

Popular free school supported with pupil data, admissions and timetabling



School Profile

Name
Gildredge House

School Category
Free School

School type
All through

Pupil roll
176

Age range of pupils
4 to 19

LA
East Sussex

“The support we have received from SBS with the administration of our MIS has been invaluable. In fact it is hard to imagine how, as a brand new school, we could have coped with the vital aspects of admissions, student database and timetabling.

Lea Gilbert
Head Teacher

Gildredge House is an all-through free school based in Eastbourne, East Sussex, which opened in September 2013.

Head Teacher Lea Gilbert stated, “This is a hugely exciting time at Gildredge House as we open our doors to our students for the first time after months of painstaking preparation. Gildredge House will embody so many of the things that I hold dear: academic excellence, community participation and leadership opportunities”.

The Gildredge House school ethos expects students to meet academic challenges, discover their passions, develop confidence, contribute positively to society, be resilient and become independent thinkers prepared for successful and fulfilling lives.

Key to the school’s success will be the small classes, in which traditional high expectations are combined with modern teaching methods, ensuring each student achieves the best possible results. The teachers are considered to be the school’s greatest strength, with an exceptionally talented and committed group of staff from the outset.

Head Teacher Lea Gilbert has a strong belief in an education system that develops the whole person and inspires a love of lifelong learning. Every child is known and valued, and offered the chance to be inspired and gain confidence in whichever area they discover their interests lie.

What were the school’s objectives?

As a new free school, Gildredge House did not have the benefit of support from the local authority to manage admissions on the school’s behalf. It was imperative that the school could undertake this process themselves for the first year’s intake without the advantage of electronic submissions. Prior to opening, the school was planned by a founder group, and the headteacher was working at another school, so Gildredge House didn’t have any staff members to manage admissions. The school was already oversubscribed, in some cases with more than double the number of applications to available places, so it was imperative to ensure a fair admissions policy. Furthermore, the school had to adhere to certain processes and key dates governed by the local authority.

The founder group felt it was important to communicate with all parents in a manner that reinforced community spirit, and use a system that would allow the school to easily send out notifications and invites to events in a timely manner. The school needed a system that could accommodate this immediately, whilst considering future requirements to integrate other communications technology.

Opening in September with two Reception and six Year 7 classes, the school wanted to ensure it had a timetable that met its ethos, with staff working across the lower and upper year groups. Gildredge House teaches Latin and Computer Science in the middle school curriculum, whilst incorporating twice weekly community challenge lessons for every child, so these needed to be built into the timetable across both academic years. With a relatively small initial teaching staff, it would prove challenging to spread the staff across both the lower and upper halves of the schools, whilst factoring in skill sets for specialised subjects. This was further complicated by the lower school working to different time schedules throughout the day.

With very little historical data and no opening guidelines, Gildredge House needed to plan how it would provide good evidence of assessment and progress. Reception children would have no benchmark to start from, but would need a solution to monitor the children as they moved through the lower years. End of Key Stage 2 data with national curriculum levels was available for Year 7 pupils from their previous schools as a baseline, but a clear process was needed to effectively assess and record progress. Using GCSE grades or national curriculum points were considered too widely spaced, so a progress measurement and notification system that clearly reflected changes in progress were important. This would also need to sustain the introduction of additional school years and growing number of pupils, and develop with changing assessment requirements.

How have SBS and SIMS helped?

Gildredge House completed an MIS system and support tender process through procurement specialists, Schools' Buying Club, in which multiple suppliers submitted options and software solutions. Market-leading SIMS from Capita was chosen as the school's management information system with School Business Services as the support provider. The founder group members were from varied backgrounds, some with little or no school experience, and no knowledge of SIMS, so it was important to instil confidence in their decision.

SBS initially worked very closely with the Head Teacher and founder group to set up the SIMS database. Without electronic forms, the popular school received a vast number of admission applications that were hand-written hard copies; consequently the pupil data needed to be manually processed. A ranking process was devised based and implemented on catchment areas, siblings, children of staff members, and special education needs, with a set percentage of places reserved for pupils outside of these admissions criteria.

