

The School Efficiency Project

The project that follows is taken from the Institute of Administrative Management's ***Certificate in Educational Administration*** course – a one year distance learning programme for school administrators run by the School of Educational Administration.

The Project arose from the fact that, when asked to nominate the one change to their working environment that they would most like to see, over 80% of the administrators questioned nominated something that was not only of benefit to themselves, but would also be of huge benefit to the school in terms of enhanced efficiency.

However, when we asked these same administrators why they were not trying to put the change into effect, most indicated that they felt there was not an easy way for them to put forward their ideas to managers. Managers on the other hand seemed to have a different view – they felt that such communication was easy.

Whatever the real situation, there is no doubt that thousands of administrators are aware of ways in which the school office (and hence, the entire school) could be run more effectively, more smoothly and more efficiently, and yet these ideas are not being put into practice.

Our aim in presenting this document to school managers is twofold – to point out the problem, and to help in finding a resolution.

There is no doubt to us that huge amounts of money could be saved from education bills if only school administrators could find a way of presenting their ideas to managers in a way that would lead to open and fruitful discussions and the implementation of the ideas.

After we had conducted our survey we added an article (on which the following piece is based) to the IAM's ***Certificate in Educational Administration*** course. Such was the impact of this article that it was then decided to give it the widest possible circulation by also offering it free of charge to non-members of the course and to school managers.

In reading this article we hope that you will recognise that the administrators in your school could re-organise their work in a much more effective way if only there were clear and open communication between themselves and the school managers. We hope you will invite them to share the article with you and think of the improvements they want to make.

We also hope that, if you believe that you already have such a system of communication, you will still spend a few moments reading this piece to ensure that some of the scenarios we describe are not happening in your school.

We also hope that you will consider nominating one or more of the administrators in your school for this course. We admit students in January, April and September – please call 01536 399 007 or email Prospectus@admin.org.uk or visit www.admin.org.uk/certificate.htm for a prospectus.

The School Efficiency Project

Increasing school efficiency by changing procedures in the school office

1. Can school administration make a difference to the efficiency of the school?

No one would deny that a good teacher can make a difference – a hard working, dedicated, well trained, talented teacher can beyond any doubt raise grades, overcome attitude and behavioural issues, and make a positive mark on pupils which can stay for the rest of their lives.

As a result, schools quite reasonably invest in teacher in-service training, in classroom resources and facilities and so forth. Around 75% of school expenditure goes on teacher salaries, and from this it is easy to see where priorities lie.

But what of school administration? Can that also make a difference? Given the lack of resources put into school administration and the reports from administrators who contact the School of Educational Administration with information on their attempts to change the way schools are administered, the perception among most school managers must be no – administration does not make a difference.

We disagree with this view. Indeed we argue that even without any extra funding for administration it is possible to make changes to a school's administration which can result in increased efficiency throughout the school. Indeed, getting the school administration right can in fact save the school considerable money, as well as making the school run far more effectively and efficiently.

This brief paper looks at how this might happen, and also considers why there has traditionally been such resistance to making changes of an administrative nature in schools.

2. Why bother to make changes?

The essence of administration is the desire to make the organisation operate more smoothly, more effectively and more efficiently. To do this, each administrator needs to understand the organisation's aims and ends, to appreciate that limited means are available (and what those limits are), and then use those means in order to deliver the best solutions. In short, as administrators we make the system work. Without us, the organisation will still work, but it would be far less efficient and far less effective.

Although it is possible to look at organisations such as schools and say, "that one has a good administration" and "that one a poor administration", a more effective way of analysing administrations is to see how close each one is to three distinct approaches.

We've already touched on "Administration" as the approach which centres on making the organisation more effective and more efficient. The other two approaches are "Maintenance" and "Subversion".

Just as no organisation ever achieves perfect Administration (there is always something that can be done more effectively) so we never see a complete example of Subversion. However, an example of what the subversion approach would look like was given most graphically on the "Yes Minister" and "Yes Prime Minister" TV series which gave us the notion of "Sir Humphrey Appleby" – the administrator whose job was not the effective and efficient running of government, but instead the maintenance of the status quo in order to foster the interests and

power-base of senior civil servants. Here the entire essence of government was undermined in order to maintain the benefit and powerbase of the civil service.

