

2014/2

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Primary Policy Watch – Reforming assessment and accountability for primary schools

It's been due to be released 'soon', 'shortly' and 'imminently' for quite some time, but this week the government's response to their consultation on primary assessment and accountability finally landed. Widely seen as the missing piece in the primary reform agenda, the plans announced here will answer at least some of the outstanding questions in heads' and teachers' minds as they plan for curriculum change in September, though much still remains opaque.

The response was released alongside the government's plans for accountability at age 16-19, and follows on from recent changes at secondary level. The thread joining all three phases is progress. The progress children make from Reception to Year 6 will now be seen as just as important as their final attainment, with schools remaining above the floor target if they meet the new expected attainment standard at the end of Key Stage 2 **or** their pupils make sufficient progress from their starting point. The intention here is clear: schools should be rewarded for enabling as many children as possible to be ready for the next phase of their education, but we also need to recognise the outstanding job many schools do in helping children from challenging backgrounds to progress as far as they possibly can.

So what will the new assessment and accountability regime look like as a child moves through their primary education?

Reception

If holding schools to account for as many children as possible making as much progress as possible is the guiding principle behind the government's reforms, there needs to be a clear starting point from which that progress is judged. The introduction of a baseline assessment at the beginning of Reception wasn't a universally popular proposal, with only 33% of the respondents to the consultation in favour, but it's hard to see how else the focus on progress could be achieved. The government has responded to concerns about testing such young children by emphasising that the baseline assessment should sit within teachers' broader assessments of children's development, and by undertaking to consider how to communicate results to parents and to Ofsted, ensuring that they are contextualised by teachers' broader assessments.

There won't be a single baseline assessment; instead it is anticipated that a range of assessments will be produced by different suppliers, matched to a set of centrally produced criteria, from which schools can choose (a bit like the phonics matched-funding model). Schools can choose whether or not to implement a baseline assessment in September 2015, and those that do so will be able to choose whether they have the progress of the children starting school in 2015 measured from this point or from the end of KS1. From September 2016, the only recognised starting point will be an approved baseline assessment. Schools can choose not to do a baseline assessment, but those that do will forfeit their right to be judged on progress, and will have no choice but to meet the (new, harder) attainment level if they wish to remain above the floor target.

Key Stage 1

Changes at KS1 are relatively minor. Children in Year 1 will continue to take the phonics screening check. Assessment at the end of KS1 will continue to be largely teacher-assessed, with judgements informed by children's performance in externally set and internally marked reading and maths tests. There will, however, be a new grammar, punctuation and spelling test introduced from summer 2016, and all tests will be updated to reflect the content of the new curriculum.

The biggest change will be in the way in which pupils' achievements are reported. True to their word, the government is getting rid of levels. Instead, children's performance on the tests will be reflected in a 'precise scaled score' (a score where 100 will represent the new expected standard for that stage). New performance descriptors, based on the new National Curriculum, will be provided (in autumn 2014) to inform teacher assessment.

Key Stage 2

The original intention was that frameworks for the new KS2 SATs would be released at the same time as this response. These are now expected to follow 'soon' (or perhaps 'shortly', or 'imminently'...). Without them, it's hard to get a clear handle on exactly how different the tests will be, but the consultation response at least makes it clear what subjects will be tested, and what the overall expectation will be.

The overall approach to assessment at the end of KS2 will remain the same. Children will sit externally set and marked tests in maths, reading, and grammar, punctuation & spelling. As now, there will continue to be teacher assessment in maths, reading, writing and science to give a broader picture of children's attainment. As at KS1, new performance descriptors will be provided to inform teacher assessments, and the tests will be updated to reflect the content of the new curriculum.

The results of the tests will be expressed as scaled scores, as at KS1 (the highly controversial proposal to rank children in deciles has been dropped). These scores will be reported to parents and Ofsted alongside comparisons showing the average score attained by other pupils at their school, in their local area and nationally. In order for a school to be above the attainment floor standard, 85% of pupils will have to achieve at least the expected standard (roughly equivalent to a current Level 4b) across reading, writing **and** maths. (This is a significantly raised bar from the current floor target of 65% of pupils reaching 4c. Remember, though, that this is being presented as a 'challenging aspiration', and that schools can also remain above the floor target if they can demonstrate that their children are making sufficient progress against their baseline on entry.)

Missed opportunities, pitfalls and questions

The government's desire to recognise and reward schools for helping all children make the maximum possible progress is a clear and welcome driver behind these plans. There are, however, some missed opportunities (for example, to recognise and incentivise the excellent work many primary schools do to develop children's broad skills and attributes, arguably as important to 'secondary readiness' as their achievement in English and maths). There are some pitfalls that still need careful negotiation (ensuring we don't brand 4 year olds as 'failures', avoiding the perverse incentive to depress baseline scores). And there are many questions that still remain to be answered (How will comparability across different baseline assessments be ensured? What will the level descriptors look like? What will constitute 'sufficient progress', and how will that be measured? What role will teacher assessment really play in the new accountability framework?).

Some of these questions will be answered as the government firms up its plans. Many, like so much at the moment, will be down to heads and teachers to work through in their own schools.

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