

School Based Member Survey Briefing 6

Comments from members in Secondary 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 sixth 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

- 2,721 comments were left by members who identified themselves as working in a Secondary School in their response to the survey (not all are included in this briefing)
- Members stated repeatedly that the social distancing guidance was impossible to implement due to the large number of pupils in class or in communal areas such as corridors
- Ventilation was a real problem as teachers are often forced to choose between good ventilation or a warm classroom environment
- Some of the comments suggested that face masks are not being worn consistently, and even where they are in use, members do not feel they go far enough to keep schools safe
- Respondents highlighted their concerns about their mental health and wellbeing due to the strain of working in schools they don't believe are safe
- Members stated they don't believe the number of cases in schools is being recorded accurately

“The biggest problem I find is that there is no clearly-stated set of rules for protection in schools and some of the ones that are stated are contradictory. E.g. Pupils must wear masks in corridors, yet seniors are allowed to sit in the library and canteen areas, facing each other at distances less than 2 feet and without masks?!!”

“A huge concern I have is if I am put in the position where I am highly likely to contract it I could pass it on to my [medical condition removed] husband. We have previously taken strict measures to shield him unofficially but if cases increase and we go up to a level 3 or 4 and schools don't close I would be very nervous about putting him and the rest of my family in that position.

“Ad hoc application of guidance and school risk assessment to suit purpose e.g. sharing resources e.g. textbooks - mainly left up to individual class teacher to decide. Very little local empathy about staff mental / physical welfare during COVID crisis. It's laughed of as over-reacting when concerns are mentioned.”

“Although a school may, in good faith, implement all mitigations, the truth is that in many instances, both within classrooms and elsewhere, it is often impossible to maintain 2 metres distance. In class, this is particularly true of those of us who teach practical subjects and are attempting to teach a very modified practical curriculum.”

“Although I am at risk and still caring for shielding parents, in our school and community we have faced a truly awful term on so many fronts and we dread to think what we would come back to with a full school closure. For the first time ever in over twenty years of teaching I dread going to work every day yet I need it to stay open as I had to meet with kids during lockdown anyway. Fortunately, everyone on our island followed the rules to keep us safe. Then we returned to work in August during the height of a crazy tourist season and explosion of visitors. No one felt safe. The HT has been amazing; the council has never asked and never will.”

“Although I feel safe enough. It is a pretence to say that Covid protections are fully in place. Many senior students do not wear masks and we often end up herded together in pinch points like corridors as students travel from one class to another.”

“One third of pupils in the school are not wearing face coverings in corridors and communal areas. Approximately 5% of S4-6 pupils are not wearing face coverings in the classroom. Windows are left opened to ventilate the classroom resulting in the room being cold. The school heating is normally switched off. During one school week before the October holiday, over 100 pupils were asked to self-isolate. A number of staff also tested positive for COVID and were off sick. Referred to a letter that there was no evidence of in-school transmission. Utter nonsense and frankly unacceptable.”

“As a paused shielder I am currently working from home awaiting occupational health input due to not feeling it's safe to return without all pupils wearing face masks. I feel uneasy about not having the space in my classroom for the pupils to socially distance. Also due to my health condition I would find it difficult to have windows open, causing extremely cold temperatures in winter but feel there would not be adequate ventilation without doing so. I know there are numerous members of staff being left with no option but to compromise ventilation due to adverse weather conditions.”

“We do not know the number of people in the school community that are isolating or COVID positive. While that may be because there are currently no pupils affected, it would be useful to have a weekly update on numbers - no names required. It would allow us to know when the risk is heightened for our vulnerable pupils (some of whom are young carers), and staff. Perhaps we could also look at further precautionary measures for such individuals.”

“As ASL staff, we are still being expected to work in very close proximity with pupils. Class teachers tend to stay behind their line. The irony is that, although we are expected to do this, we cannot even sit within 2 meters of our departmental staff in our staff hub! We are being told that it is up to us how we choose to work with kids but, in reality, we have no choice. Children are not all wearing masks in corridors and nothing can be

done about that. I feel, too, that pupils should be wearing masks at all times in class. Veritable lambs to the slaughter.”

“As a teacher in Home Economics and in Guidance (Pupil Support) our workload has been truly horrific. Staff's mental wellbeing is talked about a great deal, but nothing is done to reduce the pressure.”

“As a parent as well as a teacher blended learning should be in place for at least tier 3, possibly tier 2. Remote learning for tier 4.”

“I do not feel safe at school and feel that shop workers and generally every other worker is afforded more protection than us. Many pupils still do not wear masks and of those who do, they are not being worn properly, not changed/washed often enough and so on. I do not believe the figures released from the school about positive cases either. I do not feel that it is if but when we are going to contract COVID. It is wrong that getting ill feels like an inevitability of our job.”

