

Pearson Thinks...

... that the school accountability system should be reformed to ensure the progress learners make is the main criterion by which school and college effectiveness is judged. This would incentivise all schools to help all learners to do as well as they possibly can.



What's the issue?

Autonomy has become one of the key watchwords of the coalition's schools policy. *The Importance of Teaching*, their 2010 stake in the ground, first heralded the direction of travel: 'Across the world, the case for the benefits of school autonomy has been established beyond doubt: in a school system with good quality teachers and clearly established standards, devolving as much decision-making to school level as possible ensures that decisions are being made by the professionals best able to make good choices for the children and young people they serve.'ⁱ Since then, at the time of writing, we've seen almost 4000 schools become academies, and a raft of policies and announcements designed to devolve more power to individual schools.

The government has always been clear, however, that the flip side to autonomy is accountability. Increased freedom comes with increased responsibility: 'We believe that public services will improve most when professionals feel free to do what they believe is right, and are properly accountable for the results ... Schools should ... be accountable to parents, pupils and communities for how well they perform.'ⁱⁱ Schools are now, arguably, freer to choose their own approaches to teaching and learning, to curriculum design, to assessment – but they need to be able to demonstrate that those approaches are successful in equipping children and young people for the future.

But the way in which 'success' is defined is shifting. Recent policy changes on school accountability have made pupil progress at least as important as attainment in judging a school or college's performance, across all sectors. At the Primary level, new accountability proposals will enable schools to choose to be judged either on a new, more challenging, attainment measure, or on the progress children make from a baseline assessment. At Secondary, the new Progress 8 measure will be used to determine whether or not a school meets the floor standard. Providers of education for 16-19 year olds will be judged on five headline measures, with progress measures used, where possible, as the basis for setting new minimum standards.

So a school's ability to track and demonstrate the progress its pupils make has never been more important. The current structure for doing this, however, the system of National Curriculum levels, is being abolished. True to their decentralising agenda, the coalition has announced that National Curriculum levels will be removed, and that they will not be replaced by a single national system. Instead, schools 'should decide how they assess each subject'ⁱⁱⁱ. Ofsted 'will expect to see evidence of good quality pupil tracking data, but will not expect schools to keep records of pupil attainment in a specific format'^{iv}.

Understandably, this has left many heads and teachers feeling anxious about how to fill the hole left by the removal of levels. How should they effectively track progress? How can they compare their pupils' progress with those in other schools? Most importantly, how can they ensure that the information they gather is used to inform future teaching and learning?

Pearson has been working with a range of experts to help address this issue, and to come up with ideas and practical solutions for both policymakers and schools. This paper is a way of sharing some of that thinking.

What's our view?

Firstly, we are delighted that the progress learners make is being prioritised in judging school effectiveness. There is clear evidence^v that the recent focus on threshold measures has had a number of unhealthy consequences, including significant teaching to the test in an attempt to get pupils to the required level; an unhealthy focus on a narrow band of pupils who the school identifies as being able to cross the barrier; the disenfranchisement and demotivation of large numbers of pupils who believe, rightly or wrongly, that they have no chance of reaching the bar; and the lack of incentive to challenge high attainers to achieve their full potential. It has also effectively penalised schools with more challenging intakes, making it harder for them to recruit the talented teachers they need to help their children achieve their potential. Focusing on progress, on the other hand, removes many of these perverse incentives, instead providing a clear imperative for *all* schools to help all children to do as well as they possibly can.

We are also in favour of the removal of National Curriculum levels. We are convinced by the evidence^{vi} that these have become counterproductive, often seen as ends in themselves, rather than descriptors of progress, and that they explain little about a young person's strengths and areas for improvement.

Finally, we agree that, in an increasingly autonomous school system, the government is right not to seek to replace levels with an alternative universal approach. The expert panel for the National Curriculum review cited extensive evidence for the integration of curriculum and assessment^{vii}. In a system in which increasing numbers of schools are no longer required to follow the National Curriculum, a centrally dictated approach to progression and assessment cannot possibly align with the curricula of the 4000 (and counting) schools that are free to take their own approach to curriculum design. Even schools still required to follow the National Curriculum have significant opportunities to introduce their own local curriculum alongside. In order to reap the benefits of a joined-up approach to curriculum and assessment, then, schools must be able to develop their own ways of tracking pupil progress against their curriculum.

