

20.11.02

10 Senator K.L. Moore of the Minister for Education regarding the employment of educational psychologists and wellbeing officers (OQ.301/2020)

Will the Minister advise how many educational psychologists and well-being officers are currently working in the education service; how many, if any, are employed, but currently not working; and how many, if any, of these positions are currently vacant?

Senator T.A. Vallois (The Minister for Education):

I thank the Senator for her question. Out of a total budget, a full-time equivalent of 40 staff, the inclusion team currently has 3 vacancies, which have been recruited to currently, and 3 staff not currently at work. Just to make it clear, that is head of inclusion, psychology and well-being services, special educational needs and disability and our vulnerable children team.

4.10.1 Senator K.L. Moore:

Could the Minister give some indication as to the period of time that these positions have not been working and the reasons for any prolonged period of absence?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

The time out seems to fluctuate from time to time depending on a particular situation in which we find ourselves. The vacancies, as far as I am aware, have not been any longer than the last 9 to 12 months. In terms of they are not currently at work, people of course get ill, but we have got very committed staff and service who share workload but of course this is not sustainable in the long-term arrangement as, I am sure, the Senator can understand and be totally aware of our commitment to try to support and minimise the impact on children. We need to take the steps to provide the necessary resources to provide the full support.

4.10.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

Can the Minister confirm, and I do not know if she said it in the opening answer, she said that there were 3 vacancies but also 3 who are not working at the moment, so that is 6. Out of a total of how many educational psychologists is that?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

It is not educational psychologists, this was head of inclusion, psychology and well-being services, special educational needs and disability and our vulnerable children team. That totals a full-time equivalent of 40 staff but the Deputy is correct that I did state there were 3 vacancies and 3 staff currently not at work.

4.10.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

So by my maths, that is about 15 per cent then of the full staff that should be in those areas are not working. Does the Minister agree that the need for educational psychologists and those related staff at the moment is perhaps even more urgent than it might be under normal circumstances and it is critical that we do not have those vacancies so that the fundamental work of putting our children first does not fall by the wayside?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

Yes, and I would go further than that, I am very keen that we strengthen the capacity of services that support our most vulnerable children. This was the key focus of the education funding review,

which I recently published. One of its recommendations of course was that we commission a full review of inclusion which is going out to tender and currently being procured via an open-tender process. I hope to receive that report of recommendations in the first quarter of 2021.

4.10.4 Senator K.L. Moore:

Is the Minister confident that the current workforce, even when the vacancies are put in place, is adequate to meet the needs of her Education Department and is there appropriate oversight in place in this area?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

The department, or this particular team, have been through a fairly difficult time over the last couple of years, as I am sure the Senator will be aware. Many services have gone through what we call a “target operating model”. We have an interim manager in place at the moment for head of inclusion, so in terms of oversight there is currently tendering in place for a permanent position for the head of inclusion. In terms of sufficient numbers to meet the needs of the demand that we have in our schools, I do not believe it is currently sufficient, hence the reason for the school funding review identifying us employing further educational psychologists but also embarking on this inclusion review so that we can put the appropriate resources in place.