

School Based Member Survey Briefing 2

Comments from members in Level 4 areas – 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 second 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

- 3,818 comments were left by members in Level 4 areas in their response to the survey (not all are included in this briefing)
- The vast majority of comments highlighted that the Guidance cannot be followed and that teachers cannot consistently keep 2m apart from pupils, due to the large class sizes and the demands of the job
- Managing large numbers of pupil absence due to Covid-19 is already putting strain on schools
- Clear support from members in Level 4 areas to move to blended learning
- Members with underlying physical or mental health conditions are feeling especially vulnerable working in schools – tighter safety measures must be in place for these staff members

“I really feel we should be moving towards blended learning to allow for smaller class sizes and social distancing to be possible in our school setting. We were advised in the summer if the R number went above 1 this would happen, yet here we are continuing on as normal while the rest of the world locks down.”

“I haven’t been able to see my own family for over 2 months now, yet it’s ok for me to stand in front of 25 families! Blended learning should have happened from August where 2m distancing could have happened and cases probably would have remained stable! School staff were promised that a return to school would be if - social distancing was possible, appropriate PPE would be supplied and available, appropriate ventilation - many of these ARE NOT happening. I am lucky that my school isn’t too bad, but I am aware that other colleagues in worse situations!”

“1. The classroom is constantly cold due to the windows having to be opened and the children are complaining about how cold they feel. 2. Worry about the possibility of having to potentially self-isolate on numerous occasions. Who knows how many times this may or may not happen?”

"A lot of lip service is being paid to staff welfare but this is not being seen in working practices. Staff morale is low and as a result the goodwill, on which schools sadly heavily rely, is going. I fully appreciate that management teams are facing huge, unprecedented challenges and stresses during these times. Staff welfare needs to be a real priority. Even just a genuine 'check in' now and again to understand individual circumstances would help. Our school is usually strong in this but not doing it well at all under current circumstances. Social distancing remains a big concern as it is impossible. Measures introduced to try to maintain distance (e.g. restricting toilet access) are becoming very difficult"

"After shielding for 5 months, how can it now be safe for me to meet with so many households in a school setting? I am very concerned for my own personal health. I have no idea how this virus would affect me. With increasing numbers within our community and having 3 very close families to me affected by COVID all through a member of the household member who has brought this home from a school setting, I do feel that I am waiting for COVID. Not enough has been done to protect all school staff and letting children, their families and school staff catch this virus is I feel this is irresponsible and unforgivable. Members of my family now have long COVID with one who has been seriously ill in hospital. All are due to in school transmission. I do not feel that the SG is being open, honest or transparent in their reporting or sharing of information."

"I'm both pregnant and asthmatic. Government advice is to follow RCOG guidelines which clearly state 28 weeks onwards no public interaction where possible. However, council is asking us to ignore medical advice."

"Considering my age [redacted] and the fact I have recently been diagnosed with [redacted], I feel quite vulnerable in school. I teach Primary 2 and the children are unable to maintain any social distancing and struggle to adhere to any of the mitigations in place."

"I have MS and am very concerned about the impact of COVID. I've been off sick since August as the stress of going back to class has triggered my MS terribly. I'm considering leaving teaching altogether. We are not expendable."

"I really feel strongly that schools should remain open as much as possible or, at a push, go to blended learning. However I do find it amazing that, on a long day, there can be more than 210 pupils in and out of your classroom, some of whom are over 17 years old yet a doctor's waiting room should only accommodate about 4 people because of social distancing!! I think that says it all"

"I suffer from anxiety and at the moment it is very heightened because of this issue. I want schools to remain open however at the same time I can't do both the online learning for those self-isolating & teaching in class. There is just not enough time in the day to cope! I'm becoming stressed over this and having to wear a mask for long periods of time I'm struggling with that but can't not wear one as there isn't any health reasons to support not wearing one."

“Not enough recognition has gone to school staff, particularly those working in nursery, infant classes, and to those working with children with additional support needs, where physical distancing is virtually impossible. Staff are risking their health and the health of their immediate families every single working day. However, the government's "schools must stay open" policy-even at Tier 4- doesn't seem to recognise this. It's also farcical to suggest that schools aren't a major factor in the spread of this virus.”