The third approach, Maintenance, may be seen as a midpoint between Administration and Subversion. In such organisations the role of the administrators is simply to do the job as it has been done before. Not, you will note, to do the job well or to do it more effectively, but simply to do it.

Let us consider these three approaches in a practical example. We will imagine that the school office is asked to check on certain pupils who have not turned up to school and for whom there is no explanation from a parent.

If Maintenance is the guiding principle then the administrators will not spend any time considering how they might carry out this task more effectively or efficiently. They will simply adopt the way in which the job was done before, and do it. (If it is a job presented for the first time they will simply work out one way of doing it and do it – without then returning to the issue to consider it further). Perhaps they will phone the parents and, if there is no reply, they will phone again later. Sometimes they might find that the child was in school after all, and that the teacher filled in the register wrongly. They will be annoyed, but this will not change the system.

In the school in which the office is run on subversive lines the office team might seek to perform this task in a way that maximises the amount of time the task takes, in order to enhance the importance of the job and thus the importance of their own position in the school. While phoning and re-phoning parents they will refuse to answer incoming calls and will not undertake any other work. Everything stops for these ultimately pointless phone calls. In other words, even

though it is evident that the system is not working, they will carry on using it, if for no other reason than to show the managers how idiotic the request was in the first place.

In a school using Administration, however, the process will be considered. The question will be asked, “What is the most effective way of getting the result we want, not just today but each time we do this?” Administrators might ask whether contacting these parents is actually necessary, and they will certainly seek to liaise with management over what to do about teachers who simply can’t fill in registers correctly. Emphasis will be put on issues such as these, so that gradually the time taken to undertake this task reduces from, for example, three hours a week to one hour a week.

While it is obvious that Subversion is not a good system for a school to use in its office, it is sometimes less obvious that Maintenance is just as problematic, not least because there appears to be no time to think through the issues. The day is already full of things to do. Re-planning how to do them will just add to the overload. Thus everyone gets the work done, and indeed works hard, but the systems do not get improved.

Of course, this might not be too much of a problem in a world that doesn’t change – but, as we all know, one factor that we can all agree on is that schooling in the UK today is changing extremely quickly. It is changing because of government regulation, technological change, changes to parental expectation and changes in pupil behaviour. Simply doing the same thing over and over again in the same way presents us with one problem – and that problem is added to by the fact that new tasks keep appearing.

Thus we have no choice – to be good administrators it is not enough to get the job done, we have to get the job done effectively and efficiently. Of course, we might well be able to do the job to the satisfaction of the staff and governors of the school by doing it this year in the same way that we did it last year – but that still might not be good enough, especially if we are now taking twice as long to do the task as was originally envisaged.

So the good administrator makes changes in order to find ways of getting everything done in the time available. And if s/he can do the job in even less time and still maintain or improve on the accuracy levels that were delivered before, then even better.

3. How the move towards greater efficiency is implemented

Changes to procedures in the school office can be implemented in two ways. Either the school administration team changes the approach and solves the problem themselves, or the problem is taken to others – managers and teachers who might request changes of procedure in other parts of the school.

In our research we found that both approaches could cause problems. In the former, as intimated earlier, there can be a lack of time for the administrators to consider alternative approaches. In addition, they are often not allocated any budget to help them improve efficiency. The job has to be done, and there simply is not time or money set aside to test and trial alternative approaches.

But even greater problems were reported to us when we looked at putting change proposals to teachers or managers. In the case of the missing pupils there were two obvious changes that could be made – one involving the installation of more effective ways of getting in touch with parents, and one which ensured that teachers did not make

mistakes in registers. The former approach normally didn't require too much expenditure to devise a messaging service which readily sent text messages to mobiles and left messages on home phones and email systems. But such decision-making and the informing of parents on the new procedures was something that was not considered to be in the remit of the administration, and so had to be handed over to management. When the problem was put to management, even when it was put with details of possible solutions that had already been researched, the most common outcome was silence. The project was simply ignored – or at least no one came back to the administrators to discuss it further, or even explain why it had not happened.

