

## **Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry**

### **Witness Statement**

Witness statement of [Seamus Searson]

Witness Number: [EDU0062]

Statement taken on [28 April 2024]

#### **Introduction**

1. My name is Seamus Searson. I am 66 years of age. I work in Edinburgh. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.
2. I am the General Secretary for the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association (SSTA) and am answerable to the SSTA Council and SSTA Congress members. I have been general secretary since February 2015 so was five years into the role when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. During the pandemic the SSTA had ten members of staff dealing directly with members. There were four other staff working on the administrative matters, such as memberships. Members can contact the SSTA directly - they do not need to contact it through a school representative or district secretary. I send members direct messages. During the pandemic, the SSTA contacted everyone at once with one message.
3. I previously worked as a teacher in London for 25 years. I have been a Union Official since 2003. I was with the NASUWT in London for 2 years and with NASUWT in Northern Ireland for 8 years until 2013. I was then with the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in North West England in 2014 until I started with the SSTA. I still reside in Northern Ireland. It was a strange situation to be in during the pandemic, as I was monitoring what was going in Westminster, what was going on in Scotland, and what was going on in Northern Ireland. My own children were being educated in

Northern Ireland, and were at that time, leaving primary education, and moving to secondary education. Looking at the three different jurisdictions directly and how they each dealt with the situation was quite interesting and helpful. In my view the Scottish Government (Scottish Government) was quite up front and direct, with Northern Ireland not far behind.

4. I am giving this statement in my capacity as the General Secretary for the SSTA.

### **Operation of SSTA pre-pandemic**

5. The SSTA was established in 1944, and it is currently coming up to its 80<sup>th</sup> year of the association. The SSTA broke away from the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) in 1944, partly because of the belief that secondary school teachers were being out voiced by primary school teachers. At that time, most primary teachers were female and most secondary teachers were male, which may have been another reason for the split. It is important to note that the SSTA has always represented secondary school teachers.
6. The two main objectives of the SSTA are to look after secondary school teachers and do the best for secondary aged children. Its members are in all positions within secondary schools. SSTA members must be qualified teachers recognised by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) so do not include classroom assistants or music instructors. It also has members who work in local authority positions, who may have worked in schools, remain involved in secondary education, and retain their teaching registration.
7. The SSTA currently has around 6,000 members, with around 150 to 200 of these being in advisory roles with local authorities. Around 75% of its members are female and 25% are male. Approximately 700 members work in independent schools.

## ***Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic***

### **School Closures**

8. I believe the decision to close schools was the correct decision at that time. However, young carers and children in special schools were a major issue. These children needed to be looked after more and were unable to be left on their own. Teachers therefore became carers to allow parents to work.
9. Although there were warning signs at the start of 2020 around COVID-19, it started to be taken more seriously by Scottish Government in March 2020. My general view was that there was a real commitment to try and keep the schools open for as long as possible but when it got to mid-March, and we went into lockdown we had to do what we had to do.
10. All the teacher and non-teacher trade unions in Scottish school education worked together at that time. I believe this was called the 'Workforce Implementation Group' (WIG). It started off as partnership working. I was a member of the WIG and attended all the WIG meetings.
11. As we went further into the process, the partnership working fell away a bit. Initially, we all had our cards on the table in terms of what we knew and what we did not know from what Public Health Scotland (PHS) and Scottish Government were telling us. WIG was very much involved in that.
12. There were two Scottish Government educational bodies involved during the pandemic, one of which was the Scottish Education Council (SEC). The work of these bodies involved the unions, employers including COSLA, Scottish Government officials and medical and scientific experts sharing information and attempting to agree a way forward to support the education service. The deputy first minister chaired the SEC and had a representative from each of EIS and Unison to represent the workforce. The SEC was a large group predominately made up of Education managers and

Scottish Government officials who were intent on keeping the service up and running with little regard for the workforce. There was only one teacher in the SEC, and one non-teacher representative from Unison. The second body was the WIG, which was made up of all the Scottish educational Unions together along with local authority staff, Scottish Government officials and medical experts. The WIG was more representative of the teaching profession than the SEC. Initially, the WIG had two meetings per week during the pandemic from March 2020 until the end of June 2020 and this then reduced to weekly when the schools reopened in August 2020. Shortly after the schools reopened the WIG meetings were reduced to fortnightly. We all felt like partners trying to find a solution.

13. The central Covid Education Recovery Group (CERG) was chaired by John Swinney MSP, and that is where the big decisions were made. This is where I think there was a bit of a disjoint, as CERG comprised the chief education officers and senior people from local authorities as well as Scottish Government officials. These people were not representing staff at the front line.
14. CERG made the final decisions on everything, which in hindsight I consider was a mistake because this group did not involve the people working on the ground in schools, such as dining staff and teachers, who were represented by only two people. In my view two people in CERG talking on workers did not represent the views of the CERG. Furthermore, the two people representing frontline workers on CERG quickly moved to working from home, so were not facing the day-to-day threats staff were facing. However, they were contributing to decision-making and determining what was to happen in schools.
15. Scottish Government wanted to keep the schools open, and to have looked after children and children of key workers in school. However, although the CERG made the decisions, they were not having to put them into practice. My criticism is that CERG was not listening to staff on the front



line.

