrell



Maeve Hurrell has worked for 28 years as School Secretary in the North Dublin National School Project which is based on the Ballymun Road in Glasnevin and is in her last year working in the school.

“As I am coming close to retiring I’m really concerned how I am going to manage in the years ahead. I consider myself lucky that in the early years the Board placed me on a pay scale. They have always been generous but there are so many expenses involved in running the school endeavouring to find funds over and above the grant is yet another problem for the Board. I am the longest serving member of staff and yet when I retire won’t have the same benefits as my colleagues. It’s

upsetting to say the least. The fact that some school secretaries are paid by the Department and others are not is wrong.

“I will miss the school, my colleagues, the parents and especially the children. I count myself lucky to have encountered the many wonderful people my job has brought into my life. Working around children is particularly rewarding – I love it. The work is hard, but as no two days are the same, never dull.

“The Department of Education and Skills should now acknowledge our hard work and treat all school secretaries the same.”

Elizabeth Phelan



Elizabeth (Liz) Phelan is Secretary at Réalt na Mara (Cáilíní) in Donacarney, Mornington, Co Meath where she has worked for over 20 years. Over that time, the school has grown from being a small rural school to a burgeoning one in

Dublin’s commuter belt with over 450 pupils (developing status school), more than 20 teachers and 11 SNAs.

Like the other School Secretaries, Liz loves her job and all of its variety – from providing support for the Principal, Teachers, and SNAs, organising and handling most of the administration, both within the school and also with the Department, to each day liaising with the children, their parents, suppliers, staff, the department, and anyone else who calls to or interacts with the school.

“I love being part of such a busy school, and I relish the daily challenges and variety of what I do. To me it’s so much more than

just a job. However, it’s really disheartening that I’m treated so differently to everyone else working in the school. I have no pay scale, no entitlement to sick pay, and no occupational pension to look forward to unlike all my colleagues. While I really love the job, I do feel that my contribution is not properly appreciated and that the job itself is treated with disrespect. We are not treated or recognised as being members of the school staff, but are instead classed as ‘ancillary staff’.

“The fact that the vast majority of School Secretaries are women has undoubtedly been a factor in the way we’ve been treated by the system. but in addition to this, I feel that the position of ‘School Secretary’ is totally misunderstood and underestimated by the department and by successive ministers. One previous minister is on record as saying that the role a school secretary is simply ‘answering phones and stuff’.

“The Department of Education and Skills say that this issue is a problem for the school boards, and the school boards say the opposite. We have fallen between the two, with neither side taking any interest in our plight. It’s hard to believe in this day and age that we are not accorded the treatment and respect due to this pivotal role in school life, and do not enjoy equality or parity of esteem with our department colleagues.”

“This has to change and as part of the School Secretaries Branch Committee I am committed to addressing the issue nationally.”

We Need Your Support



www.forsa.ie/support-our-secretaries-campaign
to sign the petition to demand respect
and fair conditions for all School Secretaries.