

# The Efficient School

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## **Part 3: Where efficiencies can be found: the office, senior management, IT, the teachers, the governors**

Efficiencies can be found throughout a school. You may not wish to look in certain parts of the school and may wish to focus on what are considered to be key areas in your school, but the fact is that they are to be found everywhere.

By way of example, here are some efficiencies that might be found in each of these areas:

### **The school office**

The office is busy and is an area which suffers a lot of interruptions in terms of visitors, telephone calls, sudden requests for information and documents, and so on. Interruptions are never good news, firstly because it always takes a few moments to get back to where one was working when the interruption occurred, and secondly because most errors that do arise, arise immediately after an interruption.

Thus it is a good idea to reduce interruptions to a minimum. One way of doing this is to ask teaching staff not to come to the office unnecessarily, either with urgent tasks which are only urgent because they been left until the last minute or with tasks that the teachers or their teaching assistants could carry out themselves (such as photocopying), or with requests for information given verbally which could have been written down (and would be more likely to be more fully understood if they had been written down) - or even “just for a chat”.

The last activity may seem strange if you have never witnessed it, but there are schools where teaching staff do pop in because:

- They want a break
- They want to be friendly
- They have come in to the office and so feel it is rude not to talk about general matters
- They actually rather like coming in for a chat.

I have witnessed many schools where notices have been sent around asking staff not to drop into the office unnecessarily, and generally over time these have limited effect. The phrase “I know I’m not supposed to pop in to ask, but...” becomes common among some members of staff, implying that the “don’t drop in” rule is imposed by senior management rather than at the request of the administrators.

One of the simplest solutions that has ever been reported in a project by a student on one of the SEAM courses involved a rearrangement of the office. One desk and two chairs in the office were removed so that in the new layout there simply was nowhere for anyone coming into the office to sit or put anything down. The number of interruptions declined, and when they did occur they took up much less time. No notices

had to be put out, there were no confrontations. Quite simply the new environment reduced the desirability of “dropping in for a chat”.

### **Senior management: the desirability of early consultation**

A number of administrators have reported to the SEAM, either within their efficiency projects or via our weekly news service for administrators, that they find themselves endlessly wasting time and being unable to arrange matters properly because they have no regular planning meeting with the head or deputy head. Thus they are often unsure of what is happening, don't know when new projects are suddenly going to be dropped on them, are not informed of changes in plans, and are not involved in any way in the process of planning changes within the school.

This is not to suggest that somehow the administration should have a veto over key changes to the school, but rather it acknowledges that many changes will affect the administration – who are placed in the position of only being told about these changes at the last minute. This is obviously inefficient since, at least on some occasions, earlier knowledge would allow them to plan the way in which they handle the new activity or system. Indeed if they were informed earlier of the plan to move in a certain direction, they might be able to say, “you do realise that our admin IT system is creaking at the seams already... Of course we'll do what you say, but you are unlikely to be able to process this data when you want it, because the computer system is simply too slow. We are running late all the time as it is...” No one had previously consulted with IT over the change, so by the time IT raises its objections, the only answer that can come back from management is, “well, do your best.”

What I have been told a number of times is that requests for a regular update meeting with a head or deputy are agreed but then are frequently cancelled because “something came up”. The implication is clear: the “something” is more important. Efficiency is of no consequence.

Such a situation is probably worse than having no meeting at all, for cancelling the meeting suggests that in reality the administrator is at the bottom of the pecking order in the school. A report from one school said that the door bell and the security lock at the school entrance had broken for over a year. No repairs were made and staff took to knocking on the window of the secretary's office (which was next to the entrance) and the secretary would stop her work, walk out of the office, round to the door, and let the teacher in. A number of parents were left standing out in all weather, fruitlessly hitting the entry buzzer, and ultimately reduced to phoning the school on their mobile to ask to be let in (always assuming they had with them a mobile phone with the school's number in it).

If only the school had had a system whereby the administrator was able to approach the head and ask for a replacement lock and entry system, the school's efficiency would have increased. The administrator didn't think to do this (she was after all new to the school and somewhat in awe of the head), and the teaching staff had just got into the habit of entering in this way and treating the ever-helpful administrator as a door opener. The waste of time and increase in errors in the office does not bear thinking

about, nor does it say much about the way in which the administrator was viewed within that school.

The point here is that communication between senior managers and those working in IT, administration and other areas is the responsibility of the senior manager, but the complaints about it not working come from those directly affected. It is also a fact that in the few cases where the SEAM has had a chance to look at the situation, generally speaking the senior management did not know that anyone felt there was a problem. The most common response we heard from senior managers was, “Well, why don’t they come and talk to us about it?”

## **IT**

The number of IT efficiency improvement projects we have seen via the Certificate and Diploma courses in School Efficiency is huge – and the savings they can make are enormous. Replacing old servers with modern equipment, for example, can mean not only faster processing and better facilities for the pupils and students but also can mean the removal of air conditioning in the server room as modern servers generate less heat than their old counterparts.

