

School Based Member Survey Briefing 4

Comments from members in Special Schools – November 2020

Within the EIS November survey, thousands of comments from teachers were collected on issues such as behaviour in the classroom, their health, and wider safety concerns about working in schools. This is the fourth in a series of briefings, that the EIS will issue to the Scottish Government outlining the experiences of EIS members. Some comments have been redacted to ensure they do not identify individual schools or members.

Key Issues

- 468 comments were left by members who identified themselves as working in a Special School in their response to the survey (not all are included in this briefing)
- Members highlighted the numerous challenges they have experienced when trying to implement the safety guidance – repeated comments suggesting it is not possible to socially distance or routinely wear face masks
- The strain of working in Special Schools whilst infections have been rising since August is clearly taking its toll on members physical and mental health
- Some members have suggested that the test and protect system is not being followed by their school
- Special measures must be in place in Special Schools to protect both staff and pupils

“I feel that in order to do my job well I cannot effectively / it is impossible to, maintain a 2m distance from the pupils that I work with and have accepted this level of risk. I imagine this attitude may be dominant in the ASFL sector. The H&S advice which is given across the school doesn't seem to apply to us – our biggest protection is crossing our fingers.”

“Bars and restaurants were closed for weeks with cases still continuing to rise - when will the government take accountability and acknowledge that transmission is happening in schools and then being take back home?!”

“ASN staff need more protection. Observations where SLT are accessing classrooms to gather data about teaching should absolutely not be happening. Enhanced cleaning is not existent in schools. Dirty surfaces and dusty classrooms. Cleaners just wipe tables down very quickly.”

"Concerns over a) high staff absence/number of cover classes due to illness or self-isolation- this is likely to get worse as winter progresses and b) pupils missing learning time due to self-isolation and cover teachers in classes"

"Due to working in a special school, we cannot maintain a 2 metre distance from our colleagues in our classroom or from any pupil in our class (there are currently 13 people in the room). Due to their needs and behaviours it would be impossible to wear a facemask or advisor as it would be pulled off! These pupils cough, sneeze, have their hands in their mouths all the time, are sick on a daily basis (behavioural) and this is the normal day to day contact we have. It is impossible to protect ourselves from others in our type of setting."

"Concerned over the system of self-isolating/ returning to school. Should parents have to disclose letter with date of return? Had 3 children asked to self-isolate who came back different dates issued by NHS. One that returned early then tested positive on day of return - then the whole class had to self-isolate. System not robust."

"Basically, our protection against this virus is an anti-viral spray, blue roll, face mask, hand sanitizer and a sincere hope that we can stay 2 meters apart from pupils and staff. Trying to stay 2 meters away from pupils that are struggling and need help with their work is practically impossible. Moral is very low, and staff are finding the whole situation very difficult. I personally feel that with the responses that we have been given from the authorities, teaching staff and support staff are expendable and this leads to a growing resentment."

"As much as I share the goal of keeping schools open, for teachers in special schools I believe there exists additional risks to both staff and pupils that are not satisfactorily overcome by the measures we are able to put in place."

"Feel general lack of information or mitigations being provided for special education sector generally. Impossible to distance from pupils in my setting. Movement of staff between classes still common at my school, when a class is closed for COVID (children sent home) but adults required to remain in work unless showing symptoms."

"Feel in tier 4 schools should close, too much of a risk for front line workers especially vulnerable workers."

"Pupils are unable to socially distance and due to larger class teams it is impossible to socially distance from colleagues. Wearing PPE all day is challenging on the health and wellbeing of staff and some pupils cannot cope with staff wearing PPE so there is an increase in behavioural incidents. It has been apparent throughout public opinion and media outlets that teaching is viewed as nothing more than a Childcare option and many are feeling disheartened especially those who remained open throughout as an essential hub for vulnerable pupils."

"How do we support staff if level 4 and in special education where maintaining 2m is almost impossible due to needs?"

"I am all for keeping schools open but with blended learning. Smaller class sizes would make much more sense and mean that when the virus gets into the school less people are having to isolate and less people put in danger. Working in ASN means that the normal strategies do not work for us. I have no issues and would not want to be different with my children they have been through enough. We implement Covid procedures in as many ways as we can. However, I do believe that we need to be pushing for what keeps more people safe. I fully believe had we returned with the planned Wednesday deep clean schools wouldn't be in the position they are in now. My fear is it will be too little too late. It should also be highlighted to those against teachers that we would actually be working full time despite the children being part time."

"I am quite concerned from a H&S perspective about teaching in my Home Economics classroom having to wear a mask as I feel that going into ovens, using hobs is not really demonstrating a safe way of working, especially if Senior pupils are wearing disposable masks!"

"I believe level 4 would merit a lockdown model of opening hubs again where teachers would no doubt volunteer their time to support those still in work requiring childcare."

"I believe my specific school should remain open at all levels because it is an ASN provision. I fully support secondary schools, particularly senior phase, implementing remote or blended learning at level 4."

