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Reducing teacher workload: Part 2

In the second of two Best Practice Focuses looking at reducing teacher workload, *Matt Bromley* continues his practical advice for schools, middle leaders and teachers, including effective marking techniques, reasonable approaches to data, better planning – for the curriculum and lessons – and more efficient creation and management of resources

With support from Pearson

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Visit www.bromleyeducation.co.uk and follow him on Twitter @mj_bromley. To read his previous best practice articles for SecEd, visit http://bit.ly/1Uobmsl

Workload reduction for teachers and schools

As I explained last month in the first part of this two-part Best Practice Focus (*SecEd*, October 2019), there are four areas of school life on which senior leaders should focus in a bid to reduce teacher workload and improve wellbeing:
1 Leadership.
2 Scheduling.
3 Marking and data.
4 Planning and resources.

Last month I tackled leadership and scheduling. Now I turn my attention to marking, data, planning and resources.

Solution #3: Marking and data
In a survey conducted in June 2018 and repeated in the September of that year, carried out as part of a literature review for *SecEd* (unpublished), the workload caused by marking and feedback came out top of the most burdensome tasks on a teacher's to-do list.

In its own workload surveys, the Department for Education (DfE, 2015 & 2018a) also found that marking and feedback were the biggest drain on a teacher's time.

So, how can schools lighten the marking load while not sacrificing the impact of the formative feedback given to pupils?

Purpose, process and validity
Any discussion about improving assessment methods should, I believe, focus on three things: purpose, process, and validity.

Purpose
As a handy rule of thumb, whenever you ask teachers to engage in any form of assessment, you should ask yourself: Why? What is it point of this assessment? How will this assessment – and the data we collect from it – help pupils to make better progress and improve the quality of education at our school?

If an assessment or data collection exercise is solely for management purposes (to produce a report to governors, say, or to generate pretty graphs to impress in meetings) rather than to actually help pupils make progress, then it should stop.

Of course, I know that it is not always as simple as this…

A teacher's time is finite and sometimes you also need to stop doing things that are indeed in pupils' best interests in order to do other things that are more impactful for pupils, or simply to cut a teacher's workload and make their jobs more manageable.

As Professor Dylan Wiliam said last year at the Sutton Trust's Best in Class event (2018), the essence of effective leadership is "to stop people doing good things to give them time to do even better things".

Process
As well as considering the purpose of assessment, school leaders should think about the process by which teachers are expected to assess, input data, and report the outcomes of assessment. Here, it is useful to ask yourself whether the process is as efficient as it can be or unnecessarily burdensome. Consider also:
● When and how often are teachers expected to assess and input data?
● Are teachers expected to engineer tests for pupils or can data be gathered in a more holistic, synoptic way?
● How is the data inputted – directly into software or can teachers supply it in written form for the admin team to input?
● If it requires the use of technology, do all teachers have easy access to it?
● What will be the outcome of this data collection exercise?
● What will be done with the data afterwards and by whom?

As well as considering the time implications of data collection, it is wise to consider the extent to which teachers are trained in using the systems – including basic spreadsheets as well as commercial software – and the extent to which they have the requisite skills to assess, record and analyse data (as well as to act upon that data).

Again, think about the opportunity cost, too. How long will it take a teacher to input this data and what else could they be doing with their time that might have a bigger impact on our pupils?

Validity
Finally, school leaders should consider how valid the data they garner from assessments will be. By this, I do not mean how useful the data will be, but rather how accurate and useable it will be.

In other words, although you may have confidence that the data will be very useful in helping pupils to make better progress (for example, by identifying "at-risk" pupils who require additional interventions, or by "stretching" higher performing pupils), the actual data you mine might not be as accurate as you hope and so all your subsequent actions may be futile or misguided.

