Q & A:
Assessment without levels

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Questions and answers on assessment without levels

In June 2013, the Department for Education (DfE) announced that it would be removing national curriculum levels from September 2014 and would not be replacing them. Since this point, it has been up to schools to decide how they would track pupil progress as they implemented the new national curriculum. The removal of levels signified a major change for schools, many of which would have used levels since they were introduced with the first national curriculum in 1988. Governing boards at both primary and secondary schools would have used levels to monitor pupil progress and hold the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school. We are aware that many governing boards have found the transition away from levels challenging, and this Q&A will answer some of the common questions about assessment without levels.

If you have another question which is not answered here please email it to fay.holland@nga.org.uk

Question 1: Why were levels removed?

Answer: When the DfE announced its decision to remove levels, it argued that the system of levels was “complicated and difficult to understand, especially for parents” and too prescriptive to fit with the freedoms given to schools as part of the new national curriculum. Levels were originally only intended for use in statutory national assessments, but schools began to use them for day-to-day formative assessment to track pupils’ progress and predict their achievement at the end of the key stage. This led to levels being used as thresholds, with teaching focused on getting pupils over a certain threshold. In addition, levels used a ‘best fit’ model, which meant that a pupil could be assessed as being at a particular level, but may have gaps in their knowledge within that subject area.

Taken together, these factors present a strong case for the reform of levels. Although the manner in which the changes were introduced was not ideal (there was no consultation and relatively little support for schools), many schools have taken the opportunity to adopt a new, better system which may be more appropriate for their context.

Question 2: What is the governing board’s role?

Answer: Since the removal of levels, schools have had to put in place an alternative system for tracking pupils’ progress, as the old system of levels does not reflect the content and expectations of the new national curriculum. Schools are free to decide what system they use, but need to consider carefully the pros and cons of available options. The governing board’s role here is to challenge senior leaders so they are confident that the chosen system is robust, and easy to use and understand by all.

Question 3: What are the options available to us?

Answer: Schools have several options when considering their approach to tracking pupil progress, some of which are described below.
a) Create your own system

Some schools take the opportunity to create their own assessment system from scratch. An advantage of this is that it allows the school to tailor the system to its individual context and gives staff ownership of the process. It can also be more cost effective than other approaches. The drawbacks are that it is time consuming and potentially very challenging for staff to ensure the assessment system is suitably robust. In addition, if the system is unique to a single school, it isn’t possible to compare or moderate assessment with other schools, which can help schools ensure their system facilitates reliable and accurate assessment.

b) Create a system with other schools

Creating a joint approach with other schools has several advantages, whether as part of a formal partnership or otherwise. First, it allows schools to compare and moderate assessment with other schools, which is an important part of ensuring the system is robust. Second, it spreads the initial workload of creating the system across the group and allows schools to draw on a larger pool of expertise. Third, it still allows schools to tailor their approach to their context, and gives staff ownership of the process. It is also relatively cheap, the main expenditure being on staff time. In terms of downsides, creating a system from scratch can be time consuming and demanding even if done with others. This approach also requires schools to work effectively together, so if there are not already strong relationships between schools this could be challenging.

c) Use a free-of-charge system created by another school

Some schools have made their approaches available on websites such as the TES resources website. One of the benefits of using a pre-designed package is that school staff aren’t burdened with the potentially challenging task of creating a system from scratch. The fact that many of these packages are available free of charge is a plus, but a disadvantage is that the package won’t be tailored to the school, so staff may need to adapt it to fit the school’s context.

d) Purchase a system from an assessment organisation

Numerous commercial organisations have made the most of the removal of levels by producing replacement assessment systems which schools can purchase. The cost and quality of these packages varies, but taking this approach means that the school doesn’t need to spend time designing its own system. Depending on the organisation, schools can be relatively confident that the system is robust, and many of the packages are based around software which is designed to make recording and analysing assessment data quick and easy. In addition, buying into one of these packages often also entitles schools to support and training. The main downsides are that this approach can be expensive, and there is little if any flexibility for schools to tailor the system to their own context.

e) Buy or use a free package with other schools
Using the same externally produced package across a number of schools will involve the same benefits and drawbacks described in c) and d), but an added benefit in both cases is that schools can compare and moderate assessment with one another. This helps them ensure that they are measuring progress accurately. Some local authorities have also developed their own assessment systems to replace levels which schools can opt into. In addition, if schools purchase a system as a group they may be able to get a discounted rate. However as in b), this approach depends on the schools working well together so strong relationships are vital.