The situation was just as difficult where the behaviour of teachers was questioned. In all the situations we looked at there was no doubt that greater care by one or two members of the teaching staff would reduce the considerable amount of time that administrators were wasting. It would also reduce the level of stress experienced by administrators who were the ones who had to face irate and worried parents who were told their children were not at school only to find later that they were.

And yet, faced with this evidence, virtually no school managers were willing to take on the task of dealing with the teachers who were at fault. A couple of managers did “have a word” with the relevant teaching staff, but no long term plan was put in place to weed out these errors, and as a result the situation continued and the morale in the school office declined still further.

4. Our first conclusions

We felt, from informal discussions with administrators and managers in around 100 schools, that a significant number of school

administrators really wanted to improve the efficiency of the office, and that there was genuine good will from the management, but somehow the communication system was not in place. It was almost as if no one on either side actually believed that improving the efficiency of the school could be achieved.

5. Help from without

Schools in England are inspected, and it would be good to think that these inspectors would take proper note of the administration of the school, and how its efficiency might be improved. But the reality is different – most school administrators report that they hardly see the inspectorate, and, even when they do, the inspection they get consists of nothing more than a cursory glance.

Indeed, even in the handful of extreme cases in which a senior member of the management staff has subsequently been found to be to be misusing school funds to pay for football season tickets, Visa bills or other personal items, a review of the last inspector's report shows comments such as "excellent administration", and "sound financial management."

But, if the inspection teams are not there to help administrators, who is? This is a question that the School of Educational Administration posed at its very foundation, and it was a question that figured large when the SEA put its application for initial funding to the Dept of Trade and Industry in 2002. We argued then, and argue now, that there are inefficiencies in school administrations, not because of any inability or lack of dedication on the part of the administrative staff, but because the notion that schools could be made more efficient through reforms to the administrative systems has not been taken on board by school managers and their local authority counterparts.

Because of this situation we believe that the most effective way to make progress in school administration is not only to provide the Certificate in Educational Administration course, but also to bring to school administrators and school managers simultaneously our view of the need for change in order to increase efficiency.

6. Our question to school administrators

Trying to find a way through this problem, in 2006 we asked a number of school administrators to answer one simple question: “If you were able to change just one aspect of your work, what would it be?”

All research should start with expectations – thoughts of what you would like to prove, or what you expect the answers to be and what you are hoping to prove. We expected that at least 50% of the answers we would get would involve contractual details (most particularly the number of weeks per year or hours per day the administrators were expected to work) and financial issues. We anticipated comments about overtime, and the lack of payment for it, the impossibility of arranging flexible working time, and so forth.

In fact fewer than 20% of the responses dealt with such matters. The overwhelming majority of administrators who contacted us submitted one of the following thoughts in response to our question:

- Teachers should treat administrators with more respect and understanding of their work, the pressures they are under, the deadlines they have to meet and the number of people to whom they are expected to provide a service.
- Teachers should understand more exactly what administrators do all day – the suggestion being that a lack of understanding

of the administrators' many and varied roles led to inappropriate behaviour by some teachers.

- Teachers should schedule the work that they give the administrators in such a way that administrators can fit the work into their schedule. The feeling was that teachers believed administrators were simply sitting with nothing much to do except answer the occasional phone call, and that it was therefore perfectly acceptable to drop work in and expect it to be done immediately.
- Managers should recognise that administrators are constantly striving to improve the efficiency of their work and should support this drive.
- The actions of managers and teachers can often have a huge impact on the work that administrators have to do, and simple changes to procedures could have a significant impact on the ability of the school office to undertake work.

7. What all these issues have in common

Of course no one would suggest that all these issues apply to your school – but it is extremely unlikely that there is no room for introducing some changes that would make your administration more efficient and more effective.

All of the issues mentioned above have certain things in common.

- a)** Each one can be very easily understood.
- b)** Each one would deliver more efficiency.
- c)** Each one could be delivered by the school – none is impossible.
- d)** None of these would cost any money.

- e) Any of these ideas, mishandled, could result in the situation getting worse.

To explore this in more detail, let us take one of the key issues that affected a number of respondents to our survey and which we mentioned in passing in section 2 of this article – the following up of apparently unaccounted absences by pupils and students.

Administrators reported two difficulties with this operation. One was the problem of reaching parents on the phone, the other the fact that some teachers were inaccurate in their completion of the school register.

