

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Department of Education

INDUSTRIAL ACTION TAKEN BY SUPPORT STAFF OF THE EDUCATION AUTHORITY

Published on Monday 20 May 2024.

Mr Givan (Minister of Education): The following statement provides an update in relation to the strike action taken by Unite the Union, GMB and NIPSA, three of the four unions who represent the Education Authority support staff, because of a Pay and Grading Review which has not been implemented due to funding pressures.

On 13 May 2024 the three unions notified the EA of their intention to take strike action between 20-22 May and on 3-4 June. The strike action has commenced this morning.

It is important to note that the dispute is not about annual pay increases, most EA support staff have their annual salary negotiated nationally as part of the National Joint Council (NJC) arrangements. All relevant NJC annual pay awards, including incremental progression through pay scales, have been approved and implemented and in 2023-24 each pay point on the scale was increased by £1,925 or a minimum of 3.88%, which resulted in an average increase for support staff in Northern Ireland of approximately 8%, at an overall cost of approximately £52m. My Department is currently awaiting the outcome of the NJC negotiations for 2024-25 which, as a contractual obligation, we will also meet.

The dispute is in relation to the implementation of an outstanding Pay and Grading Review which is designed to make a number of adjustments to the current grading system and, in doing so, seeks to address staff recruitment and retention issues. I met with all unions concerned on two occasions, expressing my support and updating them on progress with the business case. The Executive has already indicated a desire to address these issues and the necessary business case has now been approved.

While I recognise the vital contribution made by our support staff and agree that they deserve to be paid appropriately for the important jobs they do, strike action is not justifiable. The Minister of Finance is seeking approval from HM Treasury to bring forward funding set aside under the agreed funding package for future years to allow for additional funding to be accessed in 2024-25. Significant additional funding of c.£180m is required to enable the preferred option to be implemented with a recurrent annual cost thereafter of c.£90m.

The ongoing strike action is causing considerable disruption to the EA bus services across the network, and to the catering service with 700 EA bus routes not running and over 13,000 free school meals children potentially being denied a free school meal. It also means at least eight Special Schools have to close with a further five partially closing resulting in over 1800 of our most vulnerable children not able to attend school.

This action is having and will continue to have a significant detrimental impact on our children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable children with special educational needs. It is also placing additional and unnecessary stress and inconvenience on young people taking part in public examinations, parents, carers and school leaders.

The Education Authority has requested derogations for special school staff, however, the unions have not provided any significant derogations. While the Education Authority has been working to put in place alternative arrangements it is not possible to mitigate the impact of this strike.

It is extremely unfortunate that this action also coincides with a number of public examinations and impact on the ability of some young people who require EA transport to get to school during this period.

While responsibility to make travel arrangements for children sitting exams rests with parents, there may be a small number of pupils who usually avail of EA transport who are unable to make alternative arrangements. In such circumstances, and where other options have been exhausted, some schools may provide assistance with travel arrangements to support pupils to attend their scheduled public exams.

In these exceptional circumstances and limited cases, I have agreed that the Education Authority (EA) will provide financial support to schools to mitigate costs incurred providing support to pupils at risk of missing public exams due to this industrial action. Such funding is available to facilitate attendance at public exams only.

Finally, I have assured the unions that I am working tirelessly along with Executive colleagues to resolve this dispute. However, in the absence of funding and in the context of what is a very challenging financial position, we do not have an immediate solution. I would therefore again ask the unions to end this strike and work with me in seeking an agreed outcome.

While I will continue to monitor the situation over the coming days, it is incumbent on us all to do everything we can to persuade the unions to call off their strike action and prevent further impact on our children and young people whose educational experiences have already been affected over recent years.

I would invite all Members to do so.