16. SSTA members were in contact telling their union how frightened they were. They were terrified not just of what would happen to them, but also to their families. There was constant worry but there seemed to be a push to keep provision open. It is hard to know where this push was coming from. I have a view that it was less from Scottish Government and more from local authorities and head teachers who maybe felt it was a badge of honour to keep their schools open.
17. There was pressure being put on teachers to be in schools. However, teachers would say to the SSTA that they had elderly parents or children who are vulnerable, and they did not want to put themselves at risk. The SSTA tried to persuade Scottish Government that if teachers fell within one of the categories set out by the SSTA, they should not be called upon to physically attend school. The SSTA advised members with vulnerable family members not to attend in-person but to volunteer to lead learning virtually. This advice note is available on the SSTA website.<sup>1</sup> Many headteachers took a similar view; however, some were pedantic about everybody doing “their share” regardless of teachers’ circumstances.
18. The SSTA had teachers that volunteered to physically go into schools, as they did not have other people within their families. In fact, some of them would have been totally alone had they not gone into the schools. However, even with these volunteers, there was still a lot of pressure for all teachers to go in. The downside of that is that if you were also a parent, and had children of your own, you could not be in two places at once. Teachers were providing online education for their classes whilst having young children of their own at home at the same time. This added to the stress for these teachers and families. In some instances, the schools were not making

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<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 Message to members ([SCI-SSTAxx-000001](#)) ([COVID-19: SSTA Members Update - 17 March 2020 - Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association](#); [COVID-19: Message to Members - Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association \(ssta.org.uk\)](#))

allowances for teachers' children when placing workload demands on their staff. I think it was the people in between Scottish Government and the front line who were making the decision that everybody had to come in at some point over a week or two weeks.

19. It was unfair to put pressure on all teaching staff. Allowances should have been made for teachers who were vulnerable themselves, those with vulnerable family members, and those with caring responsibilities. It should not have been that way; however, the SSTA aware pressure was being put on people quite a lot. The advice the SSTA was trying to give out on a regular basis at that time was to tell members that safety came first; to look after their own circumstances and not put themselves at risk. The SSTA was quite clear about that.
20. Some schools were closed, however there was still pressure coming down from Directors of Education, headteachers and other senior staff in schools to keep some open.
21. Members were very frightened during this time, as they did not know what was going on, and the SSTA did not know either. Initially, the SSTA was getting enough information to pass to members, however the closer it got to Christmas 2020 and into 2021, it was only receiving bits of information. As the pandemic spread less sharing of information occurred. I think this was because of the politics between Westminster and Holyrood, with Scottish Government trying to do the right thing to protect everybody whilst the UK Government undermined decisions taken in Scotland.
22. Some of the medical information the SSTA was being provided with by Scottish Government was different to what it was told initially. It felt as if questions were not being answered, and the SSTA was being kept at arm's length. I think the medical/scientific experts and Scottish Government were aware initially that we were trying to keep everybody safe.
23. What I found very concerning was that during the weekly meetings of the

WIG with the unions, representatives of COSLA, medical experts, and Scottish Government officials discussions would be held on the very fine detail of the precautions that should be taken. For example, the rules for spacing, face masks, and another face coverings. Although courses of action were being agreed they were not being implemented on the ground in schools.

24. Initially it appeared that the unions at the WIG meetings were planning for what should be happening in the schools. However, what the unions at these meetings found out over short period of time was that local authorities were worried about how much this was going to cost. Some local authorities were not prepared to spend money on safety measures unless the money came directly from Scottish Government first. There appeared to be no trust that monies would be forthcoming from Scottish Government. We found that across the 32 Scottish local authorities things were done very differently. There should have been blanket rules across all authorities and that could be adapted internally. Safety measures should have been universal and not left to the discretion of each local authority, many of whom balked at these due to the potential costs. Money appeared to be more important than the safety of staff.
25. It felt like a constant battle with the local authorities, as the unions had to let them do what they thought was right in their area. Many local authorities who were not in attendance at the WIG meetings were not prepared to accept the decisions made by their representatives at the WIG meetings. It appeared that COSLA had no teeth and missed the opportunity to lead local authorities. A lot of local authorities were asking where the money was coming from, and it appeared that they were not prepared to do much unless the money came from Scottish Government directly. At the WIG we were told that some local authorities had no funds for emergencies such as the pandemic.
26. I felt that some senior officers in local authorities did not take the situation

seriously. Partly this may have been because they were not working in the schools but working in an office or at home. They were giving directions but had no real idea of what was happening in the schools. They never saw the real panic that was there in the schools, and in my view, there should have been an element of trust between us and them. I felt it strange that they would not trust us when the unions had tens of thousands of members telling us what was happening. The unions had to keep repeating members concerns to their employers. Employer representatives heard what was being said but action was left to individual councils. It appeared as if the unions were not believed.

27. There is a general misconception that unions like to strike; however, strikes are the last thing the sector wants. There is far more work involved in striking than not. The difficulty for the SSTA was trying to do the day job and dealing with COVID-19 at the same time, which was putting a lot of pressure on everybody to keep things moving. We had members on the phone contacting us on a regular basis worried about every scenario. It was like a battleground, and the SSTA was reporting this back to the WIG whilst trying to make decisions. An organisation such as COSLA should be able to dictate to the 32 local authorities, so the rules are the same across the board. COSLA could disseminate the information that had been agreed with the unions and Scottish Government about how things should be run in every school. However, this was far from what was happening, and the SSTA was receiving excuses from the local authorities such as there being different circumstances in different places. What they really meant was that each local authority was implementing Scottish Government decisions in the way that was costing them the least money. Money was a big factor.

### **Online Teaching**

28. With regards to online teaching; access to digital devices; and access to resources, generally there was a lack of resources available. One or two local authorities had additional ICT resources, but the vast majority of

schools did not have up-to-date ICT equipment at the start of, and throughout, the pandemic. In fact, a lot of schools still do not have this equipment now.

29. Teachers were in a very poor situation. The SSTA surveyed its members in Autumn 2020 to ask them about working online because this was all new to them and in some had never done this before. The results of this survey are available on the SSTA website.<sup>2</sup> There might have been a few who had done distance learning courses, but they were few and far between. The survey found that for around 99% of teachers, online teaching was completely foreign to them, with them only ever teaching in classrooms. Teachers have very little understanding around the rules and regulations of teaching online and we had to advise members of the risks of teaching in this way so as not to put themselves at risk. For example, teachers did not know who was in the same room as the pupils they were teaching.
30. The SSTA was advising its members to be there for children, but not to do live online teaching, because at that point they had not been trained in how to do it. We advised teachers that there could be some pitfalls in delivering live teaching online. For example, there could be other people in the room with the pupils, who hear something that is going on, do not know what relationship the children have in the classroom, take something out of context and make a complaint either to the employer or the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Luckily, this did not happen, and we advised teachers that they needed to protect themselves first and to try to make work available for children that was suitable at the time.
31. As time went on children dropped away from online learning because a proper dialogue between them and teachers was not really possible in those situations. SSTA members complained that a lot of children were not

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<sup>2</sup> Survey Results 2020 " Lockdown Learning Depended on Teachers Resources and Resourcefulness" ([SCI-SSTAxx-000002](https://ssta.org.uk/lockdown-learning-depended-on-teachers-resources-and-resourcefulness/)) (<https://ssta.org.uk/lockdown-learning-depended-on-teachers-resources-and-resourcefulness/>)

completing their work. This brings matters back to the fact that a lot of young people did not have the appropriate equipment at home or had no support at home from their parents. Members told the SSTA that they spent a lot of time preparing work for children, but the response was quite small as the children were not completing much work.

32. I would say the fact that schools managed to get online learning up and running was a success. However, I would question whether this was a productive exercise. Schools appeared to want to run online learning as if it was a normal school day and that is not possible. Common sense would argue it would have been better to have a good quality rather than good quantity of teaching.
33. Some schools tried to say that teachers needed to be in front of their computer at 8:50am and be there until 3:30pm, which is nonsense. It made no allowance for the people who had caring responsibilities or needed to fit in shopping trips, especially when you were not allowed to go outside for long periods of time. Many of these practical things were not considered.
34. Some head teachers suggested teachers giving two sessions of English per week or two sessions of maths per week instead of sticking to rigid timetables.
35. In terms of the vulnerable children and children of key workers who were still attending school, the teachers that were there were providing cover, but I would not say they were teaching them but rather they were child minding. The classes would be of mixed ages, from different schools and in different phases and would include children they would not normally have taught. Some children would not have had their ASN support.
36. In terms of the availability of, and access to equipment, it was pitiful. There was an expectation that teachers should buy their own equipment. I recall that in Dumfries and Galloway Council, the director of education said that teachers earn enough money to buy their own equipment. However, this

was extreme and other local authorities provided teachers with what they needed. It was however, expected that teachers use their own Wi-Fi or mobile phones at home and very little was ever recompensed afterwards.

37. Teachers felt there was no recognition for the things they did during that time, which at times was very challenging. It was overall a difficult time.
38. In response to the survey conducted by the SSTA in Autumn 2020, the vast majority of members said they were given equipment but that the reason for this was because it probably was not good enough to be given to the children. Schools continue to lack ICT equipment and have poor Wi-Fi, which is why there is such an issue with mobile phones in schools, as pupils use their own phones to look things up. If another pandemic was to occur, I do not believe Scotland would be prepared for it. In respect of where matters stand in connection with ICT infrastructure, it is as though the COVID-19 pandemic never happened and no preparation has been made for the future.

### **Free School Meal Entitlement**

39. The SSTA did not have any direct responsibility for providing the free school meal entitlement. However, there was some concern raised by members that young people were not getting fed. In some cases, children were coming into schools to get fed. Some members were very concerned about this and encouraged the children to attend school. I believe schools bent over backwards to accommodate these young people, even if they just came in for lunch and went away again. I believe this was the sensible approach. However, some schools wanted the children to stay in all day if they were coming in for meals.

### **Childcare Hubs**

40. The SSTA considered that it was better to ask for volunteers to staff hubs rather than telling people they had to do so. I believe most headteachers



did that. Local authorities put demands on headteachers, stating that somebody must carry out certain tasks. Headteachers feel obliged to do everything that they are asked to do for the children in their care, particularly in connection with delivering arrangements for national qualifications. There was a mad rush before COVID-19 hit to get national qualification work done for summer exams and unfortunately it all went sideways after that.

41. Safety within hubs was a real worry for the SSTA and its members as they were really just child-minding facilities. I would not go as far as saying there was no structure to these childcare hubs. However, because of the range of abilities and ages teachers were just finding things to entertain the young people. To be honest I think that is what the UK government and Scottish Government wanted - somebody to look after children while people went to work.
42. In terms of attendance, members made the SSTA aware of children who should be attending these hubs but were not. Key worker parents would often make additional arrangements for childcare outwith the schools. For example, they would leave their children with a partner, close friend, or family rather than send their children into school. I believe this was because there was more chance of catching COVID-19 at the hubs than with family or friends. This was the same for most parents, whose children would only be sent into the hubs if they had no other option.
43. Some of the teachers that attended the childcare hubs were happy to do so, as it allowed them to interact with people face-to-face. Nobody was force into working in hubs and it was done on a voluntary basis.

#### **Impacts on particular cohorts of staff**

44. I believe there was a lack of understanding from people in school management positions that teachers might have caring responsibilities out with work. The impression given by management was that teachers should



be able to cope with that as well as their job.

45. Head teachers were making the decisions on how to implement Scottish Government decisions regarding education provision. Local authorities were putting the pressure on, but it was the head teachers who were left to make the decisions in each individual school. A good number of head teachers understood that people were at risk, and if some work was being delivered online and everybody was involved, they were happy, and did not want staff to come in. However, in some places the general rule was that all teachers had to attend their workplace.
46. Members with vulnerable children or family members in some cases were still asked to attend schools, even though the guidance said that they were to look after themselves and their dependants. I believe head teachers were under a tremendous amount of pressure and did what they could. In hindsight they probably wish they had not done that, as it put people at risk.
47. Women are normally the ones with childcare responsibilities; therefore, I believe women probably found it the hardest to deal with. Also, if teachers are criticised for not attending class or not doing the best for the children in the class, they feel they are not doing their job properly. In my view teachers that felt they could not attend classes thought they were in some way letting children down and not doing their job effectively. This of course is not true. We made it clear to our members, particularly older staff, that people with vulnerable family members had to put their families first.