"I feel that the current surge of cases in schools is being airbrushed over by the Scottish Government. News briefings state everything is levelling off, yet I hear of positive cases in schools on a daily basis and whole classes having to isolate. As much as I support face to face learning in school it cannot be at the expense of pupil and staff safety. If we move to tier 4, how can we close virtually everything except essentials but keep schools open for face to face lessons? In addition, a labour MSP published a list of schools with positive cases and in turn many isolating, however, I noted the local authority were disappointed by this. There is a need for transparency to inform and protect others. From the list published many schools were missing from it that I am fully aware of have positive Covid cases."

"I feel that in level 4 especially I would feel very unsafe being a pregnant woman in school and that currently the Scottish government are not taking into account vulnerable staff members or pupils."

"I recently tested positive for Covid. I feel that in Special Education it is very difficult for pupils to implement the details outlined in the Risk Assessment. Whilst teachers have fully supported hand washing and cleaning tables, along with mask wearing and social distancing from other staff members, pupils find it largely impossible to undertake these precautions. This enabled the virus to take hold in our school. It would have helped if a deep clean of the building had taken place or even if classrooms were 'closed and isolated' for a

few days following a positive result, but this did not happen. While the building was apparently deep cleaned eventually, this was too little and too late. In addition, prior to the virus really taking hold, one of the 2 ladies staff toilets was broken and out of use. This could have caused further spread, with a large number of staff using one toilet. Some pupils are wearing masks, but are doing so incorrectly, potentially causing further spread. Could the wearing of masks by children with additional needs be banned as it is widely felt that it could be a contributing factor in causing the virus to spread further. Children touch their masks constantly, twirl them about, drop them and to cap it all, I had to speak to a pupil recently when I found her using a mask to clean her 'show me board'. I support children attending school at this stage, as I feel they benefit socially and educationally, but it has to be made safer for all present. Due to schools being unsafe, I contracted Covid. As a direct consequence, my husband and children had to isolate. This has had an impact on their education. My husband also went on to contract Covid. Schools need to be made safe."

"In the ASN sector it is impossible to socially distance. In addition, many pupils are unable to tolerate masks either on themselves or others."

"Many of our children have secretion issues, and need assistance with personal care e.g. using the toilet and feeding, which is worrying, despite wearing appropriate PPE"

"More guidance for teachers of pupils with ASN needs to be provided. The pupils cannot physically distance from us which puts us and them at greater risk. We are in classrooms with other adults which also increases our risk. Pupils are taken to and from school by yet more adults and some attend respite centres with further different adults/children. I respect their right to use these facilities but also recognise it puts us all at greater risk of infection."

"My p2/3 autistic children cannot distance or stay on one seat. To properly support my kids my ASNA and I can't distance. High school pupils are all in buses close together when people in tier 4 are meant to not use public transport. I am anxious as my paused shielding 74yr old husband is at home and I am in work with 50+ adults."

"Our ASN school has had the luxury of social distancing where possible as we have 10 pupils per class. However, I also teach pupils who are quite incapable of following the guidelines and have questionable hygiene. They also need intense support at times. So the 15 minute rule causes concern as well. I have 4 pupils in this base class who do not or cannot wear a mask. One has to ignore the increased risk to cope with being at work."

"Schools are in constant panic mode - nothing is certain for the pupils or the staff and mental health issues are through the roof for both too. The uncertainty and constant firefighting is at times unmanageable."

"Schools are not safe and our children and workers should not be put at risk. No teaching is currently being done in my school as our focus is trying to keep the children as safe and happy as we can. ASN children cannot socially distance and therefore are at higher risk."

"The school does not have enough space for all its staff to have a restful space for break and lunch. The council has delayed roof repairs and a class is sitting useless moulding away (for over a year) while my class is in a box "room" with incomplete walls off a corridor surrounded by two noisy classes also with incomplete walls. Something needs to be done with all the cramped spaces in schools, if we had more space it would be more Covid safe too."

"Very concerned at fact there apparently have been 2 positive cases of Covid among pupils which have been hushed. Neither staff nor other very vulnerable pupils were told to isolate and neither were parents informed. Thus the virus may be spreading rapidly round the school as classes taught by a range of staff who also have several other classes. Outrageous."

"Special needs teachers and staff cannot withstand the pressures of the job at the moment. A serious mental health problem is going to come. What happened to all the extra money that John Swinney promised to support schools during the COVID pandemic because we have not had any extra staffing support."

"Teachers and school staff shouldn't be working when everything else is in lockdown. It physically and mentally too much."

"I think schools remaining opened is a priority for our learners. However, there has to be support to keep everyone safe. We have staff and cleaners absent which makes keeping surfaces regularly cleaned a challenge. I think if the priority is to keep pupils in education, there has to be flexibility about e.g. extended playtimes to allow remaining staff to clean surfaces. It is difficult to socially distance with up to 4 adults in a small room."

"I have pupils with complicated and complex health needs, I worry about the risk to them and I would like clearer guidance on when they may need to stay at home."

"I have only been absent from work 1 day over the past 3.5 years and am now absent from work because of contracting COVID 19. This is my 4th week of absence and I am due to return to work on Monday. I have no evidence to prove that I may have contracted COVID-19 at work but 4 other staff members plus myself (total 5) tested positive within 3 days. I have one family member at home and he tested negative for COVID-19. Another issue is that I feel that my personal life has been affected by me being ill with COVID-19. I was an extended family member for my elderly Mother. Now I am no longer able to be her support because of my situation."