



An OECTA Guideline: The Roles and Responsibilities of Department Heads

A Professional Development
Steering Committee Project

HOUSING ENGLISH
Catholic
Teachers
ASSOCIATION

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PART 1

The role of the department head

The genesis of this document rose from needs identified by department heads seeking guidance from the Association in navigating between their duties as OECTA members and obligations under legislation. In addition, many of our current members, working both as and with department heads, have articulated a need to both clearly define the role and limit its expansion.

The intent of this resource is to provide guidelines for teachers who act as department heads. It is hoped that professional relationships between principals and teachers will be strengthened by a document that clarifies the role of a department head in facilitating the implementation of the *Education Act* and OECTA collective agreements. Ultimately, the impetus has been to provide Association members with a practical and OECTA-friendly resource.

What Does the Law Say?

Under the *Education Act*, Ontario Regulation 298 – Operation of Schools is the primary statutory reference for department heads.

Section 14 of the Regulation stipulates that secondary schools may be organized by departments or other (organizational units), and a teacher may be appointed to direct and supervise the department, subject to the authority of the principal.

Section 17 also refers to co-ordination and supervision of subjects/programs.

Section 20 indicates that it is the duty of a teacher to cooperate fully with the department head in matters of instruction.

Section 11 (3) (a)-(c) states that the duties of the principal, which are fulfilled in whole or in part through the department head, include the requirement to,

- (a) supervise the instruction in the school and advise and assist any teacher in co-operation with the teacher in charge of an organizational unit or program
- (b) assign duties to vice-principals and to teachers in charge of organizational units or programs
- (c) retain on file up-to-date copies of outlines of all courses of study that are taught in the school

In addition, Section 11 (3) (j) provides that a principal shall make recommendations to the board with respect to,

- (i) the appointment and promotion of teachers
- (ii) the demotion or dismissal of teachers whose work or attitude is unsatisfactory

(Neither (i) or (ii) above are part of the role of the teacher or department head.)

There is a need to define the role of the department head and limit its expansion.

PART 2

Looking back

Prior to the 1995-96 school year, there was a regulated job description for department heads. In addition, the norm was for a department head to have release time of one period per year, such that heads would teach five of six periods normally assigned to a teacher. With the advent of a new funding model in 1998 and the accompanying dismantling of a regulated job description, the funding for release time was removed, and only a responsibility allowance for department headship was included in the funding model.

The role of department head in the current school environment is limited and streamlined in recognition that department heads now carry a full course load, and have limited time in which to perform the duties above those of a teacher. While the responsibility allowance provides some limited remuneration, it does not address the crucial element of time needed to perform department head duties.

Centralization removed regulated release time for department heads.

PART 3

Looking at today's reality

Department head responsibilities are primarily colleague resource and curriculum related. Because department heads belong to the teacher bargaining unit, they must decline any involvement in managerial functions related to teacher appraisal. As stipulated in the Education Act, management duties and the promoting and hiring of teachers are the exclusive responsibility of the principal.

The recent introduction of Ministry of Education programs designed to support the growth and professional development of teachers has made this division of duties more apparent. With the implementation of Regulations 96/07 and 97/07, teachers are now evaluated by their principals through the Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA) process in five-year cycles. The New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) regulates TPA for new teachers and formalizes mentoring for teachers and teacher mentors. It is important to note that there is only one formal process for teacher appraisal and it is found in the Education Act. This process is applicable to both teachers and department heads.

Management duties fall to the principal and not to the department head.

The Department Head's Role as an OECTA Member

Do's

- A department head can provide resources and support to foster exemplary teaching and a collegial, collaborative work environment within a department.
- A department head can provide curriculum support for all teachers within a department. In departments with multiple subject areas, this curriculum support may vary according to the department head's qualifications.
- A department head can advocate for a department and department members within the school and within the board. Upon request by a teacher, a department head may help identify exemplary practices.

Don'ts

- There is no requirement or expectation for a department head to be a mentor under NTIP but a department head may volunteer for this role.
- A department head shall not take part in the performance appraisal of another teacher, give input into a performance appraisal nor volunteer to give input into an appraisal. Additionally a department head shall not give evaluative commentary on a teacher performance.
- A department head is not to participate in the promotion or hiring of teachers nor perform in any other management function.

PART 4

Current issues

The following frequently asked questions and answers are offered to assist a department head in fulfilling his/her duties as an OECTA member:

1. *If there are new teachers within the department and the principal assigns you to be a mentor, what advice does OECTA offer?*

Remind the principal that mentoring relationships are voluntary. All teachers who are not NTIP candidates may participate as per your collective agreement or Unit policy. A department head, like any other teacher, may volunteer to be a teacher mentor within NTIP but is not required to act in this capacity.

2. *A department head may be asked to review examinations or mark summaries. What is the role of the department head regarding the scope of the review and what obligations exist for reporting to administration?*

A department head may inform a teacher of department, school, and board evaluation policies in order to promote consistency. However, the scope of any review is limited to providing teacher support around curriculum delivery. The exchanges between the department head and teacher are confidential and non-evaluative. There is no duty to report to an administrator nor should it be done.

3. *What role does a department head play in the Annual Learning Plan (ALP) process for teachers in his/her department?*

A department head has no role in the teacher-authored ALP. Upon request from a teacher, a department head may act as an informal mentor. The principal and the board have obligations to provide support for all teacher learning and to foster effective teaching and satisfactory performance.

4. ***During the implementation of ministry or board initiatives, what role does a department head play?***

There is no requirement or expectation that a department head has a role other than that of a teacher when it comes to ministry or board-wide policy initiatives. The role of the department head is limited to subject-specific curriculum initiatives.

5. ***If a principal approaches a department head with a concern over lack of diligence demonstrated by members of his/her department, what role does a department head play?***

Supervising teachers in the performance of their duties is the exclusive role of the principal. Department heads have a duty, like all other teachers to evaluate their students; they do not have any part to play in the appraisal of their colleagues.

6. ***Is there an informational role for a department head in monitoring the implementation of ministry and board policy and local collective agreements?***

Yes. A department head may have access to critical information on such issues as class sizes, staffing, and student success initiatives. It is crucial that this information be relayed to Association representatives in order to ensure that local collective agreements are respected.

7. ***A department head may be asked to intervene in parental complaints. What advice may does OECTA offer?***

Principals have the responsibility for all school community and parental matters; however, upon request of a teacher, a department head may advocate for that teacher.

8. ***A department head may be asked to intervene in a personal conflict between members. What advice does OECTA offer?***

It is the duty of the employer through its agents to provide a workplace free from harassment. However, should a dispute between members arise, a department head is advised to avoid any involvement in such conflict. Department heads and teachers must be cognizant that any information they provide to administration may be used in discipline, demotion, or termination of teachers.

PART 5

Conclusion

This Association document is intended to provide clarity to members acting as department heads and to help them effectively fulfill their school-based responsibilities within an OECTA context.

Secondary school department heads are curriculum leaders within their respective schools. Curriculum leadership and support is required at all levels. It should be encouraged by commensurate compensation practices and the provision of time for teachers to work together during the instructional day.

The current legislative regime excludes a department head from performing management roles and functions which leaves curriculum leadership and support as the primary focus. OECTA relies upon the knowledge and professionalism of these peer leaders to foster exemplary teaching practices and provide a resource to Association members.

The primary function of the department head is to provide curriculum leadership.

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