To help answer this question of accuracy, you may wish to consider once again whether or not teachers have the requisite skills to be able to assess and provide data:
● Have you triangulated previous teacher assessments with actual validated outcomes?
● Have teacher assessments proven accurate in the past?
● Were some teachers' predictions way off the mark and, if so, have you identified any training needs?
● Have teacher assessments helped to predict eventual outcomes and therefore been useful in terms of identifying those pupils who are at risk of underachievement?
● Did the subsequent interventions prove to be effective?

Sometimes we keep doing what we have always done because that is easy, but sometimes we keep doing the wrong things. Do not be afraid to be bold and question seemingly unquestionable practices.

You may also wish to consider what is actually being assessed and if indeed that thing is assessable in a meaningful way. What, for example, are you comparing a pupil outcome to? Are those two things indeed comparable? Is the data you draw reliable and defensible? Is it, for example, possible at this stage to assess progress, or might we be measuring a poor proxy for progress?

If assessments are used to measure progress over time (to create a "flight-path") is progress in this topic/subject actually linear? Should we be able to see nice neat contrails heading for the skies? Or is progress messier than this because pupils need to go backwards before they can go forwards? Or because different things are being assessed in different topics at different times? Succeeding in topic 1 might not mean, for example, that pupils will do even better in topic 2 because the knowledge or skills being taught may be different or unrelated.

Horses for courses
As well as considering the purpose, process and validity of assessment practices, thought should be given to the varying demands of different subjects if you are to ensure a teacher's workload is fair and manageable.

For example, marking in essay-based subjects such as English and history is often more time-consuming than tick-marking in subjects with short, right/wrong answers such as… (I'm not sure I want to open this can of worms!).

Furthermore, the timing of assessment points will differ depending on the subject and topic.

If your whole-school assessment policy dictates that every teacher of every subject must assess at set points of the term and year, they may find that they have nothing meaningful to assess at that time and simply make it up to fulfil your expectations, or they may do their best to provide helpful data but it is unlikely to be meaningful.

Here, it may be wise to set wide "assessment windows" and allow subjects to determine when they assess within that broad timeframe. That way, subjects can ensure that they hold assessments at logical points, when they will be most accurate and helpful to pupils, rather than shoehorning in tests simply for management accountability.

Marking: Meaningful, motivating, manageable
So far, we have tackled assessment in its widest sense – the collection of data to measure and track pupil progress. Let us now hone in on teacher marking and feedback.

Our profession's recent obsession with marking and feedback has, I think, led to an unhealthy and unsustainable teacher workload which, in turn, has adversely affected recruitment and retention in the profession.

Look no further than the government's teacher workload survey (DfE, 2015) which found that 53 per cent of respondents thought that, while marking pupils' work was necessary and productive, the excessive nature, depth and frequency of marking was burdensome. In 2016, the DfE's Workload Challenge working group on marking and feedback recommended that, in order to improve the effectiveness of marking and feedback, school leaders should:

● Use the three principles of meaningful, manageable and motivating to review their school's marking practice as part of an overall and proportionate assessment policy in partnership with their teachers.
● Evaluate the time implications of any whole-school marking and assessment policy for all teachers to ensure that the school policy does not make unreasonable demands on any particular members of staff.
● Monitor marking practice as part of the regular monitoring cycle, and in partnership with their teachers and governing boards, and evaluate its effectiveness on pupil progress.
● Challenge emerging fads that indirectly impose excessive marking practices on schools.

Let us, therefore, explore some ways of ensuring that marking and feedback are made more meaningful, motivating and – above all – manageable for teachers…

Meaningful
Marking and feedback have but one purpose: to help pupils make better progress and achieve good outcomes. They might do this directly by providing cues to the pupil about what to improve, and they might do it indirectly by providing assessment information to the teacher to guide their planning.

Marking and feedback carried out for any other purpose are not meaningful activities and – as well as being a waste of a teacher's time – can distract and indeed detract from this important goal.

