THIS IS THE full text of the emotional speech delivered by the Secondary School Teacher of the Year, Evelyn O'Connor, on Wednesday in Claremorris, Co Mayo:

*The very first thing I want to say is: 'thanks lads'.This isn't going to turn into an Oscar acceptance speech - but I do genuinely want to thank those of you who nominated me, both those who I teach here in this building and those who belong to my virtual classroom online.*

*I am grateful for this award and I am proud of the part my students played in helping me achieve it.*

*As an English teacher I always tell ye to try to avoid cliches but you'll have to allow me this one:*

*I love teaching. And I know that I am very privileged to have a job that I love.*

*One reason why I love my job is because I believe that teachers can and do make a difference in students lives - I had a teacher who made all the difference to me.*

*My English teacher's name was Mrs.Freeley. She's the reason that I became a teacher and one of the most important things she taught me was that it's okay to be a rebel.*

*She would have been very proud of me today but sadly she's not here anymore, she died last Christmas Eve.*

*It's pretty ironic, to me, that as I'm receiving this award for teacher of the year, I have no idea if I'll have a job in a year’s time.*

*As you know I am not a permanent member of staff.*

*Two English teachers had just retired when I started teaching here; and I went through a rigorous interview process competing to get this job. Another English teacher Ms Shallow retired this year but the contract I'm about to sign will effectively deny me a secure future in this school because of a bizarre bureaucratic nightmare.*

*The school want me here. You the students seem to want me here. And I want to be here.*

*If I go to a different school – which I don't want to do - I have to start my career all over again. And even though I've been teaching for 9 years, it'll be at least another 5 years before I qualify for any kind of job security.*

*Now I haven’t told you my story because I think I'm special or perfect - I’m not. I make mistakes. And I'm not trying to get my story out there because I think I'm special.*

*I've become visible because I created a useful website that students all over the country are using but I'm just a regular teacher, who more than anything wants to teach. And there are so so many non-permanent teachers up and down the country in the same position as me.*

*The government want us and the public to believe that they haven't cut the pupil teacher ratio but this is a carefully crafted illusion.*

*• They have taken away the allowance for career guidance teachers.
• They have taken away the hours which were granted to schools who run the Leaving Cert Vocational Programme
• They have abolished language support for non-nationals and reduced special needs hours or made them non super-numary.
• And they have introduced a redeployment system which means that those who are already in the system can be moved around like pawns on a chess board and those of us who are non-permanent are non-existent.*

*Every time a teacher is redeployed – in most cases against their wishes – a non-permanent teacher loses their job.*

*It seems that in our new low-cost education system, all teachers are equal, but some teachers are more equal than others.*

*If I sound like I'm running for election I apologise. God knows the last thing this country needs is another teacher in the Dail. I don't want to be a politician, I just want to teach.*

*If you are wondering why non-permanent teachers aren't screaming about this from the rooftops - the simple answer is because we are afraid.*

*Teachers aren't popular in this country.*

*We are afraid to even say these things out loud because the government will try to use our complaints as an excuse to make things even worse for all teachers.*

*We're afraid that if we make ourselves visible we might lose our jobs. We're afraid that people will dismiss us as whingers because of our summer holidays.*

*When people looked at me enviously when we finished up a few weeks ago I didn't know what to say to them.*

*I didn't tell them about the ball of anxiety in my stomach wondering if my contract would be renewed; wondering how many hours I'd be granted for next year; wondering if my family and I should just abandon Ireland and set up home somewhere else. I become like Hamlet: I know that “it is not nor it cannot come to good but break my heart for I must hold my tongue”.*

*Well I'm tired of saying nothing and I'm tired of being afraid. Non-permanent teachers have to stop going quietly because our students and our schools are suffering. And because my English teacher once taught me that it was right to rebel against stupidity and injustice.*

*The department aren't interested in my situation or in our school’s difficulties. Schools are a maths equation to them. If you have your quota of allocated teachers to pupils then you just have to make it work somehow.*

*Well I have an exam question for the Education Minister Ruairi Quinn. If he would like to take the time to come down here and tell us exactly how it's possible to timetable 475 pupils for English with just 2 permanent teachers he is more then welcome.*

*The Project Maths teachers would be delighted because this is the kind of real world problem the Minister insists wants students to get to grips with.*

*Of course sadly we know that Ruairi Quinn has no intention of paying us a visit. Both he and our Taoiseach Enda Kenny were invited to attend these awards weeks ago, long before the judges made their decision. They both declined.*

*The irony of this isn't lost on me either. No-one in power seems in the slightest bit interested in encouraging, celebrating and recognising good teaching. Their solution would most likely be to redeploy someone else into my job and leave me on the dole.*

