# Northern Ireland’s plan to criminalise teachers over inspection strikes sparks fierce backlash



The Department of Education in Northern Ireland is facing significant backlash over proposals that could criminalise teachers for non-compliance during school inspections. Minister Paul Givan's plan suggests that teachers might incur fines of up to £2,500 for obstructing inspections, a move that follows a period of industrial action that has disrupted inspection processes.

Dr. Graham Gault, the national secretary of the NAHT Northern Ireland, has voiced strong opposition to this move, articulating “deep and serious concerns” regarding proposed legislation that could endanger teachers' rights to participate in lawful industrial action. He emphasised that the opposition is rooted not in a rejection of school inspections, which are seen as essential when conducted appropriately, but in the principle of punishing staff for advocating their rights. “Making this a criminal offence is morally wrong, a shift from partnership to punishment,” Gault stated, urging for solutions that address the underlying issues pushing teachers towards industrial action rather than punitive measures.

The frequency and intensity of school inspections in Northern Ireland have been called into question, with inspections typically occurring every seven years but potentially leading to follow-up assessments. Givan argues that without regular inspections, schools may not receive the necessary support to enhance their educational offerings, particularly affecting vulnerable groups of students. He has encouraged public consultation on these proposed changes, appealing to parents and stakeholders to engage in the conversation about educational quality.

Meanwhile, recent events have highlighted the contentious atmosphere surrounding school inspections. Wellington College in south Belfast recently remained in formal intervention status due to an inspection that could not proceed because of industrial action by teachers. Although the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) noted improvements in student achievements, the inability to carry out thorough inspections raises concerns about accountability and educational standards.

The backdrop to the current proposals includes ongoing industrial action by teachers, which is part of a larger movement advocating for better pay and working conditions. A joint strike plan, which could envelop the entire educational system in Northern Ireland, is set to commence soon, drawing support from multiple teaching unions. This wave of industrial action underscores the broader dissatisfaction within the educational workforce, exacerbated by issues such as budget cuts and the pressures of an evolving inspection regime.

In recent years, numerous factions within the teaching community have expressed discontent with the inspection system. The NASUWT union, for example, has joined the boycott alongside the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, aiming to shield its members from increasing workloads prompted by reduced notice periods for inspections. This demonstrates a collective stance among educators against what they perceive as an overreaching inspection framework that fails to appreciate their contributions or the context of their industrial actions.

As the Department continues to consult on these proposed changes until early July, the ongoing dialogue reflects a tension between the need for effective educational oversight and safeguarding the rights of teachers as essential stakeholders in the educational landscape. The outcome of this debate will be pivotal, not only for the profession but also for the quality of education provided to future generations in Northern Ireland.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/education-minister-warned-over-criminalising-teachers-failing-to-comply-with-school-inspections/a2054707004.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/belfast-grammar-school-remains-in-intervention-after-staff-industrial-action-halts-new-inspection-report/36496153.html> - Wellington College in south Belfast remains under formal intervention after a follow-up inspection was halted due to industrial action by teachers. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was unable to complete the inspection as teachers refused to cooperate. Despite this, the ETI noted improvements in the school's performance, including increased GCSE attainment. The Department of Education stated it will work with the Education Authority to support the school in building on these improvements.
3. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/11/20/norths-teachers-to-strike-on-five-days-over-pay-dispute/> - Teachers in Northern Ireland are set to strike for 12 hours from November 29th, with plans for additional full-day strikes in the spring, amid ongoing disputes over pay. Union leaders warn that the planned action could lead to the closure of every school in the region. The Northern Ireland Teachers’ Council (NITC) comprises five recognised teaching unions, all of which are participating in the strike action.
4. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/now-second-teaching-union-joins-boycott-of-inspections-at-schools/34706508.html> - The NASUWT union has joined the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) in boycotting school inspections at institutions where ATL members are taking action. This decision aims to protect members from increased workload and pressure due to recent changes in the inspection system, including reduced notice periods and additional follow-up inspections. The NASUWT has written to the Department of Education, advising that its members will not cooperate with inspections until the situation is resolved.
5. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/04/26/ni-teachers-and-civil-servants-involved-in-biggest-industrial-action-in-decade/> - Hundreds of teachers and civil servants in Northern Ireland participated in industrial action, described as the largest in over a decade, protesting against pay and budget cuts. The strike, supported by five teaching unions and the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), led to the closure of many schools and disruptions across the region. The unions are campaigning for better pay and against cuts to public services.
6. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/2017/04/08/news/teachers-hit-out-at-inspectors-over-industrial-action-990868/> - Teachers in Northern Ireland have criticised the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) for downplaying the impact of industrial action on school inspections. The Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC) has extended its request for teachers to withdraw from roles as associate inspectors, highlighting concerns over the ETI's assessment of the industrial action and its impact on the inspection process.
7. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/teachers-in-northern-ireland-involved-in-industrial-action-every-year-since-start-of-covid-19-pandemic-QITL24JFFJAJPIC4P3WFLZA63I/> - Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers in Northern Ireland have been involved in industrial action every year, primarily due to disputes over pay. Despite receiving pay increases of at least 12% over four years, teachers have continued to engage in 'action short of strike' measures, impacting tasks such as covering for absent staff and participating in inspections. The latest dispute centres on a rejected 5.5% pay offer.