The best person to decide which type of marking and feedback to use and when to use it is, of course, the teacher because it is they who will use the assessment information to aid their planning and to support their pupils to make progress. Accordingly, the teacher should be allowed the freedom to determine whether to give written or verbal feedback, and whether to do so in class or in pupils' books.

Motivating
Marking should help to motivate pupils to progress. In this regard, short verbal feedback is often more motivational than long written comments on pupils' work. Indeed, some pupils find written comments demotivating because they ruin

> ❝ *The teacher should be allowed the freedom to determine whether to give written or verbal feedback, and whether to do so in class or in pupils' books* ❞

the presentation of their work, are confusing, or overwhelming. Once again there is a simple rule to obey: if the teacher is doing more work than their pupils, they need to stop.

Not only is it harmful to teacher workload, it can become a disincentive for pupils because there is too much feedback on which to focus and respond to and/or they do not think they have to take responsibility for improving their work because the teacher is spoon-feeding them (particularly if they had not sufficiently checked their own work before receiving feedback).

What is more, too much feedback can reduce a pupil's long-term retention and harm resilience. To build retention and resilience, pupils need to be taught to check their own work and make improvements before the teacher marks it and gives feedback.

The feedback should also prompt further thinking and drafting, perhaps by posing questions on which the pupil has to ruminate and act, as opposed to ready-made suggestions and solutions.

Manageable
It would be possible to work 24/7 and still not feel that the job is done. It is important that, whatever approach schools take to marking and feedback, they ensure they protect teachers' work/life balances, because tired teachers do not perform as well and burn-out can lead to issues with retention – and we all know that teacher absences and staff shortages seriously impede pupils' progress.

Marking and feedback should, therefore, be proportionate. Here we return to the "energy versus impact" equation – we want to ensure maximum impact for pupils from the minimum amount of energy teachers expend. Any expectation on the frequency of marking should take into account the complexity of marking and the volume of marking required in any given subject, phase and key stage.

As I have said, there is no doubt that feedback is valuable but we need to decide which one of all the valuable things that teachers do are more worthwhile than others and focus on the areas of biggest impact for the smallest investment of teacher time and energy.

Put simply, if teachers are spending more time marking and

If teachers are spending more time marking and giving feedback than pupils are spending on a piece of work then your priorities are wrong

giving feedback than pupils are spending on a piece of work then your priorities are wrong and should be changed.

Not what Ofsted wants
Often, school leaders blame Ofsted for their burdensome assessment procedures, claiming "it's what inspectors want to see". Though this was undoubtedly the case some years ago, the new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) and helpful "myth-busters" make clear that Ofsted does not expect to see a particular frequency or quantity of work in pupils' books or folders (Ofsted, 2018 & 2019).

Rather, the inspectorate recognises that the amount of work in books and folders will depend on the subject being studied and the age and ability of the pupils.

Government advice...
...on marking
The DfE (2018b) advises that schools take the following actions to lighten teachers' marking loads:
● Consider why you are marking – review your feedback policy.
● Use the principles and recommendations from the report on eliminating unnecessary workload around marking (DfE, 2016) to review your practice and consider carrying out a feedback and marking workshop with staff (see the DfE's workload reduction toolkit, 2018d).
● Ignore myths that suggest that spending hours marking makes a better teacher, and that writing pages of feedback makes you more effective – concentrate on feedback which is meaningful, manageable and motivating.
● Consider the design of your systems. Most data collection systems can now work together so it is important that teachers only enter pupil data once – let the systems do the rest.
● Consider a range of feedback techniques which are proportionate – not all feedback has to be written.

