

# CHOOSING A SCHOOL MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEM

September is all about new starts; new children, new parents, new staff, newly polished floors with their unmistakable smell, but some things remain the same, for example, do you have the right management information system (MIS) to support your goals, one that's easy to use, saves you time and really adds value? Are you at a point where you want to review your current system or choose a new one and what are the considerations?

## The Broader Picture

What is your starting point and where do you want to end up, what are the advantages or disadvantages of each system and who else needs to be involved, not only in the decision making process but also in using the chosen program?

Are you happy with a home-grown system on one computer just for pupil records or could you benefit from a well thought out commercial solution to share data amongst multiple users?

## What do you want the MIS to achieve?

The ability to access up-to-date information goes without saying but also think about how your school would benefit from being better organised, releasing time for other tasks. Beyond that, the more innovative systems allow you to turn a back office overhead into an outward facing marketing benefit where you can get parents involved and potentially share the cost.

## Does size matter?

Many of the basic administrative challenges are the same whatever the size of the school yet some are put off a commercial system because "we're too small to justify the investment". This may be a false economy however and small schools in particular

should look at the new generation of systems that have low overheads in time and local skills resource. Larger schools can also benefit from taking a step back to see if their current systems can satisfy their current and future needs. All of these points apply equally to large and small schools, those who are or are not ICT literate.

## Cost

The first thing that the Bursar will ask is 'how much'? Take care not to be seduced by initial cost alone. Whilst this is a major consideration, think about how much time the system will save and how much time it will take up to run, maintain and back up as well! Is there an extra cost for training and if one member of staff is going to train the others, is that person sufficiently expert enough to do the job and what is the cost of diverting them away from their normal job?

Factor in the cost of any new computers (where required), as well as how much time will be spent on their installation and maintenance.

Finally add the cost of support. Will you be charged on a monthly/termly/six monthly

fee or per call? The more intuitive the system, the less reliant you will be on their support system.

## Accessibility

Is the system going to be based in the school office for administrative use only or do you envisage all the stakeholders (teachers, admin staff, parents, pupils) being able to use the MIS in some form or another? I remember from my old Head of Department days having to walk to the other end of the school to the office, ask Pam to

clearly shows what help they will give you and what you will be expected to do yourself, to avoid any misunderstandings later.

## Links with other processes/systems

Some MIS can connect to and work with other systems like marketing and promotion, ordering school photographs and library management. Joining up other processes can really pay dividends by avoiding re-entry of data and improving accuracy, so long as the process is simple and easy to manage.

## How safe is the data?

Assuming you have transferred the data onto the system, who is going to be responsible for it, how is it going to be kept safe, what will happen if there is flood or fire, who will be responsible for the backups and where will they be kept?

The Autumn Term is a very important one. During this busy time, these pointers should help you decide on your own school's priorities, how you want the MIS to fit in with your current processes and how many of the stakeholders you would like involved in its use.

**"Take care not to be seduced by initial cost alone."**

log me on, remind me how to use the system and then allow me to use her computer while she went off to do something else. The school paid 'per seat' for using their MIS and I wasn't one of the 'seats'!

## Data Transfer

How long will it take to transfer the data to the new system? Who will be involved in the transfer of the data and what resources will you need? Depending on the system you choose, it can take up to about nine months to get going, while others are working for you in less than a week. Ask your supplier to provide you with a detailed implementation plan that