

The strange case of the disappearing equipment in Britain's schools

The notion of a school that has too much money for its needs and does not know what to do with it all is, basically, laughable. Every school wants, and could easily spend, considerably more money than it gets each year.

Which is why it is truly horrifying to learn that the overwhelming majority of schools in the UK lost equipment during the past year, and that schools were unable to claim through their insurance for many of the losses that were permanent

Over 85 percent of schools questioned in a survey undertaken in November 2007 have reported that they have "lost" something of value belonging to the school and have not immediately been able to account for it.

Of course, some would argue that there is not too much of a problem at all. All organisations, it is said, lose things, and most of these items are ultimately recovered. In schools 20 percent of the lost items turned up within a day and around 40 percent of the goods were recovered within a week.

But if we consider the comments of the administrators who have the job of trying to locate these missing items, we can see at once that the mere fact that many of the items turned up again does not make the situation much better – at least it doesn't if we consider the amount of time spent chasing missing items.

We followed up our statistical research with a series of conversations with school administrators, the people who are mostly responsible for trying to keep track of school equipment. Not surprisingly, although large numbers of school administrators were more than happy to report on the level of losses that were occurring in their school, none were willing to identify their school as being guilty of losing items. However a number of administrators were more than willing to talk off the record.

"It's not the cost of the equipment we should be thinking about," one administrator in a secondary school of 750 pupils in the south of England told me. "It is the time we waste trying to find the item. One teacher comes to me in a flap because he's about to do a lesson with one of the interactive whiteboards that are allocated as movable between classrooms. We all know these whiteboards are big items – you can hardly lose one under a desk. But when the board is not where it should be, there's still nothing I can do except walk the whole school looking in each room. Each time I see one I have to interrupt the lesson and check the serial number against the one that is missing – it can take an hour to go round the whole school. That would be fine if I had nothing else to do – but that's an hour out of a day that is already full of checking unauthorised absences, handling finance, answering the phone and dealing with visitors.

"And that's even before we get to a situation in which I find the board, and it is being used by a teacher who shouldn't have it. What am I supposed to do – stop the lesson and wheel it out?"

Another secondary school administrator told me that her school had tried sending messages to teachers asking if they had certain items, but this had only made matters worse. “No one wants to admit that they have taken a couple of laptops or calculators or a printer or anything else for a lesson and not returned them. So what happens is that they sneak the equipment back into store without admitting it was them – which means we are searching for things that have already been returned.”

Of course, interactive whiteboards and laptops are large expensive items that absolutely must be found. But many of the disappearances relate to much smaller – but still essential – items. “The staplers from the office just go,” one school secretary in a primary school told me. “We’ve given up searching, and just have to order up extra staplers, hole punchers, calculators and the like, knowing that some will vanish.”

None of this is to suggest that the removals of items are malicious in most cases. “If you are in the middle of something on the computer, and your keyboard suddenly packs up, you probably want a replacement quickly. If you are a teaching assistant and you are given a job that requires a hole punch, and you haven’t got one, you go looking. But still, it would be helpful if whoever needs something can let me know, and then return it when they’ve finished with it.”

All of this is annoying. But it is when we look at the longer term picture that we can see a situation that is particularly disturbing. 36 percent of schools reported having lost items that took more than a week to be found, and 22 percent of the equipment “lost” was never found at all – and in these cases we have to consider all the time taken up with searching for the equipment, and then the ultimate failure to recover the item.

Schools taking part in the survey were also asked to indicate the people who were most likely to have removed the equipment without permission or without completing the proper records – and the answers show exactly why school administrators and secretaries were so reluctant to be quoted on the record.

According to their analysis, the people who did most of the removing without permission were not the pupils, the students or the heads of department, but the classroom teachers. Classroom teachers accounted for 60 percent of the items that went missing. Heads of department on the other hand were only believed to be responsible for 6 percent of the losses – school managers even less.

Of course, classroom teachers make up a bigger percentage of staff than heads of department – but these figures show a disproportionate tendency for classroom teachers not to complete the correct forms and/or not to return items after they are used.

There was some thought among administrators that the heads of department should be doing more to ensure that their colleagues followed the rules, but generally speaking the feeling among everyone other than the classroom teachers was that what was needed was a central system that made all equipment trackable. “Then if something’s missing we can quickly work out who’s got it and where it is,” as an administrator in Wales put it.

Of the equipment that has never been recovered a quarter was thought to have been stolen and 40 percent was thought to have been “permanently mislaid”. For the rest, the schools remained unclear as to what had happened.

These figures raise another alarming point. It is very hard to raise a claim with an insurance company for items which are lost, or for which the school simply cannot account at all. These are losses that the school has to accept, and for which there is likely to be no comeback.

The survey – the first ever into the amount of equipment that is mislaid or removed in schools - was commissioned by SG World. Their Asset Management product allows schools quickly and efficiently to tag and audit all valuable equipment in the school. The software tells the administrator exactly which items have been moved, where they should be, and keeps track of movements and values.

Details of the Asset Management Starter Kit can be found in the new SG World catalogue. Contact the Customer Service Department on 01270 588 211 for your copy or alternatively e-mail: enquiries@theeducationcatalogue.co.uk or visit: www.theeducationcatalogue.co.uk