

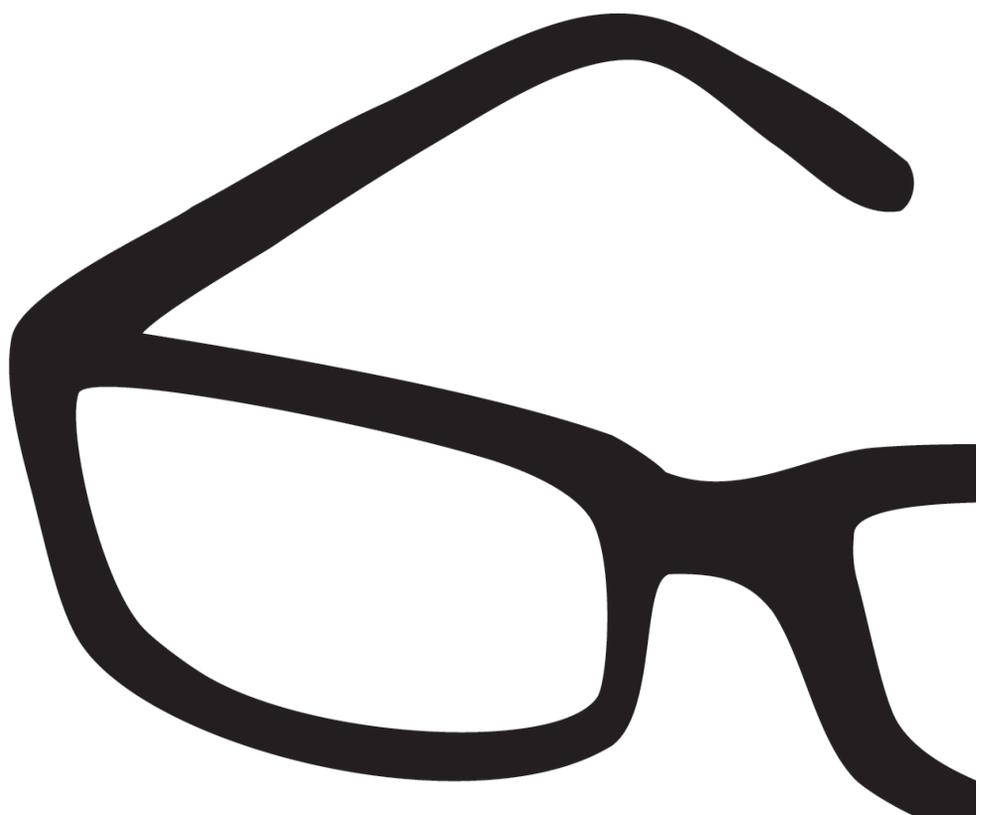


Primary assessment and accountability

Teachers' responses, July 2013

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Introduction

The primary assessment and accountability framework consultation was launched on 17 July. Schoolzone recruited 30 primary teachers to give feedback via a series of online focus groups. As the launch was in what was for many schools the last week of term, and teachers would have had very little time to engage with the new assessment and accountability framework, Schoolzone produced a short summary of the key points and emailed this to teachers ahead of the sessions, then shared them via the online focus group software to facilitate discussion.

Some of the assessment changes had been widely known for some weeks, such as the likely (now confirmed) removal of national curriculum levels from the assessment regime, so to some extent teachers had been able to discuss within schools possible changes to their assessment scheme requirements. Other aspects were new to teachers on the day of the discussion, so many of the comments arising during it are teachers' immediate concerns. We provide this report without conclusions, as we feel it is too early to do so as yet.

The new final curriculum framework itself was also discussed during focus group sessions and responses to this are summarised in a separate report: *The new primary Curriculum*, Schoolzone, July 2013.

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Main points of the assessment framework

- National curriculum levels will be removed and not replaced.
- Instead the new NC PoS set out what pupils should be taught by the end of each key stage.
- There will be no prescribed system for ongoing assessment and reporting: schools will create or choose their own.
- There will be baseline testing, probably for five year olds but possibly end of KS1.
- SATs at KS1 and 2 will continue, but be more demanding - new versions used in summer 2016.
- SATs results will be scaled and compared to the national cohort and league tables will report progress compared to baseline.
- Floor standards (used to trigger an Ofsted inspection) will be at a “much higher level” with an expectation that 85% of pupils reach “secondary-ready standard”.

