

School Based Member Survey Briefing 8

Comments from supply teacher members – 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 eighth 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

- 1,030 comments were left by members who identified themselves as a supply teacher in their response to the survey (not all are included in this briefing)
- Members highlighted that it was impossible to socially distance themselves from their pupils when they need extra support, or when the class sizes remain so large
- Cleaning was flagged as an issue, with members saying that classrooms are not cleaned regularly enough, and that supplies are running throughout the day. This was of particular concern to some supply teachers who covered more than more class in a day or week as they feared spreading infection between multiple classes or schools
- Ventilation was also highlighted as a key issue as it is impossible to keep the classroom warm as well as ventilated

“With every sector being encouraged to work from home, I really Don’t understand why shoving 33 kids into a class (which is freezing) is a good idea? Me wearing a mask isn’t protecting me. The kids are catching it. The kids are spreading it. We CAN work from home and teach remotely - so why aren’t we?”

“Enhanced cleaning is stated for each level of the tier systems, yet this appears to be the first thing that is lowered due to staff absences. Touch surfaces are not being cleaned by cleaning staff but rather class teachers. Duties are decreased to only bins and toilets. I am happy to stay working in school however I feel the government cares more about keeping parents happy than the safety of their teachers and support staff.”

“Other sectors have been provided with adequate PPE, teachers are expected to bring their own masks with the exception of one provided by the school. This is unrealistic for washing it daily. Pupils were provided with a pouch of pencils/pens etc which have been lost- we have not been provided with any additional ones, so pupils are borrowing pencils and equipment daily. Pupils are not wearing masks in the corridor and when they are being contact traced for a positive Covid classmate this is not taking into consideration lunch and break times where they often don’t wear masks in social areas under the guise of “eating” / when a teacher sees

them. Teachers are being expected to provide work on online platforms additionally to teaching classes so are essentially providing blended learning as well as in class which is unexpected under the current working time agreement. We have assessments currently ongoing which don't take into consideration the 2/3 day lay period of paper contamination and this is also unrealistic for working time agreements. We are having to cover more and more classes as staff are unwell and this means our not contact time is being spent (often teaching rather than covering) in classrooms without adequate seats to change and behaviour issues arising with pupils we don't know. If tested positive, staff are still expected to provide a great deal of cover work for classes and this is putting pressure on staff to attend school even if they are possibly showing symptoms. We are in close contact with pupils' jotters and working closely with them to assisting them with issues in class but it is looked on as our fault if we catch the virus as we should be wearing a mask if in close contact, despite the fact it can be transmitted through other ways. A taped line on the floor is not enough to protect us from this virus and our health is being put at risk for this."

"Do not feel safe in school at all... Pupils not taking situation seriously enough, they feel all back to normal as schools are back full time. I am too scared to ask to work from home in free periods as only temp contract! No security in work, no sick pay, used as lifeline to keep things going when "proper" staff need time out. Very stressful times all round. How long till the supply/temp staff break? Definitely feel like expendable commodity...!"

"Glad the EIS are looking out for teachers as I do not think the Government is - I feel teachers over 60 years of age are not being considered 'at higher risk' and their risk is being ignored. I have worked in education all these years and I feel passionate about teaching yet, I feel unsupported at this time. I have worked faithfully and contributed much up and down the country and feel forgotten at present - not valued! Also, I know I will not be alone in this and it certainly has a huge impact upon my own Health & Wellbeing."

"Enhanced cleaning is a concern as this is still not being undertaken to a satisfactory standard."

"Working on supply I feel particularly vulnerable going between different lass throughout the school day and week therefore in contact with more pupils and adults than other class teachers are within the school. As a result of this job role, I am currently self-isolating."

"What happened to reduced class sizes and restricting contact with other members of staff. We are expected to all be together in a cold gym hall for the day to train. What happened to a focus on staff health and wellbeing?"

"There is not a level playing field for external candidates seeking work. People in my position who aren't newly qualified have been forgotten. It is frustrating as I want to work, and I hear of schools who need supply teachers."

“There is no ability to reliably teach my curriculum as whole classes are being devastated by the need for self-isolation after a positive Covid test within the class. Evidence of pupils’ work is still needed for their grades but it's getting closer to impossible to collect this from each student when they are not in for 2 weeks at a time. Some pupils have been self-isolating for 2 weeks only to come in for 2 days until they need to self-isolate again. There is no consistency in the school due to absences, this means that class lessons that are prepared sometimes have to be scrapped for an online lesson with only a couple hours (if you're lucky) notice. There is a pressure for teachers to sacrifice their own health just to keep schools open and running as a day-care centre more than for their education and while we have the responsibility and desire to look after the pupils under our care we are not being able to actually do the thing which we signed up to the job for. Teaching!”

“We need to remind management that we started this year being assured we would be taking things slowly and to prioritise recovery. This has been forgotten as we are being asked to do more and more like normal, including special weeks and paperwork etc.”

“It is such a worrying time. To some extent I do feel the mitigations currently in place would be enough to feel safe at work however not everyone adheres to these. For example, lack of social distancing, cleaning or wearing face coverings. Additionally, cleaning in my classroom is so time consuming I am finding it difficult to juggle that and workload at the moment.”

“Still worrying recruitment issues within education, been forced to work as a specialist learning assistant while looking for work to complete probation. Would not be confident in going into mainstream schools with Covid issues.”

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

“It is increasingly worrying that the Scottish Government have recognized that schools are spreading the virus but won't protect teachers. It is so hard to socially distance from pupils who can't cope with the school day without nurturing. Teachers can't help but comfort crying children, which puts us at risk as we are touching them but children need this comfort and nurture, as sometimes, they don't receive it anywhere else.”