A totally different story came from one head of IT who realised that a lot of teaching time was wasted because all machines were shut down at the end of each lesson to avoid wasting power. Therefore, for each new lesson after break or lunch the children had to turn the machines on and log in – wasting maybe 10 minutes at the start of each session (because not all log-ins were straight forward). It was not possible to buy a new set of machines, but by changing the logging in system, and having the machines on all the time (or by having the IT teacher come in and turn them all on 10 minutes before needed) a lot of teaching time was recovered.

## **The teachers**

*Note: the later section “Can teaching be more efficient” deals directly with the issue of making teaching and learning a topic of debate vis-à-vis efficiency. This section deals with other issues that might involve the teaching staff.*

While the notion of offering one year GCSE courses every other year for minority subjects is well-established in many schools, there are others where it does not happen because of staff resistance. And yet (and I write here as an ex-head of music) there is no way that teaching a group of 7 to 10 students GCSE music across two years was efficient, when in fact I could have taught 15 to 20 students together in one year.

On a different matter, there are schools where every teacher has his/her own printer in the classroom, but any suggestion of changing to a centralised printing system (that could save the school tens of thousands of pounds a year) is rejected as being impractical from a teaching point of view. And yet the chances are that within a few miles there will be another school which works with such a centralised system and makes the savings. But resistance to change is huge.

Additionally when it comes to the notion that different styles of teaching and learning are more or less efficient than each other... that is a matter that is highly resisted. And yet there are approaches to teaching and learning which are shown to be much more efficient, either because students use the same amount of time and achieve higher grades or use less time and get the same grade.

Let me combine the IT issue with this teaching and learning issue in one way. There is an on-line teaching system known as SAM learning through which students work interactively with the computer system on the subjects they are studying. To put it simply, if the student doesn't understand one point, the computer analyses the answers to find out where the student is going wrong, and takes the student back and re-teaches that point.

It is a highly effective way of teaching, and extensive research over many years from the Fischer Family Trust has proven that it does raise grades compared to what would be expected without the system.

So SAM Learning is a good idea. But there is more. If a computer room is created in which a large number of machines are connected permanently to the SAM Learning system, then any class can use the system under the eye of the IT technician in charge of the room. As such, it is an ideal activity to use in secondary schools if a member of the regular teaching staff is away. This then saves considerable money in supply staff fees, and potentially makes much better use of the time when a member of staff is away. SAM Learning has already been paid for and educational outcomes are further enhanced – a significant efficiency saving.

And yet I have seen this approach rejected on the grounds that, “if we start going down that route we won't have any teachers left soon”.

Apart from the fact that there is nothing to suggest this notion is true, the objection does challenge the whole notion of efficiency. No one is expected to make themselves redundant through efficiency savings, but one should surely not reject an idea because one day it might reduce the number of teachers in schools.

### **The governors**

Having been a governor of two different schools, I have watched a range of different people behave in very different ways. There is no doubt that governors who turn up at meetings ...

- a) Late
- b) Without their papers
- c) Having not read reports that will be debated

are problematic. As are those governors who will take an issue that has been decided in the past and open it up for discussion again, in an attempt to get that decision overturned.

My own solution when running meetings has been to say to the committee members, “these are the days when we are all asked to be efficient, so I am going to try to introduce some efficiencies into our meetings – with your agreement.” (I have occasionally had the mumble at this point that “we are not machines” or “can’t let efficiency get in the way of the right decision”, but most people will go with such a general view of where we should be.)

“So,” I continue, “I would like us to be able to start on time at each meeting.”

“But,” comes the complaint, “sometimes one is held up, and it is impossible to get away.”

Given that one is in a school where the pupils and students are expected to arrive on time, and by and large without their own cars to help them do so, I find that a bit rich. But that is not my issue here and I am more diplomatic.

“I accept that, so I am going to introduce two points here. First, I want us to discuss and agree on what time of day we are going to start our meetings. At the moment we say 7.30 but never get going until 7.40 or so. So we really ought to say 7.45.

“Second I am going to suggest that we have a rule whereby we don’t go back over issues that have already been debated for the benefit of latecomers. My point being that since we all know the agenda in advance, if we are absolutely unable to make the start of the meeting on time or we think that is likely to happen, we can ask for an item that is coming up early to be moved back or even postponed until a later meeting.”

Now this is, I admit, a little confrontational and not to be tried at meeting number 1, but it has the great merit of not only leading to huge efficiency savings but also of getting on side those people who do turn up on time and abide by the rules. Because they will be as annoyed as anyone at always having to wait for the same latecomers.

The first and second time one imposes these new rules it is difficult and can require steely nerves, but it does work. Meetings start on time, do not debate issues twice, and end on time.

Governors take on a huge range of tasks for little reward, and all of us who have experience of working with dedicated governors who put a lot of energy into their work will know how much we owe to such people. But... it must be admitted that there are some governors who are governors because they like having their say on committees, or because, rather sadly, in later life they have not so much to do and committee meetings help fill up a rather blank schedule.

Likewise there are some governors who are appointed to the committee, perhaps by the LA or by a foundation that supports the school, who are pulled in all sorts of directions by their workloads. With such people the only thing one can do is talk to them directly about the need to meet efficiently and offer to work around their busy schedule. Generally such an open and frank offer leads to an assurance that the individual will make the meetings a priority. It may or may not happen, but it allows the chair of the meeting to start on time and not go back for the latecomer.