Life without levels

Some schools report the fact that they plan and resource lessons by targeting levels, so schemes of work will need to be revised once levels are removed. Other schools don't think that removal of levels will have much impact on their schemes and resources, provided levels are removed from everything: they appreciate that levels were simply one way of monitoring performance on an ongoing basis, and may not have used levels for this purpose anyway.

Teachers' main concerns about the removal of levels are that schools need a way to set targets for their children by identifying the next step in each child's learning; they also need to be able to anticipate their likely success in SATs.

The latter concern seems to cause more alarm, especially as, when the curriculum is new, schools will need some exemplification of standards, which the government has indicated that it is not going to supply. English coordinators are particularly worried about how they might moderate writing etc.

Teachers struggle to see how a curriculum without levels will enable them to do these things. This may simply be because they have not yet had enough time to familiarise themselves with the new structure to the curriculum, however.

There appears to be a widespread assumption that schools will carry on using national curriculum levels and APP as a way of monitoring and setting targets, although it is unclear how this will work.

It may be that schools will need to develop an alternative to their existing levels since they are unlikely to fit with the new curriculum. The consultation document mentions a step-by-step approach to the curriculum

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If we don't have a standard way of monitoring learning, how are we to accurately prepare children for the KS2 tests

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It will really affect our assessment procedures and planning. Assessment in all subjects is NC based. Without level descriptors, how do we know where children have got to?

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I don't think people will move away from levels, even with the Government saying so

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and assessment. Teachers see this as a form of levelling, but what they really need is a way to set targets by anticipating the next step.

Schools are likely to work together in consortia, where these already exist, to develop some form of monitoring and target-setting approach, otherwise they are likely to create their own. Few seem interested at this stage in an external scheme for assessment.

Some teachers take a more pragmatic approach to the removal of levels for assessment purposes, indicating that provided there is some means of communicating progress it doesn't really matter what it is: "as long as you know where you want the children to be and you share that with them, it shouldn't be too different. I want my children to see improvement and take onus for their learning - not just a targeting a number".

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I am sure that we will devise another way of saying this and we seem to have flexibility to do something along these lines. Maybe someone will come up with the way to do it!

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A key element in any new system, without levels, will be documents that help children to understand the criteria for assessment and the language used: schools may prefer to produce these themselves, one teacher commented.

The removal of level six papers is seen as a positive move however. Teachers thought that it was unrealistic to expect children to achieve Y9 standards at the end of Y6. Even though this was an optional paper, schools felt some pressure to enter pupils for it.

Teachers also see this new extended, more difficult KS2 SAT paper as being fairer and more reflective of students' ability, certainly in maths: "this new way will allow us to show more able children more clearly, without stepping into levels that require more maturity and life experience".

One maths coordinator also thought that this would help more able maths students when they reached secondary school. "It will make it harder for them to ignore L5/6 children and dismiss their achievement levels."

English coordinators were divided about the usefulness of the phonics screening, so if this is to become optional it seems likely that it could be abandoned in some schools unless they have found a way to make better use of the information.

Reporting

Teachers express concern about the fact that schools will be potentially using their own systems for data gathering, monitoring and reporting. One teacher mentioned that parents found the old levels system difficult enough to understand, without each school measuring in different ways. Parents will not be able to compare success rates of children within different schools, to know whether sending a child to a particular one had been a good decision, for example.

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Ofsted currently ask for data to be re-packaged into a format they prefer - I can't imagine they will stop doing this now

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Reporting by progress against the year group indicator may be a demotivation for children who are still working at the level of a younger year group. Similarly if they never achieve the expected standards within the year group they may become more and more demoralised as each year goes by.

There is a statement in the consultation document that says schools will present data to Ofsted in whatever form they gather it, using whichever system they choose. However teachers are sceptical about this idea. Furthermore some teachers feel that this lack of standardisation will undermine the rigour of assessments: “It leaves a lot open to saying that tracking is not rigorous enough. Freedom here is to be condemned.”

However some English coordinators thought that this method could work because Ofsted were really looking to make sure that schools were doing the best by their pupils, so it doesn’t matter what the system is in use.

English coordinators also have fears about reporting success to parents in relation to a skill-based curriculum, especially as they are required to indicate strengths and weaknesses. The APP system is useful for this, partly explaining schools’ reluctance to move away from it.

The norm-referencing which will come into play when SAT scores are scaled, with 100 as the secondary standard, puts teachers in mind of IQ scores, automatically making them sceptical of the system.

