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BY EMAIL ONLY

14 March 2017

Dear Mike,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the letter you received from the Cabinet Secretary for Education dated 7 March 2017.

Firstly I would like to highlight that UNISON has never been opposed to the registration of school support staff, so long as it is meaningful and of value. However, whilst the Cabinet Secretary for Education firmly believes that the registration of learning support workers will address a number of issues around status and recognition, we have not seen any evidence to support this to date, nor have we been privy to any forthcoming plans to address the issues we have raised.

Furthermore, it is understandable that the Cabinet Secretary is concerned with the implications of registration in its' broadest sense. For UNISON, however, the constituency we represent is the schools workforce and so that is where our focus rests. As we have previously emphasised, school support staff continue to struggle to get their collective voice recognised within a sector that has always prioritised teaching staff. It is our duty as the trade union for school support staff to ensure school support staff are properly represented and acknowledged for the important role they play in education in Wales.

With a view to professional standards for school support staff, UNISON has held a long-term commitment to support the development of such standards. In fact, UNISON has been involved in a number of working groups that have been initiated to address this issue, only for those groups to then stop with no outcome. Clearly this is a frustration for those who have been involved in those discussions, but more importantly is a disappointment for school support staff. UNISON has been engaged in the working groups the Cabinet Secretary refers to and we have delivered a consistent message on this matter. In addition, it must be noted that, with the broad categories of school support staff registered, the development of professional standards is not a straightforward task. For example, there are hundreds of different descriptors for the same role across Wales. UNISON will continue to engage in this process to help rectify this issue, and we sincerely hope and look forward to an outcome that will address some of the difficulties school support staff experience across Wales.

UNISON continues to promote the Professional Learning Passport. We are directly and constructively involved in the running of workshops across Wales. However, until professional standards are developed and consistency is reached, the PLP will not have the same meaning as it does for the teaching profession. This is not the fault of the EWC who have developed the PLP tool.

In relation to the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice, UNISON took issue at the time with the formation of the EWC Independent Reference Group as it was not a group that allowed the active participation of trade unions. The code was put out for comments at union partnership group, but not for consultation. Problems that were raised at the time have never been addressed. Furthermore, mere attendance at a meeting does not signify agreement.

UNISON is clear the fee level for school support staff increased from £45 to £46 per year and the subsidy increased accordingly on this occasion. The subsidy and the fee are separate matters, and there is no guarantee the subsidy will continue in the long term. The Cabinet Secretary is correct in saying the fee contribution has not increased, but the fee rate has. Additionally, the introduction of the fee has left school support staff financially worse off – irrespective of the amount they are expected to contribute to the overall fee.

With regard to the fee models, UNISON is in agreement with the principles as outlined, but we would also argue that a fourth principle around value for money should be included. If this were the case, then it would become clear very quickly that school support staff do not currently experience value for money from registering when compared to other members of the schools workforce.

It is disappointing that the Welsh Government has opted not to differentiate between full and part-time workers registering with the EWC. Nearly all school support workers in Wales work part-time as a result of term-time only arrangements. For the majority of school support staff, this is not a choice but is a result of inherent unfavourable treatment which has become embedded in the culture across the education sector. Until this matter is addressed and school support staff are treated professionally and in the manner they deserve, UNISON will continue to argue that they should not be expected to meet the costs of registration.

We also feel it is inappropriate and unhelpful to compare the fee level of school support staff with registrants of the General Medical Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council and Health and Care Professionals Council. School support staff have no formal training, do not have automatic access to ongoing professional development, have no entry level requirements and do not have the earning potential of those professionals who can register with the aforementioned bodies.

As outlined above and in previous correspondence, UNISON is committed to and in favour of the registration of school support staff, but we have consistently argued that any registration must be meaningful. Unfortunately this is not currently the case and so we believe it is unreasonable for school support staff to have to meet the costs of registration.

I hope you will find this response useful.

Yours sincerely,

Jess Turner
UNISON Cymru/Wales schools lead