With the first issue there are several technical solutions possible, such as systems which allow text messages to be sent to the parent's mobile or home phone straight from a central computer in the school. With such a process the administrator can call up a single standard message and, by simply touching two or three computer keys, can send that message to the home phone, mobile phone and email address of the parent in question. Thus, instead of spending many minutes retrieving the parent's contact details, dialling the number, holding on, and possibly having to redial later, (all of which takes up time which is being paid for by the school through the administrator's salary) the matter is dealt with in seconds, leaving the parent the obligation of calling or emailing back with information.

Since experience shows that the majority of parents will provide a suitable daytime contact phone number or email address, most parents can be contacted in this way. The few who don't have such contact points, or who fail to return the call within a given time period, can be contacted manually. This does of course take time, but since the number will be small the amount of time taken up by the process is far less.

Such systems as these, involving using a computer and standard messages, have many other uses: as a way for parents to send in explanations for absence before the school makes enquiries; and as a way of sending out information about school trips, special events, school closures, changes to arrangements and the like. Multiple communications can be achieved with just a few keystrokes.

This system does cost money of course and some schools may not have this. That is understandable – but what is alarming is the fact that most of the administrators who reported back to us on this theme also commented that the manager who rejected the application for such a system would not even consider the longer-term cost benefit.

To consider the issues involved here the manager should be asking, “How much time per annum will it save the administrators?” From this one sees how much money is saved in salaries (and quite possibly phone bills), and then this can be balanced against the cost of the system. Figures that we have seen suggest that such systems can pay for themselves within a matter of a term – and yet most managers were simply answering the proposition with the response that there was no budget allowance for this.

(Of course this is not to suggest that many managers have not already introduced such systems into their schools – of course they have. What we are looking at here is the situation in which a school has not introduced such a system and the idea for it is coming from the administration, not from the management. It is at this point that there seems to be a problem).

When we consider the issue of teachers filling in the register wrongly, we found two common outcomes. In the first the administrator did nothing, in the second the manager said he or she would take the matter up, but then nothing more was heard of the matter. What

neither party did was take full ownership of the issue – the administrator did not make it the key issue to be debated and discussed day after day until resolved, and the manager did not tell the teacher/s that this behaviour was unacceptable – and ensure that the administrator reported any more occurrences.

It is a desperately sad fact that many administrators carry the view that “you couldn’t get this sorted in my school” and “that wouldn’t work here” – the implication being that this school has a uniquely difficult set of managers who will not consider the problems faced by administration. And this happened in schools where managers felt that they had excellent relationships with their administration.

The fact is that these self-same administrators who are struggling with a problem of this nature are the same people who may well, on being asked if everything is ok, say that everything is working perfectly.

8. Statement vs negotiation

Thus we reached the position where changes to systems looked difficult to implement no matter which route was proposed (whether admin led, teacher led or inspector led). But we felt that there might still be a chance of implementing changes because the benefits that accrue and the lack of cost implications in many cases, made changes highly desirable.

We therefore concluded that the route forward was indeed one that involved the administrators taking their issues to the managers.

However one of the big problems that needs to be faced here is that, because there are so few examples of administrators bringing issues to managers, there is no obvious process in most schools for handling

the issue. As a result such requests for change can be given low priority, or even get lost in the everyday activity of the school.

Thus we developed an example in which an administrator takes the matter to the Deputy Head in order to show administrators how we felt they could take forward the question of the wrongly filled-in register. We imagine a situation here in which neither the administrator nor the deputy head have any experience of how to handle the matter between themselves, and the deputy head may have no experience on how to handle the matter with the culpable teacher. The deputy head may well feel that the administrator has a very fair point, but may not quite know how to take on a teacher who says, "I am not having some trumped up secretary telling me how to do my job." Equally he/she may not know quite how to handle the teacher who apologises profusely but then carries on making the same errors as before. Likewise we imagine the administrator is not used to bringing any sort of complaint forward to anyone.

We also looked at the example of the administrators who felt it was more than reasonable to ask teachers to give a week's notice for any work they want undertaken. The deputy head might agree, but then find on announcing the measure to the staff meeting that teachers object on the grounds that teaching is not like this, it is often necessary to change tack and have new materials prepared urgently and that it is not reasonable for administrators to dictate how such matters can be arranged. After all, every other school has an office that copes, so why can't we?