Our research with heads and teachers across all sectors, however, suggests that many of them will find this challenging. It is not necessarily the best use of the teaching workforce for every school to design their own approach to progress tracking in isolation, and even those schools that welcome the change would appreciate support. There are clear benefits to groups and organisations developing approaches that schools can adopt as a starting point, and adapt to meet their needs. We welcome the introduction of the government's assessment innovation fund as a way of encouraging and sharing new approaches to assessment and progress tracking, and are impressed by the work of organisations like NAHT in this area.

What's are we doing about it?

We believe that Pearson, bringing together our expertise in assessment and learning services, can also play a useful role in supporting schools through this change, and helping to spread evidence-based good practice. We are working with experts, including academics, heads and classroom teachers, to develop products and services that support schools in mapping learning in different subjects, tracking learners' progress against these maps, and ensuring the information and insights they gather feed into their planning and teaching.

We have also sponsored the CentreForum think tank, which has done extensive work in this area, to write two reports on reforming school accountability. Their report on **Secondary accountability models** was published in August 2013, and proved highly influential in the development of the new Progress 8 measure. Their report on Primary accountability will be published by the end of 2014, and will focus on how the Primary progress measure should be designed and implemented.

What else do we think needs to happen?

The changes taking place in the school accountability system provide great opportunities to ensure schools are judged on the things that really make a difference to learners. As with all change, however, there are potential pitfalls. We have a number of recommendations, for both policymakers and schools, to help avoid these bearpits and ensure the benefits of the new system are maximised.

Policymakers should

- continue the move towards prioritising progress measures, in order to provide a clear imperative for *all* schools to help *all* children to do as well as they possibly can;
- resist calls to replace National Curriculum levels with an alternative national system, and instead continue to empower and support schools in developing or acquiring their own high quality approaches;
- ensure the whole accountability system works together to validate schools developing, or adopting and adapting, effective approaches to progress tracking and formative assessment;
- ensure Ofsted inspectors are highly knowledgeable about effective approaches to progress tracking and formative assessment, and that schools are rewarded for introducing such approaches.

Schools should

- consider carefully how they want and need to track progress between key external touchpoints, and how their approach to progress and assessment aligns with their curriculum (the report of the NAHT commission on assessment^{viii} includes an evaluation checklist which is an excellent starting point for schools seeking to develop or acquire an assessment system);
- work with other schools, including partner Primary/Secondary schools, to share and develop effective approaches and benefit transition, and to build their own expertise in assessment and progress tracking;
- ensure approaches to progress tracking and accountability feed effectively into formative assessment, completing the loop of assessment and learning.

How can you keep in touch with our work in this area?

We would be delighted to share our ongoing work on progress, assessment and accountability with interested colleagues. More information can be found by following the links below. Do get in touch if you'd like to discuss these or get involved.

- *Measuring what matters: secondary school accountability indicators that benefit all* (Pearson-sponsored report by CentreForum)
- *Pearson's response to the government consultation on Secondary assessment and accountability*
- *Pearson's response to the government consultation on Primary assessment and accountability*
- *Pearson's response to the government consultation on 16-19 assessment and accountability*
- *Pearson's response to the government consultation on how schools and colleges should be required to show performance measures on their websites*

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ⁱ *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010* (Department for Education, November 2010)

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Reforming the accountability system for secondary schools* (Department for Education, October 2013)

^{iv} *Ibid*

^v See Chris Paterson, *Measuring what matters: secondary school accountability indicators that benefit all* (CentreForum, August 2013) for a detailed analysis of the failings of attainment-based school performance measures

^{vi} See Oates et al, *The Framework for the National Curriculum: A report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum review* (Department for Education, December 2011) for extensive links to research highlighting the way in which National Curriculum levels undermine learning, and inhibit the overall performance of the education system in England

^{vii} *Ibid*

^{viii} *Report of the NAHT Commission on Assessment* (NAHT, February 2014)