*And believe me I know right now there are hundreds of thousands of highly capable and qualified people in this country who are unemployed. My husband is one of them. But if you have children; if you care about education you should want the hundreds of teachers up and down the country who are losing their jobs to be kept in the system.*

*In this country we are very proud of our national sports, Hurling and Football.*

*But as a teacher for nearly a decade I would humbly propose we add teacher bashing to this list.*

*It's a measure I suppose of the passion Irish people have for education that nothing irritates us more than a teacher who we feel is unfit to teach.*

*I have a 3 year old daughter and I'd like to think that the people who are entrusted to educate her for the next 15 years will be good at what they do and will take it seriously.*

*But despite our national obsession with criticising teachers, I need to point out that the majority of teachers in this country ARE good at what they do and DO take it seriously.*

*And when my daughter Hazel goes to school, that doesn't mean that I'll agree with every decision her teachers make; it doesn't mean that I'll necessarily agree with their style of teaching.*

*Crucially it doesn't mean that I can measure the effectiveness of what teachers do by looking at exam results.*

*They've tried this in the UK and America and it has completely undermined teachers, students and education to the extent that most teachers leave the profession within three years.*

*Measuring teacher effectiveness by exam results only aggravates the problem of 'teaching to the test' instead of offering students a real education and this is a problem that we are already all too familiar with in this country.*

*What I'd really like for us to do as a country though is to have a different conversation. A positive conversation.*

*Let's talk about good teaching. My whole life people - parents, friends, college lecturers, even fellow teachers - have tried to persuade me that I'm wasting my talents being a teacher. But why can’t being a teacher be as prestigious as being a doctor? - A good doctor saves people. A good teacher inspires them.*

*The fact of the matter is, if we want teachers to be proud of, we need to make it a profession you would be proud to be part of.*

*Instead of attacking teachers and tearing their morale to shreds we should be asking what makes a good teacher? and what makes a good teacher great?*

*We should ask how can we keep attracting good teachers to the profession? How can we stop them from leaving teaching? and how can we help our teachers to get better at what they do?*

*And we should, of course, ask what about our students? What do you want to learn? How do you want to learn? Do you want to learn? And what can we do to make this happen?*

*We should also try to figure out the working conditions that make it possible for people to become the best teachers they can possibly be? I teach over 200 pupils. How can I possibly give all of them the individual attention they need?*

*Why do you think I argue so passionately against cutbacks? Is it because I'm lazy? Or is it because cutbacks make me worse at my job through no fault of my own?*

*The reason grinds are so popular in this country isn't because the teachers are rubbish – who do you think are giving the grinds?*

*It's because the ideal pupil-teacher ratio is 1:1.
We've known this since Socrates taught Plato and he taught Aristotle and he in turn taught Alexander the Great.*

*When we elected this government they proclaimed - and I'm going to quote here because as an English teacher I'm a fan of quotes - that “even in our country's crisis, we can make progress in education and protect frontline services”. They promised to “recruit, train and support the highest calibre of teachers”.*

*Well I don't feel very supported and nor do the talented and experienced teachers up and down the country whose jobs are disappearing.*

*Not to mention the new entrants to the profession who thanks to pay cuts will become like second class citizens in our staff rooms.*

*I guess what I'm asking now is if the government mean it when they talk about supporting good teachers or is it just more double speak?*

*Obviously I have a personal agenda here - I want to save my job. But I don't have a political agenda.*

*My grandfather was a proud Fine Gaeler and I have many friends in the Labour party.*

*I want to believe that Fine Gael & Labour can find a way to be better than the idiots who got us into this mess in the first place.*

*Some positive things are happening in education: our minister Ruairi Quinn is determined to bring about changes in our in-many-ways antiquated educational system - and for this I admire him.*

*The proposals for the new Junior Cert have the potential to bring about real and meaningful change (but the department need to listen to the teachers) and this is a change I want to be a part of.*

*But we need to make sure we're making things better not worse. Destroying the morale of the teachers who will be implementing this change is not the way forward.*

*Minister Quinn will no doubt throw his hands in the air and say there is no money.*

*Well I say to Ruairi Quinn and the Department of Education, if this is the limit of your creativity, imagination and passion to protect our children's education - shame on you.*

*FINALLY I want to apologise to my students.*

*I should be putting every ounce of my energy, my passion and my enthusiasm into my teaching and your learning next year.*

*Instead I'll be battling with the department, tying to force them to recognise that I am needed in this school.*

*I'll be distracted from doing my best for you by the fear that someone else will be parachuted into my job and by the fear I will have to consider emigrating to support my family and to continue doing the job that I love.*

*And for this I apologise. You our students deserve better.*