

## Primary Assessment in England

### Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

#### Introduction

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
- 2 The way in which primary children are assessed, and primary schools are held to account, is deeply flawed. There are widespread concerns in schools about the accuracy and appropriateness of the national statutory assessments, the impact of these on both children's and teachers' wellbeing, and the unintended consequences of the current approach.
- 3 The government has already made some positive steps to improve the current system, including the changes announced by the Secretary of State in October 2016. This consultation includes some thoughtful and sensible proposals which, implemented, could lead to further improvements. These include:
  - enabling the progress schools make with their pupils to be measured from entry to primary school, rather than halfway through their time there;
  - reducing workload and stress for both children and teachers;
  - enabling teachers to better use their professional judgement when assessing children's attainment and progress.
- 4 ASCL welcomes most of the proposals in the consultation, with some caveats. We have included some detailed thoughts on how they might be implemented to best effect in our responses below.
- 5 There is, however, one glaring omission from the consultation. This relates to one of the most pernicious aspects of the current system: the distorting effect of the Key Stage 2 SATs on the primary curriculum. This issue was brought into sharp relief by the recent education select committee report on primary assessment.
- 6 Drawing on nearly 400 submissions of written evidence, plus a series of oral evidence sessions with teachers, school leaders, academics and other experts, the select committee's report concluded that "many of the negative effects of assessment are in fact caused by the use of results in the accountability system rather than the assessment system itself". Damningly, the report concluded that "this high-stakes system does not improve teaching and learning at primary school".
- 7 ASCL agrees. While the recent increased focus on progress in primary accountability is welcome, the current system still places far too much weight on a single set of tests in English and maths, taken in one week in May by eleven year olds.

- 8 Even in 2010, before the recent ramping up of expectations exacerbated the situation even further, the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review found that “many teachers felt impelled, because they considered they were being judged on the SATs results, to spend a good deal of time in Year 6 and sometimes earlier in revision and practice tests ... In addition, disproportionate time was spent on the subjects tested at the expense of creativity and personal and social development”. Quoting the National Association for Primary Education, the report concluded that “in a great many schools coaching for test performance has replaced education”.
- 9 The select committee made a number of recommendations for improving this situation. These included publishing a rolling three-year average of Key Stage 2 results instead of results from a single cohort, and requiring Ofsted to report on the extent to which schools offer a broad and balanced curriculum.
- 10 These are interesting suggestions. We believe, however, that there is more we can do, at a system level, to incentivise and reward primary schools for providing children with a broad, rich and deep curriculum, and to tackle the unintended consequences of the current approach.
- 11 ASCL has therefore initiated an independent review of primary accountability, bringing together a group of experts to explore the impact of the current approach to accountability on the primary curriculum, and on children’s experience, and to make recommendations for how the system might evolve. The expert panel includes primary leaders and teachers, high profile academics and researchers, representatives from Ofsted and the Schools Commissioners Group, and other national figures in primary education. The review will consider questions such as:
- In what ways do curriculum, assessment and accountability currently work together or conflict with each other in the primary phase?
  - What data is gathered on primary school performance, how reliable is it, and how accurately does it reflect the effectiveness of a school?
  - What are primary schools rewarded for doing, and sanctioned for not doing?
  - What unintended consequences result from the current approach to accountability?
  - How might that approach be changed in order to tackle those unintended consequences, and incentivise and reward primary schools to provide a broad, rich and deep curriculum and experience for children?
  - How can primary schools effectively demonstrate the broad value they add?
- 12 We aim to publish a report and a series of recommendations in the autumn term, and will, of course, share these with government and other stakeholders.
- 13 Our responses to the consultation questions should therefore be read in the light of this ongoing and unaddressed concern. The changes proposed here address some of the more glaring faults of the present system, but fail to get to the heart of the problem with the current approach. We would therefore strongly encourage the Department for Education to:
- recognise the pernicious effect of the over-emphasis of the Key Stage 2 SATs, and consider ways to address this, including those that will be recommended by the ASCL review; and
  - accept that placing too much weight on any single measure is likely to lead to perverse incentives, and to heed the repeated request in our responses to ensure that no decisions about a school are taken on the basis of limited and potentially misleading data.

## Responses to specific questions

### Question 1

The EYFSP measures a child's development against the ELGs set out in the EYFS statutory framework. Should the profile be improved to better assess a child's knowledge, skill, understanding and level of development at the end of the early years? If so, please describe which elements could be added, removed or modified.