● Evaluate the time spent on marking by all staff and discuss whether this is proportionate.
● Consider live class feedback (e.g. audio, photo, video) that can be recorded and added to electronic versions of pupils' work.
● Make sure the type of feedback, language and style are suitable for pupils.
● Build in live sampling. Select a sample of work and mark it in front of pupils so pupils see how work is corrected, enabling them to then make amendments to their own work.
● Use "sampling for planning". Focus on a sample of pupils' work after a lesson and use the understanding gained about progress to inform the planning of the subsequent lesson(s).
● Use low-stakes and self-marking tools.
● Prepared questions can be saved and shared, allowing teachers to re-use or adapt the content rather than create something from scratch.
● Use feedback codes where appropriate. These can be used to draw pupils' attention to common strengths and areas to develop and reduce the need for lengthy responses.
● Prioritise key pieces of work. Use schemes of work to identify which pieces of work should be prioritised for more detailed feedback.

...on data management
The DfE (2018b) advises the following:
● Plan and review your data collections.
● Use the principles from the *Making Data Work* report from the Workload Advisory Group (DfE, 2018c) and consider running a data management CPD workshop (DfE, 2018d).
● Ask yourself what the purpose is, what the most efficient and proportionate process is, and how you can ensure the data collected is reliable and valid.
● Review pastoral data as well as attainment and progress data.
● Consider the number of attainment data collection points. *Making Data Work* advises that school and trust leaders should not have more than two or three attainment data collection points a year.
● Interrogate the validity of data collected on pupil attainment and progress, including target-setting and predictions.
● Review governors' use of data. *Making Data Work* states that governing boards should normally be prepared to receive information in whatever form it is currently being used in the school. School and trust leaders should agree with their board what high-quality data they need, and when.
● Consider how many times items of data are handled, how this

can be reduced, and if technology can support this. If you require it, look for systems which suit your needs, e.g. a system providing data analysis which suggests next steps for teaching or intervention; or a system providing immediate alerts to staff on sensitive issues.
● Consider the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), in place from May 2018. The GDPR means that all organisations handling personal data, including schools, need to have the right governance measures. The DfE's data protection toolkit for schools published last year helps schools to develop processes and respond appropriately to data breaches.
● Develop staff confidence and ability to manage data to inform interventions. Consider training for staff on the use of relevant systems and the purpose of data collections and monitoring.
● Offer support for inexperienced staff new to interventions, saving time in planning and maximising impact.
● Conduct an intervention "health check". Use evidence-based, structured interventions with low impact on staff time. Regularly monitor the allocated time commitment of each intervention and plan the frequency, time per session and duration of the intervention. Be

prepared to stop interventions if they are not proven to work.

Solution #4: Planning and resources
After marking, the biggest drain on a teacher's non-contact time is planning – both in terms of medium-term planning in the form of schemes of work, and shorter-term planning in the guise of lesson plans and classroom resources such as PowerPoints or worksheets (DfE, 2015).

Now that the school curriculum has been placed front-and-centre by Ofsted's EIF, it is likely that many middle leaders and subject specialist teachers are also being asked to engage in longer term planning in the form of curriculum design.

Curriculum design
The process of curriculum design can be extremely time-consuming. Senior leaders, therefore, have a responsibility to ensure they provide the right training to teachers and middle leaders to enable them to engage in the complex process of designing a

subject curriculum (not to mention that a well-designed curriculum in itself will also cut out unnecessary or repetitive workload).

School leaders also have a duty to carve out the time for teachers and middle leaders to actually carry out this process – not by creating additional meetings or INSETs, but by putting together a planned programme within the existing school calendar.

Indeed, Ofsted's EIF makes these requirements explicit (Ofsted, 2019). Under the Leadership and Management judgement, the EIF says that consideration will be given to how school leaders align CPD with the curriculum.

Also under Leadership and Management, inspectors will gather evidence about and judge the extent to which leaders take into account the workload and wellbeing of their staff in order to deliver a high-quality education, while also developing and strengthening the quality of the workforce.

As such, it may help – both in terms of workload and CPD – if your school adopts a logical, step-by-

step approach to curriculum design, making explicit and visible what can be regarded as abstract and open-ended. I advocate a six-step process...