### **Impacts on Head teachers**

48. Head teachers were under tremendous pressure. In some cases, they were having to open the school buildings in the morning as the janitors were not there. In normal circumstances the school should not be open unless support staff are also there. Again, this was a result of the pressure being applied from local authorities and possibly Scottish Government. The

people applying this pressure were not on the ground in schools and were making decision that would not impact upon them.

49. The relationship and communication between headteachers and local authorities came across like one upmanship on the part of some local authorities. Some local authorities had more schools open than others. If you did not open schools in your local authority the concern could be that the other authorities would perceive you to be not looking after the children in your care, when in fact you were keeping the schools closed and the children safe. There has always been a proverbial 'look over the garden wall' mentality within education, seeing what other local authorities are doing and trying to be better than them. In my view, keeping schools open gave some senior managers within local authorities 'bragging rights'. However, each local authority is different, and some did not have the money to employ additional staff to help with this.
50. The general concern during the period of school closures was about, was how young people would take their exams and how this would be facilitated. Exam results are an important matter for schools so I believe there was unnecessary pressure added from SQA, local authorities, headteachers, universities and parents that should have been taken off teacher's shoulders at an early stage.

### **Impacts on teachers of practical subjects**

51. All practical lessons were stopped, including anything to do with music, singing, or PE. If students were taking exams in any of these subjects the exams could no longer go ahead.
52. Advice was given by scientific experts about marking books, for example how many days after the student had completed an exam can the books be marked, how many days do you have to wait after they have been marked, and how many days before they can be handed back. A lot of exam work is based on physical evidence of the pupils' work by way of coursework and

exams this is a directive direct from the SQA.

53. Before the first lockdown, secondary schools were trying produce three months' worth of work in two weeks in case schools were closed. Practical subjects had no chance of being completed, as under these circumstances teachers and pupils tend to concentrate on subjects such as English, mathematics, and science. SSTA members that taught subjects such as modern studies, geography, home economics, and P.E were telling us that they were not even seeing the pupils at that time, as the priority for parents and pupils was English, maths and science. The impact of this was that work did not get completed in these other subjects and there has been a long-term de-valuing of these subjects since the pandemic.

#### **Impacts on particular cohorts of pupils**

54. Pupils with ASN, disabilities, those with English as a second language, and those living in deprived areas all missed out on their entitlement to education. The teachers were transferred to the main classes or the main groups of pupils. However, pupils with ASN rely on the individual contact the teachers and support staff can give them. ASN pupils did not get the direct support of ASN staff and were left to flounder.
55. Some ASN pupils were unable to come into school and those that did attend were unable to have the 1:1 contact with teachers they needed, as they had been reassigned somewhere else. Unfortunately, this still happens. If there is a shortfall elsewhere in the school such as in a mainstream class, the ASN teachers and support staff would be allocated to them, and the ASN pupils would either miss out or must attend a mainstream class. Sadly, a teacher sitting in a class with twenty plus pupils is preferred to a teacher sitting in a class with one or two ASN pupils.
56. One of the big failings in the Scottish education system is that when there are financial cuts, the staff are the first to go. This has consistently happened in schools within deprived areas for years. For some pupils,

COVID-19 was the excuse they needed to not attend school. This mindset has continued to this day, and the SSTA believes this may continue for another three to four years if not longer.

57. The impact of COVID-19 will be long-standing. SSTA members say that the pupils who are now in fourth year and preparing to sit their exams are at least two years behind in their education because of all that was missed during lockdown.

**Ability of teaching staff to work in partnership with other organisations**

58. All additional working impact ceased during the pandemic. This was a godsend, as teachers did not have time to focus on getting ready for inspections, and the paperwork and bureaucracy that these bring. Teachers are overworked with demands from the system that are not related to the teaching and learning in the classroom. The pandemic stopped many of these outside demands and allowed the teachers to focus on teaching.
59. However, for the SSTA's secondary teacher members, exams were the biggest problem and brought the highest demand of work. The SQA was putting pressure on teachers to make sure all the preparation work was completed, saying that if not, pupils were going to lose out.
60. Visitors were not allowed into schools, so visits from social work for example were not going ahead as before. Again, the most vulnerable children missed out on the support they needed.
61. The only other organisation involved at that time was Education Scotland. Education Scotland is meant to give support and materials to schools, but sadly this did not reach them. If you ask any of SSTA members now, they would not even be aware Education Scotland was involved during the pandemic. Education Scotland was providing some guidance, but part of the current problem in Scottish education is that the people making the

decisions are not aware of what is going on at the front line.

### **Communication with the Scottish Government**

62. The SSTA worked alongside the WIG during the pandemic. In my view, this group should have been advising the minister for education, rather than the other groups involved. It was the CERG who had direct interaction with the minister for education. Members of the CERG in many cases had other agendas rather than supporting teachers in the classroom.
63. There was a subgroup set up and led by Education Scotland to look at different bits of work. The SSTA joined some of the Scottish Government groups, but not all of them, as some related to early learning and childcare, for example. However, the Scottish Government groups all ran out of steam as the pandemic went on. There was a bit of effort put in initially, but then the meetings got further apart. In most cases, Scottish Government guidance was expanded within these groups.
64. As part of the WIG, the SSTA was getting sight of Scottish Government advice and guidance and was asked to read it over and pass comment. Generally speaking, that was as much involvement as we expected. I would not criticise Scottish Government's guidance, it was in connection with the implementation of that guidance that SSTA had the biggest problem.
65. There were ten Scottish Government education subgroups that my colleagues sat on during the pandemic. These subgroups were 1) Term 4 learning, 2) Infrastructure and Organisation, 3) Curriculum and Assessment, 4) Supporting learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, 5) Pastoral care for children and young people, 6) Workforce support, 7) Workforce planning, 8) School improvement in a new context, 9) Critical childcare and 10) Early Learning and Childcare. **Personal Data** attended the Workforce support and Workforce planning subgroups on behalf of the SSTA, with **Personal Data** representing the SSTA at the School improvement in a new context subgroup.

