

Witness Name: Paul Marks

Statement No.:

Exhibits:

Dated: 4/6/2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF Paul Marks

I, Paul Marks, will say as follows: -

This witness statement relates to the matters addressed by the Inquiry's Module 8. I have prepared this statement myself.

About your school and your students

1. My name is Paul Marks, I am the principal of The High School Ballynahinch. I was the principal of the school during all aspects of the Covid pandemic. The High School Ballynahinch, is located in Ballynahinch and is 16 miles south of Belfast. Ballynahinch is small market town and has 3 post primary schools and 4 primary schools.
2. The High School Ballynahinch has 415 pupils, about 100 staff and is a typical non-selective controlled school managed by a Board of Governors and is controlled by the Education Authority (EANI). It would be described as a "state school" and is open to all pupils.
3. The school has an autism special needs provision, which has 6 classes and a student population of around 70. Our free school meals would be around 35% which would be typical of a non-selective post primary school. We would have no pupils prior to the Ukraine conflict who had English as a second language.

Planning for the pandemic

4. It is my belief that the pupils and staff were seeing the rise of Covid spread through Europe and I could tell that some parents were already removing the children from school because they were frightened which affected our attendance figures this was around February 2020.
5. My pupils were talking to the staff and myself about the images coming from Italy on the news, and they thought that there could be a lot of people dying and asking me should they be worried about it? I remember giving an assembly to my pupils trying to reassure them that the government would make good decisions to keep everyone safe and to try and not worry.
6. I was fielding a lot of questions from staff and parents and the workload in trying to answer these was a lot for my senior team and I but there is a good network of principals in Northern Ireland who were sharing experiences and advice in early March 2020.
7. During the few days where we had to make decisions about how to manage the impending news about whether or not that schools were going to be closed, I decided to move staff training to a Monday. The Tuesday was St Patrick's Day (a mandatory school closure day), this was to allow me breathing space to put in place actions to mitigate virus spread at school.
8. I remember that the Republic of Ireland government gave advice to schools before St Patrick's weekend and there was a significant concern in NI education circles that we were slow to react. As NI education is devolved, we had to wait even after GB went into educational lockdown for our own minister of education to make the announcement which made it look like there was a delay between GB and NI departments.

9. When the lockdown was announced my substitute teachers had concerns that they were not going to be paid as they only get paid when they work

Prior to the pandemic

10. To be completely honest there was no planning for what we would do if we had to shut the school. There was no training given to pupils or staff on how we would deliver lesson remotely. The school had never delivered lessons or learning remotely before, and we were not ready to do so.

During the pandemic

11. I believe that the communication with parents was quite effective as I used Google Forms via text messages to send them letters. I did not use social media as I was trying to keep the main message serious and only for the parents of the school.
12. I created an online form sent to parents asking if there were essential workers so I could get a handle on how many pupils would be coming to school so I could appropriately and safely staff it. There were some discrepancies about who was an "essential worker". This judgment was left down to me and I applied it to the best of my ability during March 2020.
13. I asked my VP (child protection cover) and one teacher who I knew lived alone to volunteer with myself (total of 3 teachers) to staff the school over lockdown to look after Essential Workers children. These staff were never financially compensated as they had to use fuel to get to school.

14. It soon became apparent in my opinion that we were not prepared for teaching remotely. Technology and software that was available was not being used by the pupils and the staff were not trained on how to use it to its fullest extent. There was very little on-line teaching, but there were digital resources put online for children to use from home, but if the children didn't have a printer or any computer facilities there was little to no learning and very hard to monitor pupil progress. To address the lack of learning we decided to make learning packs on paper which were then posted home or delivered by myself locally for those pupils who had no computer facilities at home.
15. I noticed that parents were giving primary school age pupils priority over laptops and computers to those children who were in post-primary. This was throughout March 2020 to June 2020.
16. I met with staff once a week online as a well-being exercise, we tried to keep it positive and upbeat, but teachers were struggling to complete online learning with pupils and were worried about exams.
17. I opened the school for small number of pupils who worked in the NHS front line – other schools closed in our local area and there was no mitigation given to us for spending money – photocopying booklets, postage, electricity, heat. We also had no canteen, so we bought and cooked lunch for the children every day. I noticed on my drive to school that so many larger high schools were not opened at all, therefore would have had no heating or electricity costs during this time, no additional money was given to us as a school to cover this inequality.
18. I asked that the pupils in our autism provision classes (The CRC) were phoned by our dedicated CRC staff to check-in once a week which was seen as a really positive thing by the parents. The majority of our CRC pupils did not use ICT to access learning.

19. The children who were entitled to free school meals were given additional money from the government and we didn't hear anything to the contrary that children were being hungry through any lockdowns during the teaching or phone calls home.
20. Essential maintenance for the school water systems was paused and then resumed so we sectioned off parts of the school for the workmen to complete the work which was difficult for all of us trying to stop contamination, this occurred in April 2020.
21. Covid money given to us for ICT (information & communication technology) for pupils never happened, Vodafone 3G dongles given to us were wasted, other money came in and had to be spent very quickly for well-being purposes, it was a very confusing, rushed and erratic process in this funding.
22. PPE arrived very late, masks, visors and Perspex, sanitisers were procured by the school, but not the testing kits which came from NHS after online requests.
23. The transfer procedure in May and June 2020 (pupils moving from primary to post-primary schools) was very difficult for all. The electronic system of children being given school place applications worked really well, however we could not speak to primary schools to get pastoral information about the new pupils that were transferring to us.
24. As there was no transfer test in place, we were getting pupils who may have had in the past better opportunities to get into a grammar school. We are a non-selective high school and we were getting applications from children who probably had a more grammar-type profile, so in response we created a grammar stream class for those children. This occurrence was caused by pupils who did not have siblings in grammar schools being disadvantaged by it.

- 25.**Primary schools were doing good-byes electronically or in drive through ceremonies, but we noticed that children were sad that they didn't get to say a proper goodbye to their primary school staff or classmates during late June 2020.
- 26.**Schools were asked by the Department of Education NI to give predicated grades for pupils for their GCSE scores. Once the teaching staff completed this, we as a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) verified each grade and looked for evidence to justify the grade. This was an exceptionally difficult time for us as we wanted to give the most transparent and accurate account for pupils. There was a secure portal for staff to input their grades and we had to train the staff on how to complete this.
- 27.**Online safety was not an explicit concern, however we did have to deal with a small number of incidents where some children were engaging in online-chats on Microsoft Teams (official School software) with staff which I felt were too friendly and frequent. I monitored this and then spoke to the staff members involved about what was an acceptable level of contact online with pupils just to keep everyone safe.
- 28.**When the pupils returned to school in August 2020, after the first lock-down, the school tried to operate a normal timetable, however we soon realised that we have to start Class Bubbles, so that children were kept in the same room all day and teachers moved about. The children and staff found this very difficult and some of the practical subjects could not offer the full curriculum which also caused damage to practical rooms which resulted in significant costs to fix. I felt very sorry for the pupils.
- 29.**I appointed a Covid Officer (unpaid position) to record details and liaise with parents and staff, one point for advice and decision making about whether to isolate.

- 30.** Masks were compulsory for all however we did have some pupils who had medical exemption from wearing masks. Some of these turned out to be not genuine. It was very difficult to keep the pupils wearing masks and some children found it difficult to respond to teachers as they did not know if people were smiling or not.
- 31.** During the return of pupils, we had a ministerial visit. This was a good opportunity to show the Department of Education NI what it was like for the pupils and staff in October 2020.
- 32.** Staff attendance was very poor and some staff were vulnerable and shielding. When a member of staff tested positive or a group of children tested positive, there was anxiety amongst staff about getting sick. Trying to cover absent staff became very stressful for me and the staff as a positive test realistically meant Covid positive meant 10 days off school. My senior team and myself were covering classes each day as we could not get any substitute teachers.
- 33.** Attendance was very low for children and some parents were once again keeping their children home to stop infection if they were vulnerable themselves and we found that the “Eat out to help out” scheme accelerated pupils and staff low attendance because of increased infection at the end of August 2020.
- 34.** We stopped the bubbles after September 2021 as we were worried about impact on children and the children seemed much happier being able to move around the school, we did notice then that the behaviour of the children deteriorated slightly compared to that when they were in bubbles.
- 35.** I encouraged all our staff to get the vaccine, but I know some were concerned about side-effects and some misinformation they had heard on-line. I felt uncomfortable about dealing with this as I wasn’t a medical expert, but I extolled the virtues of the vaccination, and I hoped that people would get vaccinated.

