



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

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Dear John

I am writing to request supplementary information following your evidence session at the Education and Skills Committee on education reform on 5 September. After the exchange between yourself and Ross Greer in relation to statistics on the numbers of Additional Support Needs assistants and technicians in Scotland's schools, you offered to provide further information to the Committee. Members discussed this matter further following your evidence session and a number of members expressed an interest in receiving this supplementary information. The Committee would be particularly interested to understand:

- What the process is when decisions are made to reduce the data being collected and published;
- What the considerations are when deciding whether to cease collection;
- Whether you have any role in influencing the decisions you outlined in Committee as being the responsibility of statisticians; and
- Whether you have taken any specific decisions to reduce collection of any information from the Teacher Census or the Teacher Census Supplementary Data.

In addition, it would be useful to receive an overview of the extent of the reduction in available data previously available in the Teacher Census and the Teacher Census Supplementary Data. It would also be very useful to get details of the process followed, and timing of decisions taken, at official and political level specifically in relation to statistics on the numbers of additional support needs assistants and school technicians.

I attach the *Official Report* extract of the meeting for ease of reference. I also attach a link to the [original letter](#) from Ross Greer on this issue. I would appreciate it if you

could respond to this letter and also send a copy to the Committee when you respond to Ross Greer's letter

Yours sincerely

Johann Lamont MSP  
Deputy Convener

*Extract of the Official Report*

**Ross Greer:** Do you believe that classroom assistants and additional support needs assistants provide valuable and distinct roles?

**John Swinney:** Yes, I do.

**Ross Greer:** Why does the teacher census supplementary data not classify them as separate categories, which it always did up until this year? They are now classed under a single category as pupil support assistants.

**John Swinney:** The Government statisticians have taken the view that the two roles contribute to the same area of activity; therefore, the combined data provides a more representative position of the employment of individuals as part of the schools census.

**Ross Greer:** You just agreed that they are distinct roles, which they are. There is a huge difference between people who work specifically with children who have additional support needs and those who do not. How are we able to scrutinise that if there is no longer a distinction in the data categories? Additionally, the data is no longer published with the supplementary data for the census. It is available on request afterwards, because it is no longer put through a quality assurance process, unlike other elements of the data. Why is that?

**John Swinney:** On quality assurance, there have been issues in assuring that data was of a standard that could be published by our statisticians. They have had to wrestle with that data-quality issue and to interrogate quite significantly some of the data that emerged. They have taken the view that, in trying to provide the broadest assessment of employment and the characteristics of the workforce, it is better to present the information in that fashion.

**Ross Greer:** The Government is keen to emphasise and place importance on the science, technology, engineering and maths agenda. Do school technicians have a role to play in the STEM agenda?

**John Swinney:** Yes, they do.

**Ross Greer:** The category of school technician has been completely dropped from the supplementary data for the teacher census. Is that a good idea?

**John Swinney:** Judgments are made by our statisticians about appropriate presentation and collection of information. It is important that we have a sense of the entire workforce. However, our statisticians have wrestled with issues about the ability to provide quality data based on the variety of different categories and classification of support workers, which have made it difficult to put in place consistent data for some of the employment categories that Mr Greer has raised.

**Ross Greer:** Do you believe that to fulfil your role as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, you benefit from knowing how many technicians there are in Scottish schools?

**John Swinney:** Ultimately, such issues are for local authorities, because they employ the staff who provide services in individual schools.

**Ross Greer:** You are the relevant minister of Government. Do you believe that you should know how many technicians there are in Scottish schools?

**John Swinney:** We have a very broad cross-section of information about employment in our schools, and I get a significant amount of that information. However, decisions about recruitment of staff at local level are currently taken exclusively by local authorities, which have to judge what recruitment is undertaken at that level.

**Ross Greer:** I am not asking about recruitment decisions. I am asking about the availability of the data through Scottish Government publications. You mentioned that decisions about that are taken by the statisticians. Do they consult people in education before making changes to the data that they collect and publish?

**John Swinney:** Yes, they do.

**Ross Greer:** Who in education do they consult? Are you made aware of such things before a decision is made?

**John Swinney:** I am made aware of decisions that have been made; I do not make them.

**Ross Greer:** Is the Government fulfilling its obligation to be open and transparent? I will not take you through the long saga of what I underwent in collecting the data, but the teacher census that would typically have been published in December was not published until March this year, and the supplementary data was not available until July. After that, I had to request the data that we have been discussing, which was not put through a quality-assurance process, as I said.

**John Swinney:** If my recollection is correct, the reasons for all that are data-quality issues that the statisticians wrestled with as part of the process.

**The Convener:** It would help the committee to have the reasons in writing, because there seem to be a number of issues.

**John Swinney:** I am happy to provide that.