## **Human Rights, Mental Health, and Wellbeing**

66. The teaching profession is generally well-organised, with all the unions working together to ensure that basic human rights are upheld. Therefore, I am not going to say there was an abuse of human rights during the pandemic. The teaching profession is very unionised, with 98-99% of teachers being part of a union. The unions were therefore looking after teachers' human rights during the pandemic.
67. In terms of mental health, I think this was the one area that was not taken seriously by local authorities, particularly in terms of staff with COVID-19, Long COVID, or those looking after dependants. There was an attitude at times within local authorities that COVID-19 and the connected issues did not really exist. This attitude was evidence when the SSTA was supporting members with their employers. The SSTA fought to make Long COVID an illness that was recognised by the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT).
68. The main worry the SNCT had was how long teachers with Long COVID would receive sick pay for. The worry was not about treatment they may need or support they may require. It was as though Scottish Government wanted COVID-19 to be part of the normal sickness absence and monitoring process. However, it needed to be treated differently because not much was known about the illness. There was additional pressure because the SSTA did not know how many days you needed to be away after you had contracted COVID-19. There was no consistency in implementation of Scottish Government guidance, as people would interpret the guidance in different ways.
69. At the beginning of the pandemic, following a positive COVID-19 test, people had to be away from work for between seven and 10 days, however that seemed to change very quickly. The SSTA then had members that were not taking tests, as they did not want to be absent from school. Members would say that they could not afford to be off sick, for reasons

such as needing to carry out work in connection with exams. Therefore, they would delay taking a test, until the work they needed to do was completed.

70. In other cases, head teachers would ask teachers not to take tests, as if there were too many teachers off, the school could not run. There was so much pressure being applied across the board. Supply teachers were being used to plug the gaps arising from staff absence. Scottish Government was providing extra funding to allow this to happen, however I do not think the local authorities were using the funds for the purposes for which they were intended. The SSTA were fed excuses from local authorities, such as that they could not find the teachers needed to help and support the schools. However, supply teachers were telling us they could not get work.
71. The mental health of staff was greatly affected by the amount of pressure and strain that was applied during the pandemic. The concern was that work was seen as being more important than that individuals' health.
72. Poor mental health in children is taken seriously, whereas poor mental health for teachers is not. The culture is that teachers should be able to get on with their job, and any mention of mental health support is more lip service, than actual support. The pandemic increased the level of problems for staff, in terms of additional stress at home, at work, and the constant worry of trying to keep things running as before. Not taking COVID-19 tests was quite common, as teachers were worried about being locked up at home for seven to 10 days, and not being able to meet targets set or be able to help pupils with exams. The consequence of this, was that COVID-19 was spreading further.
73. The original concern of the SSTA and its members, along with other unions, was pupils contracting COVID-19. However, with teachers coming into schools the concern was also that they would contract COVID-19 from pupils and pass it on to their families. Teachers have always been at risk of catching every virus going, because of the environment they work in.

However, there was very little support, and even now, some teachers are struggling with the effects of Long COVID. It is still regarded as just another illness; however, the unions believe it should be treated differently to other illnesses as it remains an illness about which little is known.

### **Workload**

74. In normal circumstances a teacher will plan and prepare their lessons for the full school year. This would involve planning on delivering certain aspects of the curriculum at particular times. The pandemic twisted that around, as teachers had to produce far more materials for online lessons. This would not have been their normal work; therefore, they were having to constantly develop new lessons, with the associated work that goes along with that.
75. Online teaching added a great deal more time to each lesson. For example, teachers would need to spend at least two hours developing a lesson and the associated materials, give the lesson, and then another hour or so to mark the work. These are conservative timescales, and in more cases than not, it took far longer.
76. Teachers were preparing lessons; however, the pupils were not doing the work. Not only was this frustrating, but some teachers also had to go into schools to provide evidence that they had worked on lesson plans and materials even knowing that the work was not going to be completed by the pupils. Many teachers felt as if they were being checked up on by members of senior management in school, pressed by some local authorities.
77. Teachers were being asked to put work up online, and this would be checked. However, the quality versus quantity argument comes in because teachers were rushing to make sure work was available.
78. The additional work around the exams was the biggest burden placed on



teachers in addition to the normal day to day administration teachers do, such as reports and lesson preparation. New initiatives had stopped for the most part; however, the biggest change and challenge was online teaching.

79. There was no additional training in place for teachers on how to teach online. They were having to learn it themselves as they went along. As well as a new teaching style, the correct technology was not provided, so everything took much longer to complete. There was an assumption by local authorities, Scottish Government and parents that teachers knew how to use the technology such as Microsoft Teams, however that was not the case at the start of the pandemic. Teachers had to learn as they went along.

### **PPE**

80. The SSTA surveyed its members from various local authorities following the reopening of schools and found that access to PPE differed across each authority. A report of the survey results can be found on the SSTA website.<sup>3</sup> The SSTA also issued advice to members on 11 August 2020 on what they should do if they had concerns that the necessary school reopening measures had not been implemented in their school. A copy of this advice is available on the SSTA website.<sup>4</sup> When members completed the survey, they told which local authority they worked in. One question that was asked was "how confident are you going into school?" In Glasgow City Council, the response was 53% yes, whereas in Inverclyde it was 23%. The lowest confidence rate was within the independent sector, at 20%.
81. Another question asked in the survey was "has physical distancing been introduced around your school building". Again, responses varied from 86% in independent schools, to 46% in East Ayrshire Council.