1, Agree the vision
The process should begin with a clear and shared vision articulating what the school thinks is important and what it regards as the purpose of education. This curriculum vision may be influenced by the school's existing values and by what makes the school and its community unique. The vision should also comprise a list of the broad and rich learning experiences each pupil can expect in each subject and outside lessons.

Start with this vision because it will provide the benchmark against which all subsequent decisions about curriculum content, structure, sequence, monitoring, evaluation, review (and workload) can be tested.

2, Set the destination
Sweller et al (2011) argue that: "Novices need to use thinking skills. Experts use knowledge."

Knowledge in long-term memory is essential in helping make sense of new information. The best means of identifying what knowledge should underpin our curriculum, I think, is to start at the end and work backwards. You should be clear what pupils must know and be able to do by the end of a certain stage or phase (GCSEs for example). Explore the foundational concepts – the non-negotiable knowledge and skills – that pupils will need to have mastered.

3, Assess the starting points
Bridge the gap between the primary and secondary curriculums, ensuring that year 7 builds upon the knowledge and skills that pupils bring with them from year 6.

The curriculum needs to be progressive, building from year to year and stage to stage. At each transition point, the knowledge and skills pupils bring with them need to be consolidated and extended, not disregarded or repeated. The implications for workload are clear.

One example, is to ensure that teachers on either side of the divide use the same, or at least similar, language. For example, in science, secondary teachers might refer to independent, dependent and controlled variables in an ▶

experiment whereas primary teachers might simply ask "how do you make it a fair test?". The concepts are familiar but the language is not.

4, Identify the way-points
Way-points pinpoint the specific knowledge and skills upon which students' progress to the next level of study in any subject is contingent. They set out what students need to know about the current topic in order to understand and succeed in the next topic. Way-points and end-points can be used as learning objectives and also as a means of assessing progress.

5, Define excellence
Expectations need to be set, and set high. I would argue that when the curriculum is implemented in the classroom, it should be pitched in what Lev Vygotsky (1978) calls "the zone of proximal development" and what I would call "the struggle zone".

In other words, the curriculum needs to be pitched beyond pupils' current capabilities but within their reach – hard but achievable with time, effort and support. Where the class has a wide distribution of prior attainment, the lesson should be pitched in the struggle zone of the most able or highest performing pupil or pupils. In practice, this might involve modelling a Grade 9 piece of work and deconstructing this for pupils.

Of course, some pupils will need differing levels of support or need to be afforded more time, but teachers should expect all pupils to reach the same destination eventually.

6, Diminish disadvantage
The education attainment gap between rich and poor starts early – certainly before a child enters formal education (Barnard, 2018). One of the reasons for this is that children who acquire "cultural capital" in their formative years,

develop an awareness of the world around them, an understanding of how life works, and a language with which to explain it – all of which provides a foundation on which these children can build further knowledge and understanding.

Those children not born and raised in knowledge-rich environments do not do as well in school because new knowledge and skills have nothing to "stick" to or build upon. Put simply, the more you know, the easier it is to know more and so the culturally rich will always stay ahead of the impoverished (Rigney, 2010).

One of the aims of our curriculum, therefore, must be to help the disadvantaged build their cultural capital and this takes one tangible form: vocabulary. As such, we must recognise the importance of vocabulary and support its development across the curriculum.

Collaborative planning
Teachers need to achieve greater consistency in the way they teach pupils in order to help support the efficient use of their limited working memories which, in turn, means that teachers need to engage in much more collaborative planning.

Although this might mean less teacher autonomy in the sense of teachers working in isolation, it will enable more collective professional autonomy in the sense of teachers working together to ensure pupils learn more and achieve more. Again, the implications of this approach for workload are clear.

But what might this look like in practice? Let me give you an

example. When teaching persuasive writing in English, it helps if we provide pupils with schema to aide the retrieval of information from long-term memory. For example, AFOREST – Amazing opening, Facts, Opinions, Rhetorical questions, Statistics, Thought-provoking ending.

