

Remodelling and Timetabling.

A Personal View

There seems to be an increasing number of Heads and governors who are being led to believe that the construction of a Secondary School timetable is an administrative task. Those who may be inclined to agree are almost certainly those who have never been closely involved with the construction of the timetable for an 11 to 16 or an 11 to 18 school.

Schools exist above all else to deliver a curriculum. Teachers, quite rightly, spend a great deal of time reviewing and modifying the curriculum in their schools. In order to deliver this they need an effective timetable. Traditionally, a very experienced teacher who not only shares the vision of the school in terms of the curriculum, but also has an intimate knowledge of subjects of the curriculum and their requirements as well as a detailed knowledge of the staff, their capabilities and their aspirations, has constructed this in most schools. The Timetabler will also need to have a good professional working relationship with all those who have a responsibility for part of that curriculum.

In most secondary schools, every year parts of the curriculum are modified. The Timetabler needs to play an active role in any discussions about possible changes. It is the Timetabler who can point out the implications of any changes. What is changed in one year or department will have implications on other years or departments. The Timetabler is best placed to guide the group making such changes when costs and benefits are being considered.

During the Spring Term, pupils in Year 9 are working through the process of selecting which subjects to study in Key Stage 4. The Timetabler is normally closely involved in this process as the way choices are made will have a significant impact on the use of staff and the use of specialist accommodation. Often, choices are presented to pupils in such a way as to take into account those departments where there is a shortage of specialist accommodation or shortage of specialist teaching. The Timetabler is often a key person in the discussions that take place about viability of small groups in certain subjects. This is not usually a straightforward yes or no decision but takes into account a range of curriculum and staffing issues as well as taking note of the overall direction in which the school intends to move in terms of its curriculum.

In those institutions with Sixth Forms, a similar process takes place regarding possible subject choices for those entering Year 12 in September. The Timetabler with his/her detailed knowledge and understanding of pupils' needs and courses on offer usually plays a key role in determining what choices are put before Year 11 Students. The Timetabler also uses his/her knowledge of available resources and expertise within departments to inform such guidance. The transfer of students from Year 12 to Year 13 (where the cohort may have undergone significant changes) also relies heavily on the educational experience of the Timetabler.

In the late Spring, when the curriculum plan has been finalised, it will be the Timetabler who has to make the initial stab at how this new curriculum will be delivered. Who will teach which subject and how much of each subject will they teach? It is the Timetabler who will work with the Head to ensure that any future vacancies are filled with a view to future demands of the timetable. At this stage the Timetabler (and the Head) will use their knowledge of staff to guide certain teachers in certain directions in order to both facilitate the delivery of the curriculum but also to enhance the career of the teachers concerned.

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When Heads of Department allocate staff to teaching groups they will do so within the constraints laid down by the Timetabler. This of course might well be a contentious issue if the Timetabler were not a senior colleague from the teaching staff team. Once these allocations have been made the Timetabler will test the data to check out the feasibility of the allocations. With any problem, the Timetabler will go back to the head of department with suggestions of changes, which could be made to remedy the situation. To originate such suggestions assumes on the part of the Timetabler, a sound knowledge of the subject, a detailed knowledge of the staff involved and an established working relationship with the Head of Department/Faculty. On occasions some Timetablers encounter an 'uncooperative' Head of Department. At such times, if the Timetabler's status is not at least equivalent to a Head of Department, unsatisfactory outcomes can be expected!

After all of these departmental tests have been completed, the Timetabler does further feasibility checks and at this stage perhaps identifies problems that are not specifically within one department. At this point the Timetabler may need to convene a meeting between (say) three Heads of Department in order to resolve an issue involving them all. If the Timetabler is part of the Leadership Group and chairs the meeting the dynamics are accepted as normal. If however, the Timetabler is not part of the teaching staff of the school, then such a meeting is likely to have a strange 'feel' for those involved.

During the construction phase, problems are likely to arise which will require delicate negotiation with individuals or groups of people. It is difficult to imagine how these will take place if the Timetabler is not an established member of the school's teaching team.

A small part of the timetabling process may well be correctly described as an administrative task. If a school uses a computer system in order to construct the timetable then the entry of the data into the computer may be just an administrative or even secretarial process. This however assumes that a considerable amount of work has been done by a senior member of the teaching staff in converting the school's curriculum plans into a practical working document. At the end of the construction process there is also a small amount of administrative work involved in printing out the various extracts that will be useful to staff at the beginning of the Autumn Term.

If schools use a mechanical or manual system for producing the timetable then a significant administrative task will exist at the end of the process in ensuring that all the information is reproduced in a usable form for all of those who need it. If the school producing a manual timetable also relies on SIMS (say) as its administrative system, then the finished timetable will need to be typed into Nova to ensure that the SIMS system can use it. This typing-in is clearly an administrative (or secretarial) task.

All of the rest of the task of constructing the timetable is far from being administrative and needs to be handled by a teacher with considerable experience.

It needs a member of the leadership group who has a detailed knowledge of the process by which the curriculum is delivered.

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