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<sup>3</sup> SSTA Safety First – School return survey ([SCI-SSTAxx-000006](#)) ([Safety First – School Return – SSTA Survey - Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association](#))

<sup>4</sup> Reopening of schools; email to school reps ([SCI-SSTAxx-000003](#)) ([Reopening of Schools: Email to School Reps - Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association \(ssta.org.uk\)](#))

82. Responses to questions about access to face coverings, again showed a massive difference across the local authorities. For example, in Dumfries and Galloway Council, 78% of teachers said that face coverings were provided by the council, whereas in Argyle and Bute Council, only 4% were provided with these. I believe this goes back to the respective preparatory work done by local authorities and the amount of funds available to them.
83. It was also expected that staff shared ITC equipment. For example, within South Lanarkshire Council, 93% of staff were to share equipment, and in Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland Councils this figure was 19%.
84. Within secondary education, some teachers were having to share classrooms as well, as the number of teachers with their own dedicated classroom has fallen. Schools are no longer built in a way that affords each teacher a classroom, and are in some cases, bursting at the seams.
85. The SSTA got a high level of engagement with its surveys during the pandemic, with 50% to 60% of members responding to these, which was unusual.

### **Vaccine Prioritisation**

86. Vaccinating staff was not a priority for the local authorities. The SSTA had a members' congress in May 2024, and one motion we are looking at is ensuring that all teachers are vaccinated. We believe the sensible thing to do is to offer vaccinations to teachers, not just for COVID-19, but the flu vaccine as well. This motion has been raised at SCNT but no progress has been made with it yet.
87. The SSTA had regular conversations at the weekly WIG meetings with local government about the necessity for teachers to be vaccinated. The SSTA makes it a priority to put the safety of both members and pupils first. However, we have seen more willingness from pupils than teachers in terms of initial vaccines, and boosters.

88. I would also like to make it known that teachers find it very difficult to attend medical appointments. This has been happening for some time. The SSTA encourages its members to ensure they attend any medical appointments; however, they get kick back from within the school, requesting them to put the appointment off and go another time. This happened before the pandemic and continues now. This is directed from management; however, it is also the mentality of some teachers who do not prioritise looking after their own health and put work first. Teachers do not appear to protect themselves well enough. This is where employers should step in and make provision for teachers to step back and care for their health more.

### **Transitions, New Admissions and Destinations**

89. There was no routine established in the schools and education system during the pandemic, and a lot of allowances were being made for pupils. Pupils transitioning from primary to secondary school were far behind where they would normally have been.

90. Bad behaviour was always there in schools; however, the pandemic appears to have highlighted the problem.

91. In terms of pupils transitioning to secondary from primary school, many members told the SSTA that pupils were not ready for that transition. In hindsight, communication with government ministers should have been made urging them to cancel the education pupils received in primary 7 and put all those pupils back a year to complete it again. Although this would cause additional problems, in terms of education, the pupils would probably be in a better place now. I can provide a personal example of this: my youngest child was in primary 7 during the pandemic. However, because the usual activities such as school trips, events, and similar were cancelled, when my child's class moved to secondary school, they did not have the necessary skills and experience gained from going through the normal transitional process. They were all lost.

92. Experiences such as school trips were deemed important as they are an integral part of growing up from child to teenager. These practices and educational experiences could have gone ahead if we had just stopped and re-run the school year by 8 or 9 months, and everyone would have won. I understand it is easier to say that now. However, I think it is an important lesson to learn going forward. The drive to get things back to normal was not the best that could have been done. Some things could have been done different. I appreciate there would have been challenges and difficulties suggesting pupils repeat a year of education, however a lot of money was spent on the pandemic, and it could have been better used by accommodating the needs of pupils, especially those leaving primary and secondary. Major milestones that pupils need to pass through were missed across the board. Sadly, this meant the pupils, especially those leaving primary, were not emotionally or educationally ready to move up. The same can be said of pupils caught leaving second year and deciding what exam subjects they wanted to do; and those leaving high school and moving on to further education.

### **Exams**

93. The pressure on teachers in relation to exams started around Easter 2020. At that time, pupils were not ready for national qualifications in 2020 because they had been pressurised too early. Time was wasted prior to Easter in an attempt to gather pupil evidence, including additional prelim exams. Vital teaching was also lost because of the need to meet the demands of the SQA. The SSTA advocated that there should be no exams in April/May 2020 and suggested the same for April/May 2021. The SSTA advocated for this early on, as we knew pupils had missed too much work.

94. The current Scottish exam system does not work. I say that with confidence. Pupils doing National 5's in S4, Highers in S5 and Advanced Highers in S6 are each supposed to cover 160 hours per course. However, with National 5, you cannot physically fit in 160 hours per subject per year.

What schools do to counteract this is start courses at Easter or in May the year before, then it is a mad dash to get the pupils completing the course in time for the exams. I believe Scottish Government is looking to bring back two-year courses again, however that is not in place at present.

95. In 2020, the usual period from Easter onwards was lost because of lockdown. There will always be pupils who get through exams regardless of what additional pressures are in place, and at the other end of the scale are pupils that will always struggle. The ones classed as "middle graders", between grade C and E for example, are the ones who suffered the most. I do not agree with this, but schools try to get these D and E graders up to a C, as the parents and some pupils do not value grades below a C, despite the fact that this is still a pass. Therefore, what often happens is that teachers put in extra work to help these pupils to get their grades up to an 'acceptable' level. However, when we look at the bigger picture, these pupils are getting this level of pressure from every teacher in all subjects at the same time. What can happen, is that the pupils cannot take the pressure anymore and walk away.
96. It is important to note that from the day a pupil walks into secondary school, they are assessed at every half term. This information is kept on a computer system and tracked over the years. Therefore, if a student is on a path to achieve an A grade, they will be on that A path when they come to sit exams. The same can be said for B, C and D students.
97. The argument the SSTA had with ministers such as John Swinney MSP, was around the question of why teachers were not using the evidence they already had for each pupil, rather than creating new material. Teachers were asked to create new material for the summer 2020 term to provide to pupils working from home. This resulted in a mad rush to get pupils at home to submit their most recent pieces of work, collect evidence of coursework and organise a number of prelim exams.
98. Pupils sat a lot more tests between January and March 2020, in the form

of prelims. This was done in the fear that this was going to be the evidence to be used come exam time. New pupil qualification evidence was being sought by schools in the absence of final exams. The SSTA argued as soon as lockdown began in March 2020 that a better course of action would have been to allow internal marking of tests and prelims, which is what normally happens, rather than add more pressure on to pupils, who were already suffering anxiety from COVID-19, and its associated effects. However, teachers are not trusted to mark internal tests. All the grades that teachers had given over the four previous years were tossed aside.