By chunking information in this way, pupils can free up more working memory to think about the actual task in hand – the exam question and the topic on which they need to be persuasive.

However, if every teacher in an English department taught a different mnemonic, used AFOREST but had different definitions, or used the same definitions but presented it in an entirely different format, then pupils would have to dedicate more working memory to processing it and understanding it whenever they moved from one teacher to another.

The example above is a simplistic one for the purposes of easy illustration, but often teachers who write all their own schemes of work and lesson plans in isolation create all sorts of roadblocks in the way of their pupils' cognition without thinking about it or meaning to.

We teachers often use a different language ("connective" versus "conjunction") or methods (long division); we have different aide memoirs in our classrooms and/or in different locations of our rooms; and – perhaps most unhelpful of all – we have differing sets of expectations and different systems for (or ways of applying) rewards and sanctions.

Every time teachers do things differently to one another, they require their pupils to use some of their working memory to process the instructional context and learning environment. In short, the extraneous load gets bigger when teachers are left to their own devices. And that leaves less space for the intrinsic and germane loads and therefore means pupils perform less well. It also increases workload for the teachers

themselves. For this reason, collective rather than individual autonomy is key and there needs to be greater consistency across departments and schools.

This means that teachers need to be afforded the time to get together as a subject team for curriculum planning and the creation of pooled resources. Teachers' workload will be reduced as a result. Rather than every member of a department planning their own schemes of work and creating their own resources, the team does this collectively. We all know the adage: "A problem shared is a problem halved."

In order to put the above advice into practice, try the following:
1 As a department, decide on the key concepts and ideas that need to be taught and for each identify a schema to help pupils process, retrieve and apply their knowledge – then work together to create that schema and ensure all staff use the same one and present it in the same way.
2 As a department, identify the key concepts and ideas pupils are bringing to your subject from their previous school. Identify the language they have been taught – such as the technical vocabulary – and their definitions. Ensure all teachers use the same language and definitions or, if it is important to increase the complexity of this, explicitly signpost the change, linking the new language to what pupils already know and use.
3 Agree a set of classroom displays that will act as schema or aide memoir and place them in every room in the department (ideally in the same location in each room). Refer to these displays as often as possible so that pupils automatically utilise them.
4 Establish consistent rules and routines for entering classrooms, for transitions between activities, for group work, for self and peer-assessment, and for class debate and discussion. Again, develop consistent schema to remind pupils, such as SLANT – used for class debates by the Uncommon Schools network in the US – which stands for Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod, Track the speaker.

