



Parent / Carer Update – Course Choice 2023-24

We are aware of a number of parent / carers discussing course choice options on social media and are therefore writing to further explain and clarify the course choice option system. Some of this information has already appeared as part of the course choice information on our website or in parent communications. This year's clashes are not worse than other years but we recognise they will be problematic for some students and will need to be resolved as fairly as possible. We apologise for situations where young people are unable to take first choices and are committed to looking for reasonable solutions now and in the future.

Ensuring we have a curriculum offer that meets the needs of our learners is a key priority for Penicuik High School. It is the reason we have made recent changes to our curriculum and one of the key drivers in combining the senior phase S4 - S6. This actually creates much more flexibility in the subjects we are able to offer in the Senior Phase as it allows students in S5 and S6 the option to complete National, SCQF, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications.

Designing and creating a timetable to allow students to access our curriculum is a complex task and it is important that we consider the needs of all young people within the school during this process. The coursing process is person centred and we try to support our students and parent / carers through this process as best we can but there will always be some clashes are not able to be resolved within the timetable structure.

Supports available for all students are detailed below:

- All coursing information is shared on the school website.
- This information includes; the course choice booklet, course choice form and also an information video with all relevant information required, including a FAQ section.
- Coursing assemblies are held for students, sharing all relevant information and directing students to the website.
- All students receive a 1:1 coursing interview with their guidance teacher or SMT to support them through the process.
- Mrs Steele (SDS Career Advisor) is able to support young people's questions about future career options and their courses of study.
- Coursing information letters are sent home detailing the process and directing parents / carers to the school website

- Individual issues are discussed and solutions explored via internal flexible arrangements or consortia arrangements.

What are the processes at each Year Level?

S2 into S3 coursing

Students moving into S3 still have to follow a broad general education and this is why the course choice form is designed to ensure students select subjects in all curriculum areas. This is the start of the personalisation and choice journey but also ensures a broad range of subjects are experienced.

S3 into S4 coursing

Students moving into S4 are given what is known as free choice. This means that all students are coursed into English and Maths and they then choose their 5 favoured subjects plus two reserve choices. A *free choice* does not mean they choose and all get the choices they want as that is not possible for schools to deliver. Schools instead work to deliver the maximum satisfaction rate using main choices and reserves. The free choice information is entered into a computer programme that works out the 'best fit' for all students. This session we had a 92% satisfaction rate for students successfully accessing their first 5 choices and around a 97% satisfaction rate when considering reserve choices. This means that 97% of our S3 students moving into S4 are being coursed into the subjects they selected on their course choice form.

S4/5 into S5/6

The process at S5/6 is slightly different but again is another standard methodology. To start the coursing process for S4/5 students moving into S5/6 we ask all students to complete a *straw poll*. This is a process where the students are free to express their choice with regards to what they want to study and progress over two years. This information is analysed and these choices are then run through a computer programme that creates the 'best fit' for all students via columns. This column information is then compared with the S4 choices and changes have to be made as a result of school resources- mainly staffing. All schools have this limiting factor no matter what their size.

The column information gained is used to create the S4/5 into S5/6 course choice form as it represents the best fit to the staffing envelope and will meet the needs of the majority of our students. At this point we provide the support from a guidance teacher or SMT to try and advise students on suitable subjects and alternative pathways that support progression and their future aspiration. Parent/ carers will also be involved in

these discussions and we entirely respect your right to advocate for your child's choices and will be honest about all options available.

No changes are made to the course choice form at this stage in the coursing/ timetabling process as the timetable structure is starting to be designed based on the information on these course choice forms and even small changes could create a much poorer fit for a much greater number of students. This also means the school has to make pragmatic decisions about choices in terms of available staffing.

What factors affect choice?

The main resource affecting curriculum is staffing. We are given a set amount of staffing based on our roll and use that across the levels and stages to produce a progressive and modern curriculum. We are still in the process of finalising staffing and looking at the budget but we should be able to staff the school to last year's figure. The picture will be clearer in May.

The curriculum needs to be balanced and offer progression across levels and the staffing resource has to support equity of provision. We have retained the wide range of SQA Certificated courses but have added additional subjects to improve overall attainment as measured by tariff points and offer good alternatives that support positive destinations.

Due to staffing we are not able to offer the full range of Advanced Highers but that is the case for all schools. Advanced Higher courses are not statutory and are heavy on staffing as they attract small classes in the timetable. *See below for discussion of consortia arrangements that support Advanced Higher courses.*

How do we overcome the apparent restriction on so young people's choices?

In many cases there are good alternatives that can be offered to young people and it may be a two year plan, that delays a subject that can be picked up again from S5 into S6, is a better option. Universities have a standard entry requirement and only some degree programmes have subject pre-requisites at S5 that must be achieved in that years exam diet. Students are advised to concentrate on 5 good Higher passes at one sitting in S5 and then address any supporting subjects at S6 where there is more flexibility about what is studied across the columns.

Another key tool in supporting a wider curriculum and overcoming clashes are the curriculum consortium arrangements that can be made with other Midlothian secondary schools. We are able to offer some choices at Penicuik High School at Advanced Higher in S6 and through consortia arrangements we are able to expand that

range where students have more flexible options across columns to travel to other schools. No Secondary School offers all Advanced Highers and instead relies on this shared staffing. Consortia arrangements may also support taking Highers in S6. The use of Google classroom and the *Equipped for Learning* programme can also offer some flexibility where we could arrange a hybrid of online and some face to face tutoring. This would be a bespoke solution where we are happy that a young person has the personal skills to manage more independent learning. In some limited cases this could support a student at S5 doing a Higher but possible disruption to other courses would need to be factored in to the programme of study.

There are now also other good remote learning opportunities through providers such as E-sgoil or the YASS programme (Open University). These may attract costs (E-sgoil) and demand independent study and would also be bespoke offers.

Finally, we use also use an external Timetabling consultant during our process. This means we are able to deliver the best possible and most efficient Senior Phase Timetable, delivered on time, to allow us to start the new Session timetable in June.

I hope this communication goes some way to explaining the course choice and timetable system. As always, please feel free to contact the school if you have any further questions.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Craig Biddick', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Craig Biddick

Head Teacher

16/03/23