“I think for all those in Level 3 and definitely if we go above that we should go to remote learning. I also think it would be a good contingency plan to keep senior pupils away from schools as they are very competent at learning on Teams and keep BGE pupils in school as they need parental care and this could affect families more. Senior pupils could then be given a day where they attend but having all of these young adults in school in the current climate where social distancing is impossible in a large higher class the government is therefore just putting not only the pupils but staff at risk. I think this is something that needs to be seriously looked at.”

“I think it's absurd that schools are being expected to remain open, particularly with the newly announced move to Tier 4 for 11 Local Authority areas. We can't do anything else that involves mixing with people - and school is the only place I'm exposed to any number of people on a weekly basis now. I can't believe we're being thrust on to the front line with next to none of the protections offered to other front-line workers. Practically a whole year group has had to isolate, a whole teaching department was isolating putting enormous strain on other staff covering classes, and numerous other pupils/staff have been off. Two cases were confirmed in one day last week in our school - anywhere else, that would be called an outbreak - in school we get a letter saying that the risk to the wider school community has been deemed "low"! There needs to be some consistency here between schools and our day-to-day lives. You can't restrict one and not the other.”

“I think nurseries and schools should remain open for the vulnerable children & families, they need to have that routine in their lives as their home lives may be significantly worse.”

“I understand that schools need to open to allow the economy to function and that during lockdown public annoyance against teachers and politicians as a result of pupils being home-schooled was making the reopening of schools a political imperative. However, I am concerned that school staff are being used as sacrificial lambs/ regarded as collateral damage at this stage. This could lead to preventable ill health and death. I also think we may have an exodus from the professional of experienced staff near retirement age.”

“I truly believe that my current school is doing everything in its power to keep staff and pupils safe. I think that action is required at a higher level and that to expect schools to be open at full capacity and keep everyone safe are two completely contradictory ideas. Having worked in another local authority shortly before beginning here, I know for certain that more can be done to protect staff and pupils from local authority level. However, I believe that the Scottish Government have to open their eyes to the reality of the dangers and the pressures which they are exposing staff and pupils to before any real improvements can be made.”

“I understand fully the importance of children's continuing education however there comes a point where the health of staff in school should also become a consideration. I think now that we are in level 3 and possibly

about enter level 4 schools should go to blended learning. Lack of proper ventilation, impossibility of social distancing in P1-3 should prompt the government to sit up and take notice rather than turning a blind eye to the school COVID cases. Thank you.”

“I understand the fears and I support my colleagues but for me the workload implications of blended learning are frightening and I’d prefer to protect my mental health and that of the pupils. Which in many ways is sad that I need to choose one over the other.”

“There is no way I can be physically distant from a pupil in my classroom unless there class sizes are limited to 8 pupils. We have put measure in place, like ensuring pupils have access to their own equipment, cleaning down desks and other shared materials. They have a pack of materials that they can use from home and we have adapted our courses to be able to teach remotely. Currently though we are just carrying in as usual, having to run extra-curricular clubs at lunchtime and after school. Pupils who have to be removed from classes to self-isolate are told to wait in an unventilated room next to our department.”

“I work in a primary school in an area of deprivation. I believe that for many children, attendance at school mitigates the negative effects on mental health that the pandemic is causing in both parents and children. I personally believe that teachers have a moral duty to step up and accept more risk than others for the good of society, just as this is expected of NHS staff and supermarket workers. We should not, however, be placed at unnecessary risk and those with underlying health conditions should simply not be at work but supporting home learning of those pupils shielding or self-isolating.”

“I work with ASD pupils and am of the opinion that Blended Learning was the right option in August in order to provide a smoother transition in education (the Govt said that vulnerable groups and those in transition were their priority), rather than being thrust back into full time education. I also am expected to travel from a level 3 authority into level 4 each day when seemingly every other (or most) workers are given a degree of protection that teachers are not being afforded.”

“I worry about the levels of cleaning within our school. Door handles are all cleaned with the same cloth. Lunches are being had in classes but day cleaners are not picking up food off floor or are emptying bins. Playground is not cordoned off so classes within a stage can mix. Our staffroom is not big enough for staff to all have lunch in, however, classrooms are used by children so can’t go there. We have no other space to have our lunch which is resorting to colleagues eating in their cars!”