“I am very concerned about implementation of guidance in my school. During in service days, staff have been required to meet in person in groups of up to 17 in a classroom with no windows open and no face coverings. Request to access resources (YouTube videos) remotely were declined. I am still expected to attend in person departmental meetings and work with a group of 12 other staff as part of school improvement groups all in a room together. In addition to this, basic items such as hand soap frequently run out in staff toilets and can go up to a day after reporting without being replaced. I simply do not feel safe in my workplace.”

“I am very dissatisfied that school teachers were not offered the flu jab given that we are face to face with pupils every day. I am worried about becoming ill as we all have to keep our windows and doors open at all times and the cold weather will make this very difficult. The authority and school have not dealt with pupil disobedience with regards to refusing to wear face coverings. In my school we are not being offered remote meetings like the EIS have been asking for.”

“I am very satisfied that our school have taken the mitigations surrounding safety very seriously and they are well implemented to the best of their ability. There is still a number of pupils who do not follow the rules in place. In school corridors are jammed, despite staggered breaks and a double period timetable. 4 members of our faculty have tested positive for Covid-19 since returning to school in August. The true numbers within the school amongst staff and pupils are not communicated but I am anxious about asymptomatic pupils and staff passing it on. There is a massive additional workload associated with the demands of supporting pupils who are off self-isolating whilst still delivering classes in school.”

“I believe my council - and indeed government - have failed to protect front line teaching staff. We are seen as expendable. We are teaching so, so, close to pupils of all year groups with no social distancing and no

protection - except a simple mask when present with upper school pupils. I'm worried I'm going to catch COVID and suffer serious Health complications just for going to my job."

"Schools are doing what they can, but there is no social distancing in schools, as much as teachers and staff working there try their best, and anyone who pretends that they think this is possible is kidding themselves for political benefit. The Scot Gov have provided flimsy guidelines to schools, which are not safe, and do not ensure consistency for every school in Scotland. It seems like we - and the kids - have been sacrificed to keep childcare open at any costs and save money (extra teachers for blended, extra buildings adapted/huts built, etc). Some teachers do not have their own classroom and have to move from class to class in the crowded corridors every period, or every other period. This is unsafe and leaves them with no control over their classroom environment, as you are going into a class that has just been used by other teachers, potentially 7 times per day. None of this makes sense when you look at other people in different industries who could go back to an office in safer more controlled conditions than this, yet are being told to stay at home."

"I can teach 140 pupils a day and be in a school with 1000+ yet I still can't see my own family where is sense in this."

"I do not agree with senior management team members deciding what children stay in school and what children are sent home. Some children do not feel safe as they were close to the person who tested positive in PE. I feel it should be NHS Test and Protect. I also believe that the high rates of Covid are due to schools being open. I believe it is passing between certain young people asymptotically and they are infecting their parents. I know of several cases of friends working from home, not going to supermarkets or on public transport, not meeting other people, but they have been tested positive with the only risk factor being their children coming home from school. Why are the government suppressing this information?"

"Concerns aren't being taken seriously regarding staff wellbeing. Working conditions are more stressful than ever and there is NO help being provided. We have extra staff to cover for absence, yet my workload is increasing. Certain departments benefit from this, others do not. The department I work in does not and there is no interest at any management level (middle or senior) to help staff in a practical and meaningful way."

"Sort out ventilation we need guidance on minimum airflow for classroom with no opening windows. We need it measured and tested independently."

"Staff health and well-being is not being taken into account and I feel abandoned."

"Teachers should be tested for Covid on a weekly basis, I personally know of a case where 2 children from a household of 2 adults who tested positive were at school for 9 days before they knew the parents were positive but had been displaying different symptoms- however the NHS refused to test the children as they

weren't displaying symptoms. If teachers were checked weekly events like this would be mitigated and it would be a lot less stressful.”

“Thanks to everyone in the union working to keep us and the pupils safe at this time. I feel at the moment that the Scottish Government is willing to put teachers and school support staff in danger for political expediency and their fear of losing votes from angry parents. Mitigations are being carried out at school level but realistically, many pupils are ignoring the advice on face coverings and of course, in class and during social times, there is very little social distancing. We are very fortunate in the North East that community transmission is not as widespread as is the case further South, otherwise, the schools would be affected far more. I worry about the potential of taking the virus home to my husband who is in his late 50s and my mother who lives with us. She is 77. Many colleagues will have similar worries.”

“Public discourse about what is happening in schools during the Covid pandemic rarely, if at all, acknowledges the practical problems of implementing even the most basic mitigations in a secondary school environment. For example, most kids need constant reminders about what is expected and a substantial minority see non-adherence as just another rule to be challenged or ignored. Moreover, in NLC the decade-long drive towards cost-cutting and 'efficiency' that results in room sharing, crowded staff zones, and time pressures seems to me to be increasing the risk for teachers and students.”