99. When it came to the time of the 2021 exams, the pupils were now that far behind where they should be, and all practical subjects had been frozen for many months. When it came to exams the pupils would not have the required knowledge and skill set to sit these. Again, the SSTA asked for the exams to be put back. Following a conversation with John Swinney MSP and other unions, it was agreed that the algorithm had to change, which is where qualification evidence is collected over a number of years and used as a predictor of future years. The algorithm was not a fair indicator of pupil performance and Schools in certain areas always achieve higher grades and those schools received higher grades in 2020. The algorithm was doing what it had always done; showing that pupils from privileged areas were doing well, and those in more deprived areas were getting poorer results. Therefore, the system had to revert to an element of teacher judgment.

100. In 2023, the SSTA objected to the SQA bringing back the full requirements for the exams, on behalf of our members. The SSTA argued that pupils were not ready for it and were behind in all subjects. For example, the SQA removed practical work from the sciences between 2020 and 2022, but SQA's proposed exams would assess practical work. Pupils have no experience of practical work. The SSTA suggested to the SQA that practical course work and exams were phased in gradually. The SSTA were advocating for the revised arrangements for national qualifications to continue or alternatively a phased return over 3 years. In addition, the

Hayward Review advocates a major change to national qualifications therefore reverting to the previous system makes no sense when it may be abolished in the coming years. However, their response was that everyone needs to get back to normal. The SSTA anticipates this year that the pass grades will be lowered to afford more higher pass rates than would have naturally occurred. The depth of knowledge and experience of pupils is lower than in pre-pandemic years, but pupils cannot be disadvantaged so grades will remain at similar levels to the past.

101. During the pandemic period a number of pupils walked away from education, and teachers were not able to engage with them. This was a result of the huge amounts of pressure being put on their shoulders. Other pupils reduced the number of subjects they would work on. The system whereby secondary schools are measured mainly by exam success, with other aspects of education not being valued as much by those who manage education, created this environment.

102. Last summer the SSTA had a disagreement with the SQA regarding the exams. The new education minister was appointed, and on the same day the SQA announced that exams were going back to the pre-pandemic system. We had spoken with the minister, and she understood our point of view, so we were surprised by the announcement. She tried to persuade the SQA to phase in the exams or give it one more year. However, the SQA were adamant that they were moving ahead with bringing exams back. It seemed to be more about protecting the SQA, than what was best for pupils.

103. Regarding the Hayward Review, which is reviewing the exam system, I feel that COVID-19 perhaps created the environment for that review. The change to exams has been talked about for a number of years with little progress. The changes brought about by the pandemic have shown there are other ways of assessing pupils.

### **Placement Based Learning and Work Placements**

104. During the pandemic all school pupil work experience placements stopped. There is a lot of effort being put back in now to try and get these up and running again. However, employers have also changed the way they work. Most places of work now do not have staff in-house five days per week, and there is a lot of remote working. For pupils to be able to attend a work placement, they really need to be in a work setting with someone, and that is difficult to facilitate now.

### **Re-opening of Schools**

105. When teachers and pupils first returned to school in September 2020, there was a lot of work done to try and make it as safe as possible. A lot of the guidance that came from Scottish Government was straightforward, but again there was pressure to get as many pupils as possible back to in-person teaching, regardless of what type of school it was. Each school building is different, so the pressures are different. Some schools could cope with two thirds of their pupils, and others could only accommodate half that number. There was some pressure applied by local authorities to headteachers to bend rules so that more pupils could be accommodated. I think pupils quickly stopped following any safety rules. The SSTA pushed for secondary pupils to wear masks in class, but and it was a big battle to get pupils to comply, and it was hard to implement. There was no consistency of implementation across the different local authorities and schools.

106. At lunch times, as there would only be one place per school for staff to eat lunch, teachers would be in close contact with each other. In the summer months pupils and staff could in theory eat outside, resulting in fewer rules about social distancing being broken. The big problem for the SSTA came after Christmas. The rules around social distancing had been relaxed by Westminster for Christmas, which in hindsight was madness. Scottish Government was prepared to bring pupils back after Christmas. I spent that time writing to every Scottish Government minister and local authority



director of education in Scotland, asking them to delay the return to school. A lot of SSTA members were worried about people spending time in groups over Christmas, and then coming back into schools and spreading COVID-19. I passed on information to SSTA members via social media, making them aware of who I had contacted by letter and what I was asking for.

107. The SSTA believes Scottish Government perhaps did fight against the opening of schools after Christmas. However, the argument would be that the schools in England were open, why not Scotland. That is why the SSTA's view is that the four national governments should have been issuing united guidance.

108. For the Scottish Government, the safety concerns were secondary to the political arguments.

109. There was a delay in the return to schools, with a return date at the end of January. I was receiving numerous calls from members terrified about going back to school earlier. The SSTA advised them it was trying to sort it out, because we could not tell them not to go in. The SSTA lobbied Scottish Government and local authorities over Christmas 2020 to delay the reopening of schools. Teachers could not refuse to follow the instruction of the employer without conducting a formal ballot for industrial action.

110. Teachers do not tend to break rules and are very disciplined. Therefore, if someone in authority tells them to do something, they will do it. The fear they had of going back early and getting ill was heightened by the fear of breaking rules. I would say it was probably more stressful after Christmas 2020, than it was when we went back in August 2020.