One suggested method is the use of age-related profiling: expected, emerging or exceeding performance, as seen in the EYFS framework. This was seen as potentially useful in the foundation subjects but not in the core. There is some doubt as to its usefulness for older children though, as it is too vague. Core subjects in particular need something more to help identify gaps and inform planning, although it may be enough for parents. It is also difficult to show progress with this method.

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I think if you change your thinking to what is good for the kids then you can tackle this... it will often match what Ofsted are looking for. As long as you can confidently explain it

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Accountability

As schools are to be comparable via a new measure of progress, the government has announced the requirement for baseline testing, but has not yet specified when (reception or KS1) this will happen. Teachers do not seem to think that testing at reception is appropriate because, certainly in maths, they may not have the opportunity to demonstrate what they understand and can do.

Meanwhile Y6 teachers feel immediately under pressure as a result of the new progress measures because they feel that it will be up to them to ensure that the school overall performs well. This new accountability system seems to be a bigger threat than the previous one.

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The floor standards are ridiculous - they don't know 85% of what! They plucked the number from nowhere - we need the assessment criteria FIRST then the targets...

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Teachers regret the move to a percentage pass rate for students and the new definition of floor standards to be applied to schools. They say that secondary-ready means that pupils should have acquired the right skills and maturity rather than achieving a fairly arbitrary pass rate.

Some teachers are also concerned about the raising of floor standards: those in schools with a low performing intake saying that they will never reach the 85% boundary. They seem to take little reassurance from the fact that Ofsted will base its decisions on whether to inspect partly on improvement from baseline to KS2, since the performance of low attaining pupils is also more difficult to have an impact upon.

The new accountability system seems to encourage schools to teach to the test even more than the old one, teachers say. They also take offence at the repeated references in the consultation about schools massaging their figures.

In some schools the 85% level is already in use, based on the level four threshold, while in other schools this additional level of challenge will be welcomed: "I think the 85% is challenging for some schools but in terms of children's life chances it's important."

Schools that are already achieving well in terms of value added are those most likely to welcome the increased challenge, provided there is some realistic means of achieving it. One ambitious teacher said: "I don't mind the accountability as long as it comes with support, ie find a similar school that is achieving that 85% and get them to help... not sure how that would work." This same English coordinator noted that while her school is in a challenging area, their Y6 pupils achieve 94% level for reading, going on to comment: "it might be controversial but I do think there is a culture of excuse in some areas.... sorry!".

The decile reporting system is also treated with some suspicion, for example as cohorts change year on year, so parents will be unable to tell what this means. However this may reflect schools perception of their own cohorts more than the international picture. "Parents need to know if their children have the skills they need for their next steps," said one teacher. Teachers cannot see how this ranking system benefits schools, children, or parents, since it is simply a measure of performance rather than having any formative purpose.

Schools will only be able to produce decile rankings for their own cohort of students at any given moment, which serves no use, teachers say. It cannot be used to help inform children of where they need to improve or focus, which will be very demoralising for the lower attainers. "We will have to have parent workshops on deciphering your child's attainment scores".

There is also scepticism about the political agenda behind these changes. Some teachers feel that the government wants to identify more schools as

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They create these pressures in the first place then are surprised when schools try to manipulate stats

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It's definitely important and always strived for, but so hard where I teach to get 85% to that level

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The deciles will change year on year, making that information useless

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How can they possibly publish and compare teacher assessments from a myriad of different systems and with no discernable national framework?

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failing so that they can pursue the Academy strategy within the primary sector, for example.

The reporting of teacher assessments in each subject, based on no standard form of assessment, and without levels, seems doomed to failure in the view of many teachers. Since core subject teacher assessment will be published, a suitable system will need to be developed, but for foundation subjects without this formal reporting and with much more vague learning objectives, this seems less likely to occur.

The extent of data to be published in performance tables is also a cause for alarm, but there is a general support for the three year rolling average.

The inclusion of levels of pupil premium funding in association with accountability caused some teachers to be suspicious that future pupil premium payment levels will be based on performance, particularly of pupils who attract pupil premium funding: “If we are given an extra £400 they will be expecting more for it”. Some teachers note that this is already happening in effect as Ofsted inspections ask to see how pupil premium money is being spent.

Pupils who attract pupil premium funding are not necessarily those who are low performing in any case, teachers point out: “Often, pupils who qualify for pupil premium have a lot of other factors affecting their learning that won't be recognised in performance table. It will also strongly influenced by a very small number of children in schools where not many pupils fall into this category”.



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