

8 priorities for subject leaders in the 2020/2021 academic year

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The challenge

Of all the challenges that schools have faced over the years, never has there been a situation like the one in which we find ourselves today.

Appropriately, the priority for schools to date has been upon the process of reopening to all pupils, establishing safe working practices, and building the confidence of the school community – normalising a new normal.

The sole purpose of schools, however, has not changed, nor have many other things in and around schools. This also applies to you and your role as a teacher and subject leader.

The pressures and challenges facing schools and children are stressful and worrying. Though, if there is one thing that teachers are adept at dealing with, it is coping with stress and change, issues that are ever present within education.

So, as subject leaders, what are the priorities for the year ahead?

This article will focus on the familiar issues affecting you and your subject in the year ahead, though with the caveat of recognising and commenting upon the significant impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) and any related actions required.

1. Know your role

Call it what you will – subject leader, curriculum leader, departmental head – the role of the subject leader comes in all shapes and sizes, from small and large schools, primary and secondary schools, early years and sixth forms. Consequently, the journeys, experiences and expectations of these differing contexts will impact upon how you perform your role. Re-establish what your role is, what the expectations placed upon you are, and the extent to which you can influence practices and processes within your school.

Ensuring that you are aware of what is expected of you will help you to find the appropriate balance between your roles and inform how you plan your time and resources over the year.

2. Think about health and safety

This year, the education you provide for your subject will not be the normal offer you would provide, especially in the more practical subjects like art, DT, computing, food technology, science, music and PE.

Are your risk assessments up to date? It is likely that you have had to revisit and review these to ensure compliance to coronavirus guidelines. It is always important to review your practices regularly, both from a coronavirus perspective, and in ensuring good practice within your subject at a more general level.

This, however, has taken on added importance this year. Keep up-to-date with the latest scientific evidence and updates from the government and specialist subject associations, adhere to the guidance and amend policies and practices accordingly. Ensure that these are available and accessible to all staff and maintain open channels of communication for any concerns to be raised. Our [resource pack](#) can help you assess all the potential risks associated with coronavirus.

3. Consider the coronavirus caveat

The far-reaching impact and influence of coronavirus and the effect it has had on schools is likely to affect all your actions and considerations this year and in future years, either directly or indirectly.

You will still be held accountable for the performance and achievement of students in your subject. Compiling a coronavirus impact statement will go some way to framing the narrative of your subject as a whole, provide qualitative data on the performance and progress of individuals and groups and give context to the quantitative data and results of students.

This could take a two-pronged approach, the first being an overview of your subject – possibly via SWOT and PEST analysis – which will give real life context to the story of your subject's journey for this and coming years. They need not be too detailed but be a brief identification of the issues.

Stepping back and evaluating the strengths and weakness of your subject will give you awareness and insight into the issues and impacts arising from lockdown and help you to identify any actions that may be needed to mitigate any potential threats to performance, especially useful when compiling contingency plans.

The second prong should be a more detailed analysis of your subject offering during the partial school closures, attempting to quantify the effect of lockdown on individual pupils, and analyse their engagement with any learning opportunities that were provided.

Possible things to consider could include the following:

- Loss of direct teaching time – number of hours/lessons per year group lost
- The units of learning, skills, content, ideas and concepts delayed, deferred or missed
- Remote learning – number of hours/lessons covered remotely
- Units of learning, skills, content, ideas and concepts covered remotely
- Resources used and an evaluation of their effectiveness and usability

- Pupil engagement – an evaluation of all pupils, attendance and engagement with remote learning and tasks set, attendance 'log ins' and school website hits
- Any homework submitted
- Individual pupil circumstances, e.g. physical access to online learning and whether they have the technology and home support to access learning
- Other contextual information you feel is useful to include from your setting and circumstances

4. Revisit subject improvement plans

Ordinarily, the start of a new academic year would signal the continuation of your subject improvement plans. Despite the current circumstances, this is still true to a large extent. The reviews you have made and the actions you have planned to take have been identified for a reason, and the imposition of a pandemic does not make these changes any less relevant.

When looking at the year ahead, however, it is clear that we cannot ignore coronavirus, and all planned actions in school this year will be impacted by this. There are certain pandemic-related measures and actions that need to be taken, and there may be other actions on your plan that need to be accelerated and pushed further up the agenda, as well as those you are planning to continue with.

Things to do and key questions to ask yourself include:

- Do I have a subject improvement plan? Do I need one?
- Where in the cycle am I?
- What are the priorities for this year?
- Are they still relevant?
- Do I need to write, rewrite or amend the action plan?
- Which actions will need to be deferred?
- What additional actions do I now need to include?
- Have some actions taken on added importance and priority?
- How does the guidance from the DfE and other government departments impact these plans and priorities?

Have a clear statement of why, what and how your subject will achieve, starting with a ready-made framework and adapting it as you go.

5. Review your curriculum

Given the renewed focus on the curriculum in Ofsted's inspection framework, many schools will have curriculum development included somewhere within their improvement planning documents. The coronavirus pandemic has magnified the need for this focus, with a key question being: "How do you prioritise the skills and knowledge that is important in the delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum, whilst ensuring adequate coverage of subject syllabi?"

