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Primary Policy Watch – NAHT commission report on assessment

Following the government's decision last year to announce the demise of levels and level descriptors as the structure for assessing pupils, the National Association of Head Teachers set up a commission to look at how schools could be supported in developing their own assessment systems. That commission, chaired by Lord Sutherland, produced its report this week. Consisting of 21 recommendations, a suggested set of principles, a design checklist, some inspiring case studies and, in true *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* style, an instruction not to panic, it's a useful guide for schools starting to think about life beyond levels.

The commission's overall message is that, while levels were far from perfect, they did at least provide an accepted language of pupil attainment and progress. The NAHT believes that giving schools the freedom to design their own assessment systems need not lead to fragmentation. Instead, school leaders need to take ownership of assessment, and design a proper replacement.

Key recommendations for schools

The report includes the following recommendations for schools thinking about their assessment practice:

- All staff should be involved in evaluating existing assessment practice and developing a new system.
- Assessment should be part of school development plans, and should be reviewed regularly.
- Pupils should be assessed against objective criteria rather than ranked against each other.
- Pupil progress and achievements should be communicated in terms of descriptive profiles rather than condensed to numerical summaries.
- Model assessment criteria, based on the new National Curriculum, should be developed and shared (possibly by the NAHT itself).
- Schools should work in collaboration to develop assessment practices.
- Teacher assessment should be externally moderated, ideally by moderators with no vested interest in the outcomes.

Key recommendations for other agencies

The report also includes some clear suggestions for agencies involved in school accountability:

- Ofsted should be clear about how inspectors will take account of assessment practice, and ensure consistency across the inspection team.
- The DfE, local authorities and other employers should be clear about the assessment data that schools will be required to report to parents and to submit to these bodies.
- Providers of both initial teacher training and continuing professional development should support teachers in developing assessment expertise.
- The DfE should support schools' use of suitably modified National Curriculum levels as an interim measure in 2014, to give schools time to properly develop their own robust frameworks for assessment.
- Schools should be asked to publish only their principles of assessment in September 2014, with a detailed assessment framework being required only from 2016.

Underlying principles

The report includes a set of principles that it believes should underpin any school's assessment system. In summary (much more detail is provided in the report), these are:

- Assessment should be at the heart of teaching and learning.
- It should be fair, honest, ambitious, appropriate and consistent.

- Assessment outcomes should provide meaningful and understandable information for pupils, parents, teachers, school leaders and governors, and government and agents of government.
- Assessment feedback should inspire greater effort and a belief that, through hard work and practice, more can be achieved.

Design checklist

Finally, the report includes a set of statements as an evaluation checklist for schools seeking to develop or acquire an assessment system, as a first step towards encouraging schools to adopt broadly consistent approaches to assessment. The checklist takes the underlying principles outlined above and translates them into statements against which schools can evaluate an assessment system, such as 'We assess pupils against assessment criteria which are short, discrete, qualitative and concrete descriptions of what a pupil is expected to know and be able to do.' and 'Assessment judgements are moderated by colleagues in school and by colleagues in other schools to make sure our assessments are fair, reliable and valid.'

Where next?

The NAHT commission has done an admirable job in identifying the key causes for concern around the removal of levels, and in suggesting a course of action to address these. By the commission's own admission, though, there is significant work still to do. In order to meaningfully track children's progress and achievement against the new National Curriculum, a set of assessment criteria needs to be developed to translate the curriculum into discrete, tangible, descriptive statements of attainment. In the absence of this being done centrally, the NAHT suggest the job should be shared between schools, and is commissioning a model document to facilitate this. The report doesn't fully answer concerns about consistency – its suggestions around external moderation are very general, and still leave questions around how we can ensure that children are really assessed consistently across different institutions. The commission recognises these limitations, suggesting that these recommendations should help schools to tackle the issues they will face this year, but calling for a fuller, system-wide review of assessment from age 2 to 19.

Finally, the removal of levels is not, of course, the only change to primary assessment expected this year. The government's response to their consultation on primary assessment and accountability is due imminently, and is likely to provide more clarity on the direction of travel around baseline assessment on entry, KS2 testing and floor standards.

The full NAHT report can be found [here](#).

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