### **Issues with behaviour, attainment, and attendance**

111. The SSTA produced a survey about 18 months ago which highlighted that the time wasted on dealing with bad behaviour was at its highest amongst S1 and S2 classes, and as you go up the school, the level of disruption

lessens. A summary of the results of this survey can be found on the SSTA website.<sup>5</sup> This highlighted that the transition period between primary and high school was affected. As previously mentioned, pupils could not cope with the pressure of high school and the work they were being set, as theoretically, they were a year behind in their learning. There is still a reluctance within the system to recognise and acknowledge that there is a real problem now in terms of children not being at the same level of education, by age, as pre-pandemic. Secondary teachers trying to reach expected standards adds to the difficulties for children. Pupil frustration and lack of prior knowledge and experience can lead to poor pupil behaviour.

112. For one reason or another, allowances have been made for younger people over the last four years, and because they have not faced any consequences for their actions, behaviour and attendance have fallen away. Young people need consistency and stability. They observe everything that is going on around them. The order within schools has been broken. To try to re-build that stability, time is being taken away from the actual teaching of lessons. The pandemic broke the stability of pupils attending school every day. There is still have a long way to go to get back to pre-pandemic education.

### **Career Progression**

113. There is very little career progression within secondary education. Especially within secondary schools, there are not enough opportunities to take on extra responsibilities and progress. When I began my career in London, I was working as a technology teacher and over the years I got promotions. I could have moved up to head teacher if I had wanted to. In Scotland, we have moved away from that. If you are a classroom teacher, the next step is faculty head. For example, you could be a religious education teacher, but you head up geography, history, social studies, and

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<sup>5</sup> Results of survey titled 'Teachers face Aggression epidemic' ([SCI-SSTAx-000005](https://ssta.org.uk/teachers-face-aggression-epidemic/)) (<https://ssta.org.uk/teachers-face-aggression-epidemic/>)

modern studies. However, you are not an expert in any of those subjects. The next point of management is the deputy head. I mention this because you build up knowledge and experience by slowly going up the ladder in management, jumping from classroom teacher to faculty head. Now the jumps are too big. The result is that you can have a head teacher with only 10 years of teaching experience. Schools are now being run by people with far less experience and knowledge than is required.

114. With the challenges of COVID-19, many school leaders did not have the experience or knowledge to deal with some of the matters arising. The system is setting head teachers up to fail and is not providing the appropriate support. Schools got through the pandemic with the support of people who may not have been in a management position, but who had a lot of experience across the board.

115. Thinking of career progression, there are these huge jumps available, however we now have a shortage of teachers within secondary schools.

### **Funding Challenges and Retention of Staff**

116. Scotland has lost a lot of secondary school staff following the pandemic. The number of members has fallen, and they have left teaching altogether. These were staff in their late fifties, who were able to access their pension a couple of years early and did not want to go back into the schools. Attitudes changed following time away from the schools during lockdown. Teachers questioned whether they needed the stress and pressures anymore, and some opted to retire. Two years earlier, teachers would have considered the pressures but would have left teaching to work in other areas. I think the pandemic broke that cycle, and if anything, it hurried people to make life decisions.

117. Scottish education normally relied on retired teachers to work as supply

teachers to cover gaps in classrooms. However, teachers who have recently retired have decided that is not for them.

118. As a profession, teaching is not as attractive as it used to be, even though secondary teachers in Scotland are paid fairly well compared to the rest of the UK. That is not enough to recruit within the profession. In September 2023, the number of people training as secondary teachers was 50% of the required number. This number has gradually dropped from 70% to 50% over the last few years. If this reduction continues, Scotland will be looking at real problems in the future in respect of newly qualified teachers.

119. Primary schools have met their targets in respect of having enough teachers.

120. The pandemic broke the cycle of people working 5 days a week within a work environment. More and more people are working from home, which better suits the home and work life balance. The prospect of being in a classroom five days per week removes the flexibility people are enjoying and makes teaching far less attractive. Add in the pressures the job brings, and this compounds the issue.

121. When it comes to funding, there is less and less money available. There is not the funding in schools to do all the things needed or wanted. Members say that funding constantly gets cut back and this has been the case for years.

122. Scottish Government made an additional £145 million available for education recovery. This was introduced around the time of the pandemic, with the funds being for more teachers. These funds were sent to the local authorities and because they were not ring fenced, they were used on what the local authorities felt was appropriate. Local authorities ended up using these funds to pay supply teachers they already had, and were paying from a different fund, so no additional teachers were recruited or employed. They were referred to as "extra teachers" but on the ground, there were no

additions.

123. Scottish Government is putting the same amount of money into education in 2024. However, they are now looking for evidence to show where the funds are going. One of Scottish Government's policies was to protect teacher numbers; however, they are going down. The best thing the funds could be spent on is teachers and teaching assistants. People believe adding computer suites to schools is where funds should be spent, but nothing compares to direct pupil to teacher interaction.

### **Lessons to be Learned**

124. The main lesson that needs to be learned is to value staff, as it was the staff that got the country through the pandemic, and that needs to be recognised. If there is another pandemic or similar in the future, every member of staff in schools will always step up to the mark.

125. There needs to be an upgrade in ICT in schools across the board.

126. We need to develop a process that values those with ASN and fully supports and serves their needs. Currently, local authorities sometimes view these pupils as a burden, as they can require extra resources. These pupils are blamed for causing behavioural problems, and that is not true. Poor behaviour in schools is not just confined to pupils with ASN. The full range of pupils in schools are capable of poor behaviour in classrooms. This can be attributed to not getting attention, lack of interest and frustration.

127. Local authorities need to support the development of schools more. Some already do this well, and others have next to no input. A better understanding is required from management level about what goes on in schools on a day-to-day basis.

128. Finally, there is a need to support those working in schools, whose role is described as "support staff" and value what they bring to the table. The support staff themselves need to be supported and trained, rather than just

being thought of as an extra adult in the classroom. Quite often support staff are dealing with situations with no training whatsoever, and that cannot be allowed to continue. Support staff should also have a career structure and the ability to progress.

*I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that this statement will form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and may be published on the Inquiry's website.*

*By typing my name and the date below, I accept that this is my signature duly given.*

*Signed: Seamus Searson*

*Date: 28 August 2024*