Government advice on planning and resources
In terms of curriculum planning, the
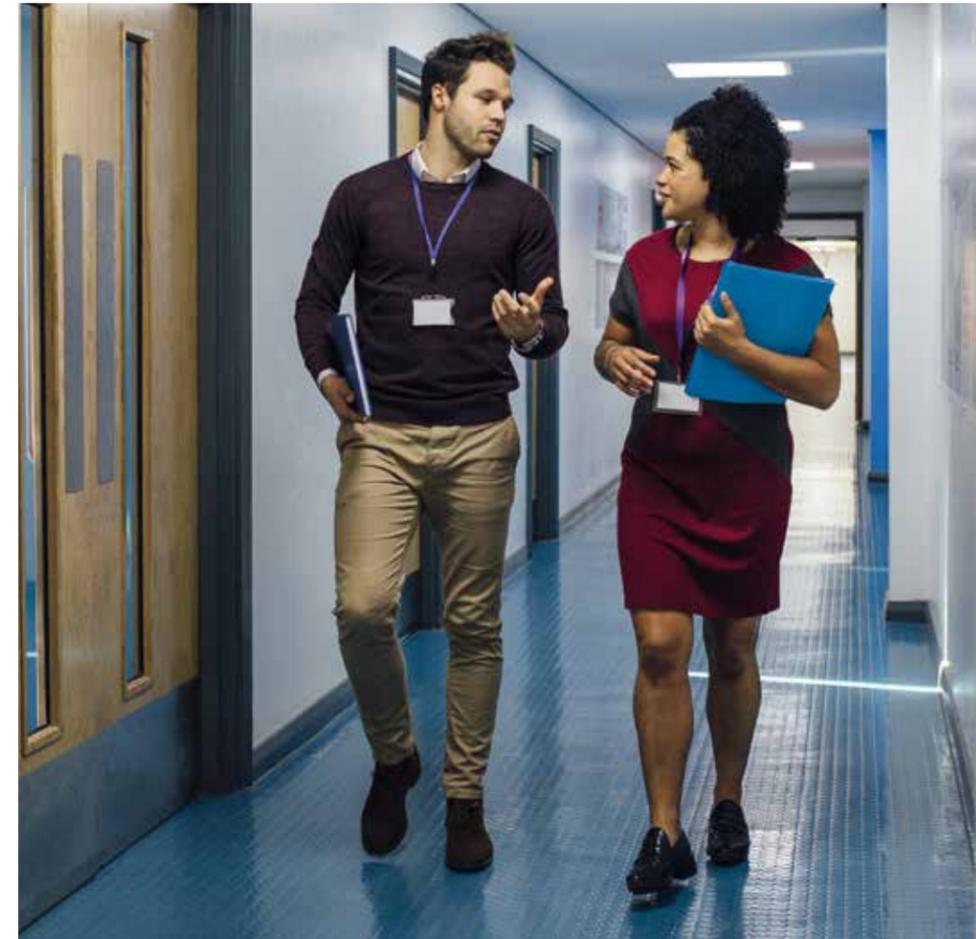
DfE (2018b) offers the following advice:
● Evaluate your curriculum planning. Start with the principles from the report on eliminating unnecessary workload around planning and teaching resources (DfE, 2016) to review your planning and consider running a curriculum planning and resources workshop (see the DfE's workload reduction toolkit, 2018d).
● Consider if your existing plans are clear in relation to pupil progress and attainment in all the relevant subjects, are fully resourced with sequenced lesson-planning and high-quality curriculum materials, and planned over well-defined blocks of time.
● Plan efficiently. If developing new schemes of work or revising existing ones, establish a team or staff pairs led by more experienced colleagues. Also consider specialisms and strengths when allocating responsibility.
● Start with agreed learning

objectives over blocks of time, plan sequences of lessons to achieve these objectives and establish the most effective way that pupils will be assessed.
● Choose high-quality resources. First consider the use of commercially produced resources (textbooks, print and digital resources, subscription services) and assess whether they meet your curriculum needs, are sufficiently high-quality and constitute good value for money. If you develop or adapt resources, factor in teachers' time for searching, development, trialling and quality-assurance.
● Agree on your most trusted sources as a school or department for particular subjects. Make standard tools available to staff/pupils as part of the school's cloud-based platform. Make use of curriculum resources available under the DfE's copyright licences (DfE, 2014).
● Plan collaboratively and share. Timetable PPA at a common time where possible, and

consider curriculum planning across schools. Create an online user group or shared drive for resources. Use collaborative software to enable you to work on the same document at the same time and consider cloud services.
● Agree file-naming conventions and folder structures so you can make best use of folders and can find what you want easily.
● Ensure resources and IT systems are accessible. Resources that form part of schemes of work should be accessible at all times, with booking systems in place for physical resources.
● Having a facility within the school, phase or department to register additional needs as an on-going document will support teachers in developing and maintaining this.
● Remove the need for paper-based homework planners. Upload homework to an online platform where pupils and parents can view tasks, while reducing printing costs and lost homework sheets. **SecEd**

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▶ For advice on any issue facing those working in education, contact the free 24-hour Education Support Partnership helpline on 08000 562 561 or visit *www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk*