

## Email to CEC Councillors 28 November 2021

Dear Councillor

Over the last few weeks, I have become increasingly concerned about what I am hearing from EIS members, and others working to support education in Edinburgh. The pressures are not just unrelenting, but building - and the more worrying thing is that, whilst some are due to the ongoing realities of dealing with the pandemic, too many others could be avoided. I would hope that you also have been talking to teachers, and particularly headteachers, in your ward, and that this is giving you an idea of the scale of the crisis, and a desire to work with schools to ensure the core work of education can be maintained. However, I am afraid to say that many school leaders tell me that they feel there is little insight from politicians, parents or the public about the day to day reality in schools, and that this is leading to totally unrealistic demands being placed on them, and to them feeling isolated and unsupported. The following are just some of the things with which schools are having to contend.

I assume councillors are informed of the numbers of staff and pupils who are testing positive in schools? I hope you are giving thought to what that means.

- Dozens of staff members becoming infected is leading to increased anxiety amongst colleagues who worry about the same happening to them.
- More pressure on schools to provide absence cover. Demand far outstrips the availability of supply teachers. There are few schools where SLT are not providing in-class cover (thereby further reducing the time available to undertake their strategic leadership roles) and even where teachers are not having to go over their statutory maximum contact time, they are having to put in time to prepare work for classes other than their own.
- In addition to staff who are absent because they are testing positive, huge numbers of staff are having to self-isolate whilst awaiting results of tests. Even if those tests end up being negative, the time out of school is having a huge impact.
- On top of this, we have all the usual illnesses that develop over the winter months. Further, many staff who kept going during the initial stages of the pandemic are now succumbing to the stress, musculoskeletal and other problems that they fended off last year.
- The large number of *pupil* absences (positive cases are in the 1000s) leads to yet more work - staff will often be trying to prepare work for pupils who are self-isolating and, even if those requirements are not excessive (which they often are - some parents seem to think it reasonable for teachers to provide a full suite of online learning for their child, even though that teacher is still having to teach all the rest of the children who are still in class), staff will be very conscious of the need to support those children when they return. This concern is further exacerbated when the pupils are ones sitting national qualifications this year (I will not, here, elucidate all the issues related to National Qualifications and SQA, but would be happy to have further discussions with any councillor who wants to be better informed about this).

CEC has prioritised keeping schools open, and pupils in class. This is something that most would agree with - no one wants a return to blended learning, still less full-blown school closures. However, I wonder if you are fully aware of the reality of what this means?

- I have already said that HTs and others are having to do increasing amounts of class cover. This is in addition to other things they are taking on to help with covid mitigations (many schools, in an effort to reduce infections, are maintaining staggered breaks and lunches etc - all of which require supervision, and it is often only SLT who are available to do this). Yet, despite all the extra hours they are having to put in to keep their school open, they are not seeing a comparable diminution in other demands being placed on them. School recovery plans, data requests, parental requests, HMIE planning, audit and quality improvement work - all these and more are continuing, and are resulting in SLT doing enormous, and utterly unsustainable, numbers of extra hours. I have never spoken to as many HTs who are considering early retirement, or resigning, or who are on the verge of signing off sick, as I have done this term. I ask you to seriously contemplate the impact on Edinburgh's children if even a fraction of them do end up leaving.
- Not only are school leadership teams spending more time in class, many of the central team (QIOs, SEOs etc) are going into schools to help alleviate the most acute pressures. Fairly obviously, this means that the amount of support they can give school leadership teams is reduced - yet those leadership teams are fielding huge demands around the attainment agenda, pupil wellbeing, results etc. Without sufficient access to support, how can they manage these demands?
- As I hope you know, CEC decided that, in an effort to keep special schools open, Educational Psychologists (EPs) and members of the Additional Support for Learning Service (ASLS) would be deployed into those special schools on a rota basis. Again, I emphasise that we all understand the reasoning behind this decision - the pupils in our special schools are very vulnerable and we all want them to be properly supported. However, I again ask if you have properly understood the reality of what this decision means:
  - Pupils in some special schools are seeing different staff on a daily basis. Many of these children need stability and continuity, and they are not getting this.
  - The staff who are being asked to go into the schools have, in many cases, absolutely no expertise or training in this area. Many of the EPs have never been teachers and are not GTCS-registered. Thus, in most cases, the best that they can do is act as a support to the class team - they cannot lead learning, let alone give the specialist teaching support these pupils need. Not only are pupils getting less expert support than they need, the staff in the special schools are having to do extra work to try to support these colleagues.
  - In addition to thinking about the workload implications for the special school staff, perhaps it might be worth considering what it feels like to be a PSA, effectively being asked to lead an EP or ASLS teacher in how to carry out tasks that would normally be done by another PSA? Yet we all know that the PSAs are paid a fraction of the salary of their teaching and EP colleagues, and that, despite the unions raising this for years, little to nothing has been done to

ensure more security of employment, career progression and appropriate salary structures for our PSAs.

- Pupils who are not receiving appropriate support are far more likely to exhibit dysregulated behaviours. In many cases, this manifests as violent outbursts. With large numbers of staff in special schools who do not know the pupils, and are not trained in how to work with them, the risks of such behaviours escalating are greatly increased. I hope I do not need to spell out the possible consequences of this?
- This “repurposing” is having a very big impact on the EPs and ASLS themselves. Many do not feel confident to undertake the work they are being asked to do. They worry about their ability to function in the special schools, the consequences should they not be able to properly support the pupils with whom they are working, and about their own health, safety and wellbeing. They also worry about the impact on the pupils they cannot support, and on the mainstream schools who are not receiving the usual level of input. And, naturally, they worry that they will be expected to pick up tasks and just, somehow, manage to deliver a normal service, despite spending time working in other settings.
- The pupils and staff in the mainstream schools are also feeling the impact of this decision. By definition, EPs and ASLS teachers work with pupils who are vulnerable, yet the capacity of the services to support these children is being reduced - and it was already struggling to meet demand. Schools are endeavouring to make up for this lack, but they have neither the resources nor the expertise. Some pupils will, because of the lack of support to meet their individual needs, withdraw, or struggle on in silence. Others will lash out. Whatever the case, the pupils, their families, and the schools will be left trying to cope.

Schools are receiving constant criticism over the impact of mitigations. Often, these criticisms seem to be coming from the same people who complained most vociferously about schools being closed - and who will be most vocal if current mitigations don't work, and pupils do have to be sent home. Yet, to many in schools, it feels like those are the only voices being heard by the media and politicians. Please consider the following.

- Face coverings - I haven't spoken to anyone who *wants* to wear a mask. And for teachers, who rely so heavily on clear communication, they are even more draining. Yet, when schools are in the midst of a full-blown staffing crisis, and when there is much peer-reviewed evidence to show that face coverings can reduce transmission, surely it behoves us all to *encourage* compliance with this mitigation?
- Trips and visits - again, none of us *want* to stop these. They can be one of the most enjoyable aspects of education, as well as being of huge benefit to pupils. I take on board the argument many make that parents can choose to take their own children to the theatre, museums etc, so that to deny schools the ability to do this disadvantages those pupils who do not have families that can do this - and, in normal times I would be making that same case. But we are not in normal times. Suppose a school sanctions a trip that involves 4 teachers (this would be a reasonable number for a fairly small trip) and, as is not improbable, all 4 of those teachers are named as contacts as a result of that trip and have to self-isolate. As things stand, if those 4

absences are added to the other absences most schools are enduring, the likely consequence will be classes being sent home. What would be the public reaction then? What criticisms would school and CEC management be facing?

- A similar argument applies when considering the risks around having parents come into schools. If we are serious about saying that the most important thing is keeping schools open, then surely something that risks a large number of staff and pupils simultaneously being declared contacts has to be avoided?
- The sudden change in arrangements around school staff being given flu jags (from in-school provision to staff having to make their own arrangements) whilst probably unavoidable (and certainly outwith CEC's control) added to many staff feeling that the talk about prioritising education is entirely rhetorical. The fall off in pupil vaccination rates is adding to these concerns.

The above are just some of the issues with which schools are contending. I haven't even touched on problems with ICT, nor the increasing levels of distressed and dysregulated behaviours being exhibited by pupils in mainstream classes, nor the work schools continue to do to support families in poverty, nor the way many parents do not seem to recognise that schools are under huge amounts of pressure, and are making utterly unreasonable demands of staff, nor the massive pressures on school budgets, nor...

Given all the above, I would ask several things of you.

- Please be aware of these pressures. Where you can do so without adding further to their workload, reach out to school staff, and particularly school leaders, to find out what things are like on the ground, and to ask what you can do to help.
- Bear all this in mind when talking to parents, the press etc. Of course parents want the best for their children, and of course you want education in Edinburgh to be the best - so do we, and so does everyone working in Edinburgh's schools. Surely it is clear that unless the educational workforce feels valued and supported, then it cannot deliver the best outcomes? If what we feel is undermined, undervalued, overworked and overstretched, then the system will be less and less resilient and crises will be magnified. As councillors, you are leaders in the city, and also have a duty of care to employees - what you say and do matters. The tone of your statements make a huge difference - please use your voice to show your value for the work being done in schools and please be realistic when talking to parents about what schools can deliver under current circumstances.
- The same realism is needed when you are undertaking your work of support and challenge around the work of schools, officers, council reports etc. We are very much in a *recovery* phase - indeed, many would say that calling it recovery is too early, and we are still in the midst of the pandemic, with some pressures being worse now than they were last year. Expecting schools to be able to deliver all the improvements that were highlighted as needed before covid hit is impossible. We need a phased approach that is responsive to current burdens. Further, we need to make efforts to dramatically reduce the burden on staff, and particularly, HTs, and CEC must do all in its power to make sure that its decisions
- This will be particularly true when you are making decisions around budgets. Speak to HTs in your wards about the many costs they are having to bear - supply, ICT etc, and the funds they have to meet those costs, and use that information when

thinking about further cuts to schools. Remember, too, the cuts that have been made to all the supports to schools, and the fact that they are having to compensate for the loss of those services.

- Whilst much around *teacher* pay, terms and conditions are outwith CEC's control, the same is not true for PSAs. Many teachers have said that having stability in PSA staffing; PSAs who have time to undertake appropriate training; and PSAs who are properly paid and valued, so that they stay in role, doing hugely valuable work supporting pupils, would make a massive difference. CEC has long spoken about addressing recruitment, pay and career structures for PSAs and other support staff (Business Managers and other administrative support staff are similarly overburdened). Seeing *serious* commitments around this, including the proper funding, would go a long way towards starting to relieve pressures in schools, and Edinburgh EIS would welcome this being made a priority.
- I assume you are aware that Education Scotland has announced that school inspections are restarting? There are many reasons why many of us feel this is an appalling decision (I recommend you read this article, for a very thoughtful take on the situation by a HT <https://www.tes.com/news/why-school-inspections-dont-make-sense-right-now>). On Friday, in response to motions brought by the Edinburgh Local Association, the EIS has agreed to a national campaign in opposition to this decision. Given the staffing pressures in Edinburgh schools, we would welcome a strong commitment from CEC to back such a campaign, and to do all in its power to prevent inspection activity in Edinburgh schools. The idea that, at the same time as EPs, ASLS and others are rolling their sleeves up and going into schools to simply keep the doors open, someone else is going to stand in the back of a classroom with a clipboard is insanity. If Education Scotland has the capacity to scrutinise, surely it also has the capacity to send staff in to work directly with children and help in core pandemic mitigations? Again, I would be more than happy to talk to any councillor about the impact the announcement of the resumption of inspections has had on staff morale and wellbeing.

My apologies for such a lengthy email, but I hope you can appreciate why I felt it is necessary to email you all individually. The unions have been raising many of these concerns in JCG and other forums for some time now, but I wanted to be sure *all* councillors understand that it is not back to normal in schools and that, to the contrary, many schools and many staff are close to breaking. I would welcome the opportunity to talk further about all this to all councillors, either individually or on a party basis.

In the early stages of the pandemic there was much talk of valuing key workers, and of showing kindness. Right now your staff are not feeling valued, nor experiencing much kindness from others, and anything that can be done to shift that narrative would be welcomed.

Kind regards

Alison

*Alison Murphy*  
*Local Association Secretary*  
*Edinburgh Local Association*  
*EIS*  
*46 Moray Place*  
*Edinburgh*  
*EH3 6BH*

*Mobile: 07948 280 906*  
*<http://www.eis.org.uk/edinburgh/>*  
*Twitter: @EdinburghEIS*

Domestic abuse an issue? Go to <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/Contact-us> for help.