



**Evidence for
Excellence in
Education**

Consultation Response

Primary Assessment and Accountability under the New National Curriculum

October 2013

**National Foundation for Educational
Research (NFER)**



About NFER

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About this document

Between July and October 2013 the Department for Education held a consultation on primary assessment and accountability under the new National Curriculum. This document is NFER's response.

The consultation followed the publication of the draft new National Curriculum and the decision to discontinue the use of National Curriculum levels for assessment and accountability. The consultation set out the case for change and sought views on how attainment and progress in primary schools should be measured and reported, and how schools should be held to account.

The paragraph numbering in the document follows the consultation questions. We only answered those questions where we could draw on relevant evidence or expertise.

Related documents

Other NFER consultation responses and policy papers relevant to the development of primary education are also published on the NFER website.

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Teacher assessment and reporting to parents

1. Will these principles underpin an effective curriculum and assessment system?

We agree broadly with the move towards greater school autonomy over curriculum and assessment issues. However, we feel it will be extremely challenging for schools to design new effective assessment frameworks for tracking progress, without external referents, at the same time as they are developing and embedding their approach to teaching the new National Curriculum. There may be an erroneous assumption that teaching the content of the programmes of study in the core subjects will ensure pupils are on track to meet the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) expectations. Some schools may need considerable support in devising robust formative assessment systems (that are not level-based) to track attainment and progress. It may also take time for the secondary-ready standard to be fully understood as the end of key stage goal towards which progress must be measured.

Without a commonly understood assessment language or metric and, in the absence of external reference points, there is a danger that different expectations of standards of attainment and progress may emerge in different schools, networks or local authorities.

2a) What other good examples of assessment practice we can share more widely?

Teachers need to be able to access information about good practice in relation to both formative and summative assessment. Schools should be supported and encouraged to build on effective Assessment for Learning (AfL) principles and practice already established. New sources of good assessment practice and strategies for improving pupil performance should be disseminated as they emerge. For example, the principles for high quality assessment from the findings of the NAHT commission of practitioners.

Many schools will already be aware of sources of evidence about the effectiveness of specific strategies, interventions and products (e.g. the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) *Teaching and Learning Toolkit*). EEF has also provided useful information about the criteria used to determine the appropriateness of tests used in evaluations.

These criteria are also applicable to teachers who want to choose standardised tests to measure progress or evaluate the impact of any change in practice. If teachers wish to buy assessment products, they need to know what to look for, i.e. tests that have been well-developed to accurately reflect desired standards, trialled in schools and properly standardised.



2b) Is there additional support we can provide for schools?

Support materials for training teachers in the principles of high quality assessment and examples of standards that would provide a shared language for discussing assessment in the new world without levels.

It is to be expected that commercial providers will be quick to exploit this new market opportunity. Schools may find it difficult to evaluate the usefulness and value of the products available and waste money on poorly developed assessment systems. We believe it is important that any examples of 'best practice' provided to schools should be rigorously evaluated and evidence-based. A set of evaluation criteria based on the principles of good assessment should be established by which commercially available products can be scrutinised. This would enable expert evaluation of assessment products using a process similar to that undertaken by the DfE for Key Stage 1 phonics resources. This information should be made publicly available so that schools can select from a range of high-quality assessment products that will fully meet their curriculum and assessment requirements.



National curriculum tests in English, mathematics and science

3 Does a scaled score, decile ranking and value-added measure provide useful information from National Curriculum tests?

Providing decile ranking may better meet the needs of parents who do not understand the current system of levels and want to know how their child is performing relative to their peers. It may also provide more useful information for secondary schools, enabling them to group pupils on entry by ability in English and mathematics.

Some teachers and parents may be familiar with scaled or standardised scores because these terms are used in the published tests used by many schools. However, our experience in this area (NFER have authored many of the tests published by GL Assessment), suggests that even schools familiar with standardised scores sometimes find it difficult to explain these to parents, particularly the issue of measurement error, e.g. confidence bands.

The proposed use of 100 as the 'secondary readiness standard' may cause confusion with parents and teachers familiar with nationally standardised tests that use 100 as the mean score. If the requirement is that 85 per cent of pupils meet the secondary readiness standard, it may be preferable to use a different scaled score to avoid confusion with a normally distributed score range.

There may also be potential for a conceptual misunderstanding between standardised scores and age-standardised scores which may need to be overcome.

Additional support in reporting National Curriculum test results, both individually and at school level, could be produced and provided to schools.



Baselines to measure progress

4 Should we continue to measure progress from the end of Key Stage 1, using internally-marked National Curriculum tests?

We believe there is still a need to measure progress from the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1) to the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2), although we also believe that progress from the end of the foundation stage to the end of KS1 should also be measured.

This would enable a progress measure appropriate to the key stage to be used, yet enabling a comparison of pupils with similar prior attainment at two points in time.

Measuring progress over a longer period without an interim milestone would be problematic.

To reduce the incidence of infant schools tending to inflate KS1 teacher assessments and all-through primary schools tending to depress theirs, we support the use of the results of internally-marked, externally-moderated KS1 tests to provide the baseline for progress measures.

5 If end of Key Stage 1 National Curriculum test results are used as the baseline to measure progress, should school-level results be published?

Although we welcome the move to greater transparency and access to data through the proposed 'data portal/warehouse', we fear that publishing school-level Key Stage 1 (KS1) results may result in local 'league tables' that focus on a single measure of school performance. It has been suggested that Key Stage 2 (KS2) school league tables encourage schools to 'teach to the test' (Stobart, 2008), and publishing KS1 results could result in a similar phenomenon in this key stage.