“I would also like the EIS to look into the heating situation for working in a freezing classroom leading into the colder Winter Weather. I am speaking for myself but also for the children in my class who are very cold most days when working. I would also like to state that most workplaces are given the tools to complete their job when working from home and yet the Government/ Council don’t see the need to supply teachers with a laptop which is compulsory for our job!!! This needs to change! We need laptops to do our work from home and shouldn’t be required to constantly replace them when they break down. Please assist in this matter! Not looking for a desk and chair like other businesses, although that would be nice, but a laptop is essential!!!”

“I would like EIS to make a collective grievance on behalf of shielding staff who have been refused home working”

“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'm very concerned about the impact of increased stress that I feel due to the significant increase in Covid related workload and the negative impact this is no doubt having on my immune system. E.g. Gathering evidence for senior phase classes who will/may not have an exam and posting work for pupils who are self-isolating or absent due to Covid infection. I am worried that this stress is negatively impacting on my overall health and immune system. For instance, I have less free time to relax because I have to work more hours and do not sleep as well due to worry.”

“It is impossible to do my job whatsoever and keep 2 meters away from 6 and 7 year old children. I have to be near them to do my job! Even if you tell them to keep away, they don't. Wearing a mask all day makes it very hard to teach especially reading, phonics and spelling. Track and trace does not seem to be in place. We are not informed why children are off, if they are isolating and parents are not getting children tested. What about the safety of my family. Workload is just like normal. Targets, forward plans, observations, students but this is not a normal year!”

“Just the disappointment over the lack of change in the school procedures to prevent the spreading of the virus. Suggestions were given but not taken on board.”

“Managing the demands of my job as a teacher, with the added responsibility of extra cleaning and planning for safe activities, preparing work for pupils isolating and then continuously chasing up absentees has added so much extra stress to an already challenging job.”

“Morale is very low in school due to the isolation we are all feeling with staggered breaks, start and stop times and limited numbers in the staff room. It can be very lonely as a teacher at the moment. Not the collegiate job it once was.”

“Please advocate for front line staff. Many people can be a symptomatic - we don't know the long-term effects. Young teachers may be ok now, have had COVID, didn't know - what about long-term effects. Most students had no symptoms and only knew when tested. We should have routine testing in schools. Younger colleagues needs to be protected as much as anyone else. Footballers are fit & healthy, no symptoms but a number positive- only aware as there is routine testing. I do not believe schools do not add to community

transmission. Parents are working from home, they are not going to parties or raves - they are getting it from their children.”

“Speaking for myself, I feel mentally and physically drained currently with everything going on. Work in my school is returning to 'business as usual' - class visits by HT, jotter monitoring and most worryingly, scrutiny of daily planning folder during lesson observations.”

“Please can you fight for a clarification on what is to happen if a class has one or more than one positive case from a pupil. The rules/ parameters seem to change frequently. Also, there is a rising sense from LA headquarters that the teachers are at fault if they do not socially distance from pupils. This is impossible, especially in Primary Schools and ASN schools. It is extremely unfair to put the blame on us as we are in a very difficult situation. Sympathy and understanding from headquarters would significantly improve our anxieties about being at work. Also, my school is not providing suitable masks. The masks are as thin as tissue paper and the mask box is called 'economy masks'. I will continue to fight for and ask for better masks.”

“Please consider a move to blended learning at least as the children are not experiencing a full education anyway given the restrictions we must work to therefore I believe the safety of children and families should be taken more seriously. As teachers we feel like we have been put in the firing line with very little support - all we have to protect us is washing hands and a mask.”

“Schools are not happy places right now, I worry about the consequences of enforced mitigation procedures on both pupil and staff mental health. Children are being prevented from group work, access to resources and staff are unable to communicate effectively whilst wearing a mask, which in my setting is compulsory at all times including the classroom.”

“Secondary school seems to be more disrupted than primary, both my children attend a secondary school in the area (S4-6) year groups) and have both had to self-isolate twice due to test and protect in their school. If blended learning was introduced physical distancing might be possible so overall could be less disruptive than repeated time off. Teachers have done their best to provide work but can't be in class and an online presence too. In tier 4 I think alternatives to being in school full time would be necessary. Simply wearing masks in class is not reassuring enough.”