**Question 4: What should we consider when choosing a new assessment system or evaluating the effectiveness of the system we’ve chosen?**

**Answer:** It is clear that there are benefits and drawbacks associated with every option. Each school will need to decide which of these are most important to them when choosing which system to use. We have produced the following questions for the governing board to discuss with senior leaders when considering an approach:

a) **Does it meet our school’s individual needs?**

This is particularly important if the school is considering using an externally produced package. Things to consider include how it fits in with the school’s assessment policy, the profile of pupils in the school, and the school’s curriculum.

b) **Does it represent good value for money, and how do we know?**

Although the convenience of adopting a commercial package may be tempting, it’s important to ensure that the financial cost is justified by the quality of the product. This will include ongoing workload costs as well as the initial outlay, so the package needs to be the absolutely best option for the school.

c) **Does it complement the new national curriculum?**

Part of the reason levels were removed was because they didn’t fit with the new national curriculum, and it is vital that any system chosen to replace them is designed to allow accurate assessment against national curriculum expectations.

d) **Is it easy for teachers to use?**

It is to be expected that introducing a new assessment system will create some degree of extra workload for teachers as they familiarise themselves with it. However, in the long term the system should be as quick and easy for teachers to use as possible, whilst also allowing for robust assessment.

Governing boards could include questions on the assessment system, its implementation and impact on workload in a staff survey or other feedback mechanism.

e) **Does it allow for accurate and reliable assessment?**
The DfE’s rhetoric calls for ‘robust’ assessment, but in practice it is helpful to think about this in terms of accuracy and reliability. An accurate assessment is one which provides a ‘true’ measurement of a pupil’s ability in a certain area. If this assessment is also reliable, the same judgement will be made however many times the assessment is made. One way of ensuring the system is producing accurate and reliable judgements is for staff to moderate their assessment data on a regular basis.

f) **Is it easy for pupils and parents to understand?**

Another criticism of levels was that they were difficult for parents to understand. It’s vital that a school’s replacement system produces assessment data which allows parents to clearly understand how much progress their child is making. Furthermore, pupils themselves need to understand how well they are doing, and what they need to do to make further progress.

g) **Does it capture progress made by all pupils?**

The removal of levels presents an opportunity for schools to adopt an assessment system which articulates the progress made by all pupils, including those with lower attainment and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Schools should consider whether an assessment system is inclusive of all abilities, and takes into account wider outcomes.

The Commission on Assessment without Levels final report¹ provides further guidance on what to consider when creating an assessment system or evaluating an externally produced package.

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**Question 5: How will Ofsted make judgements about assessment?**

**Answer:** Ofsted has made it clear that it does not have a preferred assessment system. Inspectors will look at whether the school’s assessment system effectively measure pupils’ progress and whether pupils are making expected progress. Inspectors will consider a range of different sources of evidence, including pupils’ work, lesson observations and the school’s assessment data.

The current School Inspection Handbook² states that

“When considering the school’s records for the progress of current pupils, inspectors will recognise that schools are at different points in their move towards adopting a system of assessment without national curriculum levels” (paragraph 178).

However, inspectors will also consider:

“How effectively leaders monitor the progress of groups of pupils to ensure that none falls behind and underachieve, and how effectively governors hold them to account for this.” (paragraph 141)

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Governing boards should therefore be able to provide evidence showing how they hold senior leaders to account for tracking pupil progress, which will include ensuring that the assessment system itself is effective. As inspectors won’t have a lot of time to familiarise themselves with the school’s assessment system, it can be helpful to provide them with a short overview document explaining how it works. This shouldn’t be onerous to produce – after all, the assessment system should be simple enough for pupils and parents to understand, so should be easy to explain to inspectors. For more information about preparing for an inspection, see our Preparing for Ofsted Q&A\(^3\).

**Question 6: What information should we be receiving about assessment?**

**Answer:** The primary purpose of the school’s chosen assessment system will be to allow teachers to track pupil progress throughout the school year. The governing board should receive regular reports (at least once a term) showing how pupils across the school are progressing. This should include data about different groups of pupils, for example girls/boys, those eligible for the pupil premium and different ethnic groups. Governors need to interrogate this data and ask challenging questions if necessary. For example, if a certain group of pupils is not making expected progress, why is this and what is being done about it?

In the early stages of using the new assessment system, the governing board should also monitor how well teachers are implementing it in the classroom. Looking at the assessment data will be part of this, as consistent judgements would suggest that teachers are making reliable and accurate assessments. Getting feedback from staff is also important, and if teachers are struggling it may be that extra training or mentoring will help. It’s worth keeping this dialogue going; if a large proportion of teachers are finding the system difficult to use in the long term it may be that a rethink – or even a totally new assessment system – is needed. By regularly receiving assessment data and asking the right questions, the governing board will be able to ensure the school’s approach to assessment is fit for purpose.

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\(^3\) [http://www.nga.org.uk/getattachment/32547fc6-6745-4388-bd74-9a68fd9f2cd3/Preparing-for-Ofsted-Final](http://www.nga.org.uk/getattachment/32547fc6-6745-4388-bd74-9a68fd9f2cd3/Preparing-for-Ofsted-Final)