SBS set up custom fields in SIMS within the standard applications screen to assist with ranking and random selection thus ensuring fair allocation of places for entry into the new school. In order to offer further support and manage the whole process, SBS completed all the manual data entry on behalf of the school and generated the reports for place allocation. Using this data and templates written by the founders, SBS produced mail merged letters that were sent to all applicants.

The SBS team effectively acted as the school administration during this time as the school staff had not yet been appointed. Rather than simply providing training and handing over the administration process, it was necessary for SBS to be flexible enough to produce ongoing reports for the founders, create invites to open events and site visits, then finally to formally offer the places, all in a very short space of time. The consultants were on-hand to attend parent events, acting as school staff, liaise with the local authority, and build complex timetables. Once the school opened, SBS provided helpdesk support and training for the school, including the administration staff, with additional remote guidance and assistance to underpin the training.

The national curriculum levels of attainment were chosen as the preferred assessment model, but by using sub-levels of A to F, staff were able to dissect the targets into smaller steps to demonstrate and assess progress. After an initial discussion, SBS went through a process of setting up the measurements, and introduced a traffic light system for close monitoring of development. Much of this was completed remotely, and will continue as the school grows and requirements change in accordance with new or revised DfE guidance on assessment.

As the year progressed, the assessment process already evolved with the introduction of GCSE options in Year 8 for languages. Despite being Gildredge House students for just one year, and with some staff having no previous experience of options, the choices for GCSEs that are usually selected in Year 9, needed careful planning. The SIMS Options module enabled the school to devise the most effective timetable to fit each language.



What was the impact?

Without accurate pupil data and class abilities, the school could potentially make incorrect decisions on settings, timetables, subjects, and lesson support. SBS ensured that the database was accurate and housed solid information for the school to base its planning upon. This allowed teachers and support staff to focus on lesson plans and getting to know the children from day one, rather than having to complete onerous admin tasks.

The support offered by SBS ensured that the school's data was sound, allowing accurate reporting, and a strong basis to build assessment going forward. The school had confidence to submit its first Census using easy to produce reports, in the correct format for the DfE.

Timetabling support and production has freed up school staff and ensured that the school produced the best schedules to meet considerable requirements. Gildredge House has been able to plan how many lessons of each subject are needed, factoring in increasing student numbers and additional year groups, whilst meeting the curriculum model. With the addition of curriculum costings, the school could plan for additional teachers and the impact of specialist staff at particular times throughout the week and school year.

The assistance and guidance provided were over and above typical Service Level Agreements for helpdesk support, on-site consultancy and training. However, this was the first newly opening school SBS had worked with, so it was an exciting time for all concerned to adapt skills and to enjoy new experiences.

Next steps

As the school continues to grow, more aspects of SIMS will be introduced. For example, there will be the introduction of a sixth form in September 2015. This will have huge implications on the timetabling process, meaning a big change in the way SIMS is used within the school, including the introduction of Examinations Organiser and Course Manager.

Now that the school is established, admissions for the Reception, Year 7 and new 6th form can be accepted via the local authority electronic process. However, normally students up to a Year 9 intake, would not have external exams so due to having a 6th form, Gildredge House will need to recruit an Exams Officer to manage external examination entries.

In September 2015 the school will provide education to seven academic year groups, the staff workforce will have increased immensely to take all of this into effect. The increases in staffing will of course be required for teaching, but also for many back office requirements. These additional staff members will require training in the many new aspects of SIMS. This will include the use of Course Manager to record the 6th form courses that are being undertaken. This is very important due to the reporting to the DfE as the evidence for the 6th form funding grant.

Currently, the school records the statutory morning and afternoon attendance. It is planned that with the introduction of lesson registration for the upper school year groups, more in depth recording and analysis of attendance and behaviour throughout the school day can identify any trends.

As Gildredge House progresses through the years and new requirements occur, the SIMS system set up is evolving with the school. SBS will continue to be with Gildredge House every step of the way, continuing to offer support, advice and guidance.

To find out more about MIS Support, contact the SBS team on **0345 222 1551** or email sales@schoolbusinessservices.co.uk

www.schoolbusinessservices.co.uk