To try to overcome some of these arguments we decided to focus on the process of negotiation. We know that there can be resistance, because the concept of efficiency is not widely used in schools.

When we looked at situations like this we realised that the requested change has two benefit elements to offer in negotiation that we could take as starting points:

- a) The benefit to the school as a whole (that is more efficient administration)
- b) The benefit to the administrator (a job well done in less time)

9. The negotiation

We urged the administrator to put across the benefits that will accrue to the school if the change is implemented. Using our example you could say that the benefit to the school would be that administrators would save half an hour a day if there were no errors in registration documents, and that the profile of the school among parents (who of course do chatter to each other enormously) is being harmed by phone calls suggesting that children who are in school, or for whom explanations have been received, are in fact away without explanation.

But even though these benefits are clear and obvious, it is important that they are put across in a manner in which the magnitude of the issues can be fully recognised and remembered. Thus we considered the medium through which administrators might put ideas and benefits across.

Setting up a meeting

Clearly the best approach is the personal one-to-one meeting at a time and in a place where you will not be interrupted. This means making an appointment for the amount of time you think you might need. It means avoiding statements such as, “you can come and see me any time” or “I could fit you in after break if it won’t take too long...”

Anything that suggests that this is going to be squeezed in between more important issues should be resisted because this is an important issue. The school has probably been living with this problem for months anyway, so another week or two does not matter. Better to wait for the right moment – and indeed showing the other party that you are willing to wait for a time when you can discuss the issue without interruption adds importance to the meeting that is to come.

In passing we should recognise that this level of planning for the meeting is exactly the opposite of slipping the issue in under ***Any Other Business*** at the end of a staff meeting. You need a fair and frank exchange of views to get this matter going, and you are not going to get that at the end of a staff meeting where no one is prepared for the issue.

Because the venue and timing is so important we urged administrators to avoid saying:

“Could I have a chat with you?”

“Could you spare me a few moments?”

“It’s not important but, could I have a word?”

All of these approaches use everyday speech in a friendly way, but simultaneously they also diminish the importance of the meeting. Thus we suggested the administrator might say,

“I’ve come across a problem in the office. Could I have a meeting with you about it?”

The problem is now defined as being a problem in the office – but what sort of problem is deliberately left vague. You might unfortunately jump to the conclusion that this is a staff issue – an issue of inappropriate behaviour by one member of staff to another? – and again we are back to the fact that you (quite reasonably in this case) might feel the need for an immediate meeting and an immediate solution.

So for those who have the confidence we suggested,

“I’ve come across a problem in the office. I think I have a solution to it, but I’ll need your help to implement it. Could I have a meeting with you – it shouldn’t take more than 15 minutes. When would be convenient?”

The meeting can be set up and can run without any interruptions either through the door or by the phone. The administrator can present the problem, the solution and the benefits to the school – and you will not have had to do anything, except get others on the staff to co-operate with the change. No money is being spent, and efficiency is being gained.

What we really hope is that you can avoid a response which says, “I see your point – leave it with me, I’ll have a word with....” The problem here is that your administrator, who is not an experienced negotiator, will feel out on a limb, unsure of what happens next. What ought to happen is that a further appointment is made on a specific date when the full response of those with whom you have had a word is revealed to the administrator. If the problem is then solved you can then say, “You absolutely must come and tell me at once if this problem reoccurs.” You’ll also need to make a note to see the administrator again in a month’s time to ensure that the problems really have stopped.

Administrators are at their weakest pushing a point – if they feel they have played their cards but nothing has happened they not only feel that it was all a waste of time, they feel worse about the school than when they started, because their reasonable request for change has been ignored. It was a scenario we saw often.

Concluding comments

A longer version of this article appears within the IAM Certificate in Educational Administration course and at this point students are invited to choose an issue on which they would like to effect change, and which will make their life easier and improve the efficiency of the school. It is an optional project, but we are encouraging students to think about what they might do, even if they don't feel able to take on the project itself.

We do hope you will encourage your administrators to consider this course.

For more information about the course please call 01536 399 007 or email Prospectus@admin.org.uk or visit www.admin.org.uk/certificate.htm for a prospectus.