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## Primary Policy Watch – Goodbye levels, hello performance descriptors

The long-anticipated performance descriptors for end-of-key-stage teacher-led assessments were released in October for public consultation. These descriptors are the framework for evaluating children's performance in maths, reading, writing and science to complete the picture coming from the summative assessment tests.

They do not replace the old-style National Curriculum levels like-for-like, and are not intended to be used to assess progress between the end-of-key-stage assessments. Schools are still encouraged to develop their own systems of assessment to evaluate pupils against their own school curriculum in whatever way they see fit – provided of course that it satisfies Ofsted.

While part of the rationale for ditching the NC levels was that they were 'confusing for parents', it's hard to see how the new system will be much easier to understand. Where previously there was a single indicator that applied equally to tests and teacher assessments across all of the key subjects, now the measure to be used depends on key stage, subject, on whether the subject contributes to the new primary floor-standard, and on whether the evaluation in question is externally or internally set and marked. Plus, as previously indicated by the DfE, SATs tests will be marked against a scaled score.

### So what do the new descriptors look like?

The proposal is as follows:

Teacher assessments for writing, reading and maths at Key Stage 1 will be graded according to the following scale:

- mastery standard
- national standard
- working towards national standard
- below national standard

Key Stage 2 writing will be graded on the same scale, with an additional 'above national standard' level between national and mastery standard.

Key Stage 2 maths and reading will be graded solely on whether the pupil has reached the national standard.

Science at either Key Stage will be graded solely on whether the pupil has reached the national standard.

Simple, huh? Luckily, the consultation document contains a [handy table summarising all of this](#).

### What do those standards actually look like?

These new level headings perhaps lack the sensitivity of the old levels. While the benefit is that parents will have clarity on how their children are performing relative to their peers nationwide, the downside is that if it is bad news there is no sugar-coating of the pill. And there is little room for nuance. Where the old levels included reassuring terminology such as 'emerging' and 'secure', the new system is more starkly 'has or has not.' However, the names of the performance descriptors are one of the items the government is seeking feedback on, so may be tweaked in the definitive version.

Of course, the performance descriptors reflect the aim of the national curriculum to raise standards by expecting more of pupils. Even to be considered 'at the national standard' children will need to be performing at a pretty high level. Take this example for Writing:

To be judged as working at the national standard, your current Year 1 children will need to be able to show evidence of:

- Maintaining form when writing [narratives and] poetry
- Using grammatical terminology when discussing and evaluating writing
- Using co-ordination and subordination appropriately
- Using punctuation almost always correctly

To be judged as working at the national standard, your current Year 5 children will need to be able to show evidence of:

- Using a range of cohesive devices to link ideas within and across paragraphs
- Integrating dialogue to convey character and advance the action
- Using relative clauses with a wide range of relative pronouns (or an implied relative pronoun) to clarify and explain relationships between ideas
- Using the perfect form of verbs to mark relationships of time and cause
- Applying morphological and etymological knowledge, and the full range of spelling rules and patterns, to spell words

To be considered 'above national standard' (KS2 only) or at 'mastery' level, children will have to demonstrate more depth and breadth in the same indicators as at the lower levels. In other words, getting a better grade doesn't mean learning about more things, it means learning about the same things more deeply. While this could be a real positive, promoting fluency over a race to the finish, it may require some thinking on how to differentiate for your high achieving pupils without switching them off learning.

The concept of a national standard also raises the question of who establishes what the national standard is. In order for these performance indicators to exist at all, a national standard has to have been assumed already. Is this a true national standard or an ideal to which to aspire? Will the calibration be looked at again should it transpire that the majority of the country is failing to reach the national standard?

### Anything else?

Two other observations:

- An enjoyment of reading is one of the performance descriptors – phrased as 'Regards reading as a pleasurable activity' at Key Stage 1, and 'Demonstrates a positive attitude to reading by frequently reading for pleasure, both fiction and non-fiction' at Key Stage 2. Of course this is a laudable aim and the aspiration of all good teachers, but how does a teacher assess it, and is it even appropriate to assess?
- It is worth noting that Science doesn't form part of the floor standard, which would tend to indicate its junior position in the core subject clan.

If you want to [have your say](#) on the wording of the document, you can do so before 18 December. The new descriptors will come into effect from next September.

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