- 36.**We had noticed that pupil hygiene needed a serious examination. Pupils had to be reminded daily about washing their hands after the toilet and about covering their face when sneezing. The assumption that children would wash their hands regularly was wrong by our staff, hence the constant reinforcement and asking the parents to back up this message.
- 37.**There was a small group of people who wrote me aggressive emails frequently, sent leaflets to me and one occasion turned up at the gates of the school saying they were anti-vax protestors. I asked them to move on and they did.
- 38.**When the testing kits arrived in school in March 2021, we had to train the staff and kids on how to use covid testing and everyone tested once a week. The BBC came into school to interview the pupils about testing which was shown on the local BBC News Programme.
- 39.**Schools in Northern Ireland had a two-week break at Halloween due to an infection spike – “fire break”- I think was a good idea to try and arrest the rising numbers of covid – however it just made the return to school much more difficult for children to settle and this affected our attendance rates.
- 40.**This was the hardest term of my leadership career, I felt symptoms of burn out, and even worked over Christmas which I have never had to do before. I think the workload, not being able to switch off and having concerns for the safety of the pupils and staff, weighed heavily on me. Luckily, I was able to recognise the signs and put in place some strategies to look after my own well-being, therefore didn't need any time away from work-but this is the closest I have been to needing time off from work due to the stress of the job.

41. During the second lockdown we were much better equipped to use technology with Microsoft Teams being used well and there was greater monitoring of learning and work being handed in. I also appointed a member to my senior leadership team with responsibility for educational technology and online learning.
42. I noticed that there were families really struggling with having their children at home and we had to make some serious decisions to bring some pupils in for Child Protection reasons even though their parents were not key workers as we saw this as a safety concern. There were more children coming into school due to key workers being included in the guidance.
43. In order to facilitate pupils and keep separation, areas were sealed off in the school for smaller groups. Staff then came in on a rota to come in and supervise children (if they had been vaccinated). Staff were asked to work in pairs for a full day to supervise children in a room using computers. This meant that 2 members of staff supervised around 20 pupils every day. Due to the number of staff (Non-Teaching, 35) I have, each member of staff worked around once a fortnight. The teaching staff worked from home, doing online learning with the pupils.
44. We had an infestation of mice due to places not being used in the school. When this was discovered, there was a huge clean-up required and a financial impact and disruption as it took two weeks to remove all the rodents in August 2021.
45. We had an oversupply of PPE and covid testing kits so we made the decision to give to local care homes and to the NHS.

Overall impact on children following the pandemic

46. We tried to instil a normalisation message to pupils. We looked at returning to our main vision as a school and relied on that, but in reality lots had changed so we rewrote our vision and values to try and respond to what is important after covid.

47. One of the biggest challenges we faced was “anxiety related absence”, our attendance rates had fallen so much and there was a large number of children who simply refused to return to school and wanted to stay at home and be with their parents. We noticed a direct correlation with those children who had parents who worked from home and their probability of them refusing to return to school or have lower attendance rates compared to those parents who were not at home all day.
48. I had noticed that pupil behaviour and parents adjusting had changed remarkably. Pupils return to normal good behaviour was quite fast, around about 2 to 3 weeks of being back. Parental behaviour towards staff declined compared to before Covid. I found the lack of respect and unwelcome emails criticising the school were more ferocious and more abundant than before.
49. The school with funding from DENI (Department of Education Northern Ireland) ran an “Easter School” for pupils to help them catch up to give support for upcoming exams in April 2021. There was a small uptake but I was quite disappointed by the pupil numbers that attended especially those pupils who I would have thought would have taken up the opportunity.

Lessons learned

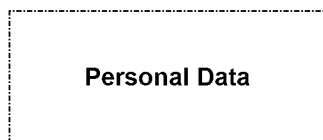
50. I feel that there are many improvements that could be adopted in the case of another pandemic. The following are what I believe to be areas where lessons could be learned.

- i) Schools should be compensated where there have been costs incurred especially if there's disparity from other schools
- ii) There should have been a program to allow me to purchase or loan ICT equipment for every pupil
- iii) Police to be given powers to stop harassment of school staff
- iv) Payments should have been made to school staff who did attend school to compensate them
- v) During a pandemic, education should not be a devolved issue
- vi) Adequate PPE should be issued to all schools before allowing pupils to attend
- vii) Anxiety Based Absenteeism amongst pupils has continued to be a problem

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: _____ Paul Marks _____



Dated: _____ 4/6/2025 _____