Rather than publish these results it would be better to support and encourage local authorities and schools (school leaders, teachers and governors) to scrutinise attainment and progress internally, using such information to identify children that need additional support or challenge. The results should also be used to promote an open dialogue with parents about the progress made by their child in the tests, contextualised with information from a teacher assessment of the child's performance more widely.

6 Should we introduce a baseline check at the start of reception?

There are two potential purposes of a baseline check: firstly to identify children who may need targeted support at the earliest possible opportunity; secondly as a baseline to measure subsequent progress. We suggest the former could best be accomplished by a well-designed optional screening tool that could be used with any or all children on entry, depending on the school and the needs of the children.



We understand the interest in a baseline check to provide a measure of value-added, but there would be a number of challenges to overcome:

- Manageability will be an issue during the first few weeks of the academic year when teachers are dealing with children who are settling into school.
- A 'simple' check may suggest a one-off test or set of tasks. There are considerable technical challenges in devising valid and reliable measures suitable for young children. Early years practitioners believe that observational assessment within child-led/chosen activities is the more valid approach with young children (see Brooker *et al.*, 2010).
- If the check is reliant on teacher assessment then there is a risk of bias. For example, schools may tend to underestimate children's abilities at baseline in order to be able to show greater value-added.
- There may be difficulties in assessing children whose first language is not English within the first few weeks of term, leading to inaccurate assessments.
- In order to be manageable and timely such a check is likely to focus on a limited number of items/areas. This might lead to a focus on core skills and have a negative backwash effect on pre-school settings and parents/carers, who might be encouraged to focus on 'school readiness' (narrowly defined) instead of a more rounded early years (EY) experience.

However, we do not believe that these technical challenges are insurmountable, and it may be possible to develop a valid and reliable assessment that can be used at the start of the reception year. This assessment should link back to the assessment for two-year-olds and forward to the phonics screening check and Key Stage 1 (KS1) tests.

In order to support a fully rounded EY educational programme in the reception year, the current Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile should be retained at the end of the foundation stage, for reporting to parents and as the measure of performance on which Ofsted will judge schools' performance. A subset of Early Learning Goals in mathematics and literacy (broken down into a manageable set of items/tasks) could provide the basis of a baseline check against which progress in KS1 would be measured. Teachers could be given some flexibility as to when to administer these tasks to increase manageability.

Irrespective of whether a baseline is measured at the start or end of the reception year, consideration should be given as to whether the results should be age-standardised in order to account for the large developmental differences between children born at different times of the year (see Crawford *et al.*, 2013).

7 Should we allow schools to choose from a range of commercially-available assessments?

From 1998 until the introduction of the Foundation Stage (FS) Profile (later the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile) schools were required to use an accredited baseline assessment scheme. There were over 90 such schemes developed by different types of organisations (local authorities, publishers, academic institutions). The schemes varied widely in their content and assessment approaches and inevitably in their quality.



The development of a statutory assessment instrument would remove doubts about the consistency of the instrument itself.

If a range baseline checks were to be used to measure progress for accountability purposes, it would be essential to ensure that materials from different providers were equally valid and reliable measures. This could be achieved with a robust, independent and transparent evaluation and accreditation process similar to that undertaken by the DfE for Key Stage 1 phonics resources.

8 Should we make the baseline check optional?

We do not think the check should be optional. If the baseline check were optional, this would mean that parents would not be guaranteed the information and the evidence base would be patchy.



Accountability

9 Do you have any comments about these proposals for the Department's floor standards?

No comments.

10 If we take a baseline from the start of reception, should end of Key Stage 1 National Curriculum tests become non-statutory for all-through primary schools?

See response to Question 4.

11 Should we include an average point score measure in floor standards?

The inclusion of an average point score measure would remove the focus on a specific threshold and would encourage schools to focus on all children – not just those at the borderline of the required standard.

12 Are there any other measures we should prioritise in performance tables?

The consultation document states that end of key stage teacher assessments will still be published, but there is a lack of clarity about how schools will make these assessments (in the absence of levels) and how they will be expected to report them.

We believe that schools will need guidance and support in developing teacher assessments that give a better indication of performance over time. There is a danger that, without such support, teachers will fall back on using tests to measure progress and reporting test outcomes rather than developing good formative assessment practice. Alternatively teachers may be led into reporting what has been taught, as a proxy for pupil performance.

The current proposals focus on literacy and numeracy, which we do think are important, but primary schools have a much broader focus than this. There are other things that could also be reported on to show they are valued in schools. In 2009, NFER published a paper on the information published about schools in other countries and made recommendations about what ought to be published about schools in England. The findings from this paper largely continue to hold true (see Maughan *et al.*, 2009).



Recognising the attainment and progress of all pupils

13 What data could be published to hold schools (including special schools) accountable for the attainment and progress of the lowest-attaining pupils?

With a reporting system based on scaled scores and ranking by deciles, there are inevitably some pupils whose attainment is always in the lowest decile.

It is particularly important for such pupils to focus on their progress rather than their attainment; to recognise the progress pupils have made; and to credit the contribution of the schools that have supported them.

It is therefore recommended that a system, such as the P-scales, is necessary to measure and record the small steps of progress made by these pupils.

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**National Foundation for
Educational Research**
The Mere, Upton Park
Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: 01753 574123
F: 01753 691632
E: enquiries@nfer.ac.uk
www.nfer.ac.uk