Inevitably, though, people can forget. This 'forgetting curve' will not be linear or homogenous for all pupils; though, without the usual structures of teaching and learning input to consciously review and retain learned material in place, it is likely to be pronounced. How you plan your

curriculum this year will, therefore, revolve around three Cs: consolidating, condensing and continuing.

Consolidating

It would make sense to undertake a recap of the topics, knowledge, and skills learnt so far and identify any knowledge gaps.

Condensing

Elements of the curriculum will need to be condensed to catch up on last year's lost learning and ensure adequate coverage of this year's learning. Evaluate the curriculum content you've missed or taught remotely, rank the skills, concepts and content in order of importance and decide whether these can be taught in condensed format, in full or if they can be dropped.

Continuing

There are still age-related expectations and you need to continue teaching the relevant subject content for the year groups you are teaching.

Ensure your subject meets the government's curriculum expectations during the pandemic by referring to the specific [DfE guidance](#) which sets out a range of overarching principles that schools should adhere to in ensuring the curriculum remains broad and ambitious, as well as specific points for each key stage that you need to follow.

6. Plan for assessment and monitoring

The most important features of effective assessment practices are reliability and accuracy – issues that have been brought into sharp focus this Summer.

The annual cycle of testing, assessing, collecting data, conducting monitoring activities, performance management, exam administration etc. takes time to set in place and manage. It will, however, be an area that, alongside curriculum, assumes a high priority on your subject improvement plan this year, especially for key year groups. Being a curriculum leader, you are able to reflect, learn lessons and lead improvement. Start undertaking the 'review, plan, do' cycle.

Review of 2019/2020

- What are the standards in your subject and how do you know (e.g. is there data you can look at)?
- What were your experiences of teacher assessment grading? Did you have sufficient evidence to inform your judgements? If not, why not?
- How did partial school closures affect your schedule of assessment and monitoring?
- Are there any outstanding issues or actions that you need to complete this year?

Plan 2020/2021

- Based on your review, are there any changes needed?
- If so, what are these changes – slight tweaks or something more fundamental?
- Plan your year ahead:

- How will you monitor your subject this year?
- What monitoring activities will you undertake and why?
- How will coronavirus impact upon your ability to undertake these effectively?
- When will you schedule different assessment and monitoring activities?
- How will you record these?
- Are systems and personnel in place for exam administration, including appeals and resits?

Do

It will take time to gather this information – which is the point of your plan and schedule. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic will continue for some time and schools also need to prepare for the possibility of further local and national restrictions. To ensure you are prepared for this:

- Try not to let events side-track and delay actions.
- Be circumspect in the information you gather and the reasons for gathering it.
- Stay up-to-date and compliant with the latest guidance from the DfE and Ofqual.
- Be prepared to continually review all assessment related activities on an ongoing basis.
- Use your team and colleagues for support.

7. Finalise contingency plans

Inevitably, there are inconsistencies in the remote learning capacity in schools and families across the nation and, for those trying to learn at home, there have been very different experiences of home learning environments and differing levels of parental support, technology and learning materials.

As a result, the DfE expects schools to have strong contingency plans in place for remote education provision by the end of September and has published a range of specific principles and philosophies that schools should follow, as well as links to additional advice and guidance.

A key whole school priority in the Autumn term will, therefore, be the development of a robust digital strategy which incorporates a blended approach to on-site and remote learning. Your subject context and circumstances will determine where your subject area sits within this overall strategy, though some input will be required from you.

Whatever your circumstances, you should:

- Research and source effective and engaging websites and digital resources that complement your subject teaching.
- Make pupils familiar with these whilst in school in preparation for home learning.
- Upskill yourself and your team in IT and the use of digital resources in remote communication and collaboration.
- Ensure you and your team are aware of any related policies that may affect pupil or staff welfare.

8. Confirm budgets and funding

Spending priorities for this year will be different from those anticipated last September. There will be a range of unplanned costs impacting upon your budget allocation and any subject improvement plans you may have costed and planned. Liaise with your headteacher, identify the status of your subject this year, what your budget allocation will be and what resources you will have available.

Make yourself aware of any additional funding streams that may be available from local or national government, e.g. the [catch up support scheme](#) or charitable organisations, and access these funds if you are able. Our very own [TheSchoolBus Foundation](#) provides disadvantaged children and young people in mainstream education with once in a lifetime opportunities that can make a positive difference to their lives.

What's next?

Your ability to offer the combination of the national curriculum; the statements of essential content and knowledge in your subject; and the school curriculum; the set of rich and engaging experiences that happen within the school environment enabling the acquisition of essential content, understanding and skills, will likely be tested this year and, whilst staying true to your educational values, the overriding concern this year will be adapting to teaching safely in a pandemic.

Although the impacts of coronavirus do not feel like a positive experience, the scrutiny and focus you put into your subject this year will result in the identification of some positive adjustments and additions for the future, as well as improve your abilities and expertise as a teacher and leader.

Our [Policy and compliance](#) area can help you stay compliant with the latest government advice, keep you in-the-know and, give you everything you need to take immediate action.

Bibliography

DfE (2020) 'Guidance for full opening: schools'
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