“In addition to the workload that seems as high as ever, I think the background anxiety of working in school during a pandemic brings additional mental health challenges. We're also being asked to pilot online parent evenings this term. Already exhausted straight after the holidays and putting in way too many hours over contract to ensure learning meets the needs of pupils.”

“It is not just my own health I am concerned about - my husband is a Nurse in a nursing home and he is concerned about schools remaining open at all costs. He has multiple health issues - diabetes, age, etc and has frequently asked me to stop work as he doesn't think it is safe in schools. He is deeply concerned that I'll get it,

then he'll get it, and then it will be in the nursing home before we are aware we are positive. Why are digital thermometers not recording temperatures of students as they enter the building and testing of staff not compulsory in schools.”

“I think it would be useful to also consider the teacher's whole household. For example, I am in an extended household with my parent who is in the highest risk group. They are also my childcare when I am working for school drop off, picks-ups etc. I think the factors around the wider household is crucial to consider as it is very likely in a family for Covid to spread easily.”

“It is very difficult to have social distancing in schools as pupils have to walk from one classroom to another and the corridor is narrow. There is not enough space to achieve social distancing. It is the same in the classrooms as there is not enough room for physical distancing.”

“Why are the figures of cases in school, being hidden? Is it to enable the government to say that there's no evidence Covid is spreading in schools?”

“Whilst the school as a whole are doing everything they can, to ensure everyone’s safety and following all guidance, I feel let down by the local authority. Lack of support from local authority in regards to number of cases within the school, sense that we were ‘left to get on with it’.”

“There have been several positive cases in our school, teachers and pupils. There have been and still are hundreds of pupils isolating and teachers also, Last April we lost a teacher to Covid. There are a lot of anxious teachers in our school.”

“There is an unrealistic assumption that what is included in risk assessments is actually in practice. Situations and exposure seem to be being dealt with inconsistently with guidance and rules being applied when it suits management and council members. The reality of following protocols and risks assessment when working in an office is totally different to being the teacher in front of 25 demanding children full time with the mitigations being continually disregarded. Our job is hard enough without a pandemic we are exhausted and do feel as though we are not being invested in and that our health is a lesser important priority than other occupations. Anxiety is growing and we are more concerned as being unidentified carriers who may be transferring the virus rather than being worried about becoming ill ourselves. I whole heartedly want to be in the classroom teaching the children but we need to be safeguarded and invested in.”

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“The workload I am currently experiencing is unmanageable. I am constantly working 10-12 hour days and having to work at the weekend to maintain quality lessons for pupils. The additional work we are having to

undertake to provide work digitally for pupils isolating is not manageable within a working week. Teachers are working much longer than 35 hours every week.”

“Teachers' health and safety seems to be less important than the desire to keep children at school. Social distancing is often impossible.”

“Supply teaching is a 0 hours contract with no coverage. In the event of a school closure I will be without pay but ineligible for any benefit.”

“Strategic curricular online support materials for all levels should be available to all schools and sectors to enable standardisation of remote/ blended learning and teaching.”

“Now that children have been proven to both carry and spread the virus the government needs to recognise this. This is my profession but I am getting very tired of the parental community not accepting that we are limited right now to what we can do in schools. Also, that parents are seemingly happy to ignore that we are taking risk every day for their children. The government ought to openly recognise that the educators and teachers of this country are doing what we can under these unprecedented times. More gratitude, humility and respect.”

“Not directly related to Covid, but I currently work in a council that is taking on increasing numbers of probationers, but cannot offer permanent contracts to people like myself, who have worked there for 2.5 continuous years (excluding probation), making it very difficult to find stability anywhere and adding to not only an incredibly stressful job, but also an increasingly stressful time within the country.”

“I found pupils attempted to use Covid rules to bully me, telling me what I was, or was not "allowed" to do. There are also inconsistencies over normal classroom procedure of moving a disruptive pupil from one seat to another, less easily done now that seating plans are more rigidly adhered to for "track and trace" purposes. Disruptive pupils can exploit this. Every classroom has a large area around the teachers desk marked off by tape. However I cannot properly manage a class separated from pupils so I keep my mask on at all times and move around the classroom. In any case desks and chairs have been moved into the "isolation" space because rooms are too small to keep them separate. Key is to keep windows open even though it is "freezing" - so I keep my coat on and I let pupils do the same.”

“I'm extremely disappointed in the system, or lack there of, to support NQTs.”

“If level 4 restrictions come into place I think there has to be a change in the way schools are run considering there is plenty of cases in schools at the moment. We all want the schools to stay open and I personally would

like to avoid remote teaching as the kids have already missed enough, however, half the volume of pupils in school at a time would have a real difference on the safety of both teachers and pupils.”

“I want schools to stay open. I have been a teacher for 35 years and am deeply committed to the outcomes for young people, especially after recent events for them. However, the ‘at any cost’ language from the government is insulting given the lack of concern over teachers’ welfare and wellbeing. The ‘red lines’ that the EIS have insisted on have been ignored, especially social distancing enabled by smaller class sizes. This is ludicrous - I have a classroom full of 30 pupils at a time.”

“I think the fact that the government keep talking about how schools are safe because children don’t get sick with the virus just shows how little they care for teachers and support staff. They either don’t realise that physical distancing is near on impossible in a primary school or they simply don’t care. I would love to see people from the government/public health come and spend a week in a school to see what it’s really like as I think people would be shocked.”

“I think schools should very think about the possibility of blended learning or remote teaching. Schools are not immune to COVID so why is everywhere else closed apart from school. It is unfair to ask teachers to work in these environments. There are a few of my friends who are also teachers who currently aren’t at school because they fear for their health. Asking teachers to come into an environment like this is not only risking them but also majorly effecting the mental health of many teachers all over the UK.”