

Appendix 3 Who should do the timetable?

There are some Heads and governors who seem 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 a timetable for a school.

Schools exist above all 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 and enabling timetable.

Traditionally, the construction has been by 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. The Timetabler will also need to have a good professional working relationship with all those who have a responsibility for any part of that curriculum. He or she will also have monitored the previous timetable, noting any feedback.

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 (and perhaps impossibilities) 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. 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, with the Timetabler again playing a key role.

In the late Spring, when the curriculum plan has been finalised, it will be the Timetabler who will begin to look 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 careers of the teachers concerned.

When Subject Leaders 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 Subject Leader with suggestions of changes, which could be made to remedy the situation. To originate such suggestions assumes on the part of the Timetabler some knowledge of the subject, a detailed knowledge of the staff involved and an established working relationship with the Subject Leader. On occasions some Timetablers encounter an 'uncooperative' Subject Leader. At such times, if the Timetabler's status is not at least equivalent to a Subject Leader, 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 Subject Leaders 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 satisfactorily 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 some administrative work involved in printing out the various extracts that will be useful to staff at the beginning of the Autumn Term.

Transferring the completed timetable from a manual model or from timetabling software to the school's MIS will involve administrative tasks, though it will also need the involvement and interpretation of the Timetabler.

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.