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Pre-budget scrutiny: reduced class contact time

UNISON

POLICY BRIEFING

Introduction

The Scottish parliament's education and Gaelic committee is carrying out pre-budget scrutiny of some of the Scottish government's key plans for education in its next budget. The committee is currently examining plans to deliver reduced class contact time (RCCT) for teachers by 90 minutes per week, to give teachers more time for paperwork, planning, administration, and other tasks. Disappointingly, there are no clear proposals on the table for school support staff, or early learning and childcare (ELC) workers to have access to the same protected time. This briefing sets out UNISON's position that non-contact time should be available to all members of staff delivering education – including school support staff and ELC workers, and the benefits this could have for staff, and the young people they support.

Context

Schools, early learning, and education does not have the resources it needs to truly get it right for every child. More resources are urgently needed, and these resources must be spread equitably across education. This means spreading resource and investment requitably across the staff who deliver education.

The proportion of children and young people with additional support needs (ASN) in Scotland's schools has soared. Schools and ELC settings simply don't have the resources they need to properly meet the support needs of every child who comes through their doors. Too many young people are being failed by a system that just isn't equipped to support them. More resources are urgently needed.

Reduced class contact time

Access to non-class contact time is essential to allow staff delivering education adequate time to prepare, undertake administrative work, develop reflective practice, and access quality training and learning. It should however, be available to the education workforce as a whole including in ELC. Where gaps in the timetable arise as a result of RCCT for teachers, they must not be filled by staff who are not graded or paid sufficiently to do this. The proposals cannot be introduced without adequate funding.

The need for reduced class contact time across the workforce

Violence: Violence in schools often happens when children and young people have complex needs that simply cannot be met by the resources and systems in place. School support staff are very regularly the staff members tasked with providing intensive support to children and young people when they are displaying disregulated behaviour because their support needs have not been met. This is often when violence occurs. All education settings must do more to prevent violence from occurring. This should include robust risk assessments, which support staff have access to and can be involved in creating. Where violence does occur, violent incident monitoring and reporting is very inconsistent across local authorities and across different settings. This must be consistent, so that violent behaviour is properly monitored and recorded, and appropriate action taken.

KEY POINTS:

- **The Scottish parliament's education committee is scrutinising the government's plans to reduce teachers' class contact time by 90 minutes per week**
- **Reduced class contact time should also be extended to school support staff and early learning and childcare workers**
- **Protected time is essential for training, paperwork, debriefing, and reflective practice**

bargaining & campaigns team

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UNISON's violence at work survey 2026 showed that, again, schools, nurseries and educational settings accounted for the majority of incidences of violence reported in the FOI data UNISON received. Staff reported being kicked, punched, bitten and being spat at. UNISON is also aware that a substantial number of incidents are not reported.

Filling in violent incident reports and fully debriefing takes time – time that must be protected as part of the working day. ELC workers also experience violence within their settings, and violence prevention and response procedures must be equally robust within ELC settings. Protected time is essential for ELC staff to complete reporting and debriefing within the working week.

Additional support needs: At a meeting of the education committee, Ms McAllan said that she viewed RCCT as a policy which would benefit ASN in Scotland because teachers would have more time to prepare more tailored teaching for pupils with ASN. However, UNISON members know that the reality is that a significant amount of ASN support is delivered by school support staff. These staff are often tasked with delivering intensive one on one support to children with very complex needs. Yet for the majority, they have not had access to proper training to do this, and have no time for reflective practice, a key part of effective ASN delivery. Extending non-class contact time so that all staff delivering ASN have access to quality training as part of the working week, and can reflect on their practice, is how the policy can truly benefit children and young people with ASN who are currently being failed.

Training and learning and development: Access to training, learning and professional development as part of the working week is essential for all members of the education workforce. Many of the education workforce have their own children, other caring responsibilities, or second or third jobs to supplement the low wages of the sector. Doing training in the evening or weekends simply isn't possible.

A highly trained workforce is good for young people, and good for the education professionals supporting them. The current lack of consistent protected time to access training and development for the education workforce is unfair for staff, and for the pupils they support. UNISON has long been calling for improved training and a more structured career pathway for school support staff, and for access to protected learning time to be consistent across the country.

Early years: Access to protected time in the working week for learning and development is essential for early learning and childcare workers. In recent years, the vital importance of quality early learning experiences for children has been increasingly recognised by the Scottish government. Disappointingly, this has not come hand in hand with increased recognition, pay, or status for the workers delivering ELC. Child development is a crucial part of ELC practice. As part of this, ELC workers must write, often lengthy, and complex reports. Yet there is no consistent right to time 'off the floor' away from children to complete these. There is also no protected time to access training or undertake reflective practice, other key components of quality ELC practice. Investing in ELC workers by introducing protected time 'off the floor' is investing in children at a crucial time for their development.

UNISON approach

The expansion of non-class contact time for teachers must be extended across the education workforce. Extending non-contact time across the workforce will mean that a more highly trained workforce is supporting Scotland's children and young people day in day out. This is what young people deserve. We hope the education committee will raise the issue of extending non-contact time to the wider education workforce, and call on the Scottish government to release the funding necessary to do so.

Action for branches

- Circulate this briefing to members working in education
- Encourage your colleagues to join UNISON

Additional reading

- **UNISON Scotland briefing: McMaunus review of ASN**
- **UNISON response to SSSC survey on introduction of professional standards to childcare qualifications**

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