- 14 There is strong support among early years practitioners for the current EYFS framework. Practitioners value its balanced approach to early education and its support for a mix of adult-initiated and child-led activities.
- 15 There is less enthusiastic, but still considerable, support for the current EYFS profile. Anecdotal feedback from school leaders and early years practitioners includes the following views:
- Most school leaders and practitioners see the benefit in a common format for the summative assessment of children at the end of the EYFS.
  - Most welcome the broad focus of the profile, encompassing as it does both academic and socio-emotional attainment.
  - Some practitioners find the process of completing the profile burdensome. Most, however, believe that this is necessary in order to provide a holistic view of young children's attainment.
  - Many practitioners find the disconnect between EYFS and Key Stage 1 problematic, and would like to see more continuity between the two in order to more effectively build on the early years and track children's progress.
  - Some school leaders are concerned that the observation-based nature of EYFS assessment can lead to value judgements that are not consistent across different settings, despite cross-school moderation.
- 16 These views are backed up by the findings of a recent report by the Institute of Education on teachers' opinions on early assessment. Summarising the views of over 1000 respondents, this report found strong support for the EYFS profile, with 82 per cent of respondents agreeing that 'the EYFS profile helps me to monitor the development of the reception class and plan for their learning'. It also highlighted some of the challenges with the profile, with some respondents finding it both unwieldy and incomplete.
- 17 The EYFS profile is far from perfect. The profile, and the EYFS framework more generally, often find themselves the focus of some of the most polarised current debates in education. There are valid concerns on both sides about whether the current approach is fit for purpose, and it is unlikely that any approach to assessment in the early years will suit everyone.
- 18 On balance, however, we would favour retaining the EYFS profile in its current form in the short to medium term. It serves a different purpose from a potential new Reception baseline, encouraging schools to offer a broad and balanced early years curriculum. It encompasses both academic attainment and other areas which are known to make a positive difference to children's learning, including language for thinking and communication, personal social and emotional development, physical development and creative development. And, crucially at a time of major upheaval in the primary assessment and accountability system, it provides stability for practitioners, and data which schools and government can use to compare one year with the next.

### **Question 2**

The EYFSP currently provides an assessment as to whether a child is 'emerging, expecting or exceeding' the level of development in each ELG. Is this categorisation the right approach? Is it the right approach for children with SEND?

- 19 Although there is clarity that a child who is attaining 'expected' is in line with national expectations, the 'emerging' and 'exceeding' bands are, by definition, potentially very wide. But schools are able, of course, to supplement these broad categories with additional information for parents and Year 1 teachers about the specific achievements and challenges of individual children. Given the point about stability in our response to the previous question, we see no compelling reason to change the current approach to categorisation.

### **Question 3**

What steps could we take to reduce the workload and time burden on those involved in administering the EYFSP?

- 20 There is a balance to be struck here between enabling practitioners to demonstrate children's abilities across the broad spectrum of knowledge and skills being assessed, and ensuring the process of doing so is not unnecessarily onerous.
- 21 Two steps that could help to achieve the right balance are:
- High-quality training for early years practitioners on effective observation-based assessment. There is evidence of misunderstanding among some less experienced practitioners about what observational assessment is, and how it dovetails with everyday practice. In particular, an understanding that observational assessment doesn't always have to take place in a 'naturalistic' environment, but can arise from teacher-initiated activities, would help.
  - Local authorities (LAs) and other stakeholders should be discouraged from placing burdens on schools which are above and beyond those required. The EYFS framework makes it clear that 'assessment should not entail prolonged breaks from interaction with children, nor require excessive paperwork. Paperwork should be limited to that which is absolutely necessary to promote children's successful learning and development'.

### **Question 4**

How could we improve the consistency and effectiveness of the EYFSP moderation process whilst reducing burdens?

- 22 As alluded to above, there is anecdotal evidence that local authorities may not always apply consistent criteria to their moderation of the EYFS profile. The role of LAs in this process is likely to become increasingly challenging as budgets and teams shrink. It may be that, in future, STA needs to play a more direct role in moderation, including providing more detailed online advice and guidance to schools.

### **Question 5**

Any form of progress measure requires a starting point. Do you agree that it is best to move to a baseline assessment in reception to cover the time a child is in primary school (reception to key stage 2)? If you agree, then please tell us what you think the key characteristics of a baseline assessment in reception should be. If you do not agree, then please explain why.

- 23 Progress measures, though far from perfect, are the fairest way to hold schools to account. It is unhelpful that the current primary progress measure begins almost halfway through most children's time at primary school. Not only does this not take into

account the crucial first years of education, it actively discourages schools from maximising children's attainment at the end of Key Stage 1.

- 24 The views of teachers and school leaders on baseline assessment have inevitably been coloured by their experience of the government's previous attempt to introduce a Reception baseline. Some are sceptical of the whole concept of linear progression. Many remain to be convinced that it is possible to reliably and consistently assess such young children – and that the data from these assessments closely correlate with attainment seven years later. Most are concerned about the potential impact of Reception assessments on children's first experiences of school. All are opposed to any attempt to revisit the multiple supplier model proposed in 2015.
- 25 On balance, however, we are in favour of moving the input to the primary progress measure to Reception, provided the following conditions can be met:
- The Key Stage 1 assessments are made non-statutory, as proposed.
  - A single assessment is used for all schools.
  - The approach taken is appropriate and proportionate to the age of the children involved.
  - The approach taken is not excessively demanding in terms of workload for teachers and support staff.
  - Attention is paid to the extensive body of available research on the most reliable ways to assess young children.
  - The assessment is designed to assess the knowledge, skills and attributes – both academic and socio-emotional – which are most likely to predict future success.
  - Data from the assessment are proven to correlate strongly with the Key Stage 2 results.
  - The results of the assessments are provided to the school at a cohort level, but not at an individual pupil level. This is more appropriate, we believe, than the proposal in the consultation to completely 'black box' the results. It will help to schools to better understand how the prior attainment of their intake compares with other schools, and to anticipate their likely progress score, while avoiding the danger that individual children are 'labelled' as under-achieving at such a young age.
  - There is clear recognition that no single measure can be used to judge a school's performance, and a clear commitment that no decisions about a school will be taken on the basis of the progress measure alone.
- 26 Others are better placed to advise on the type of assessment which is most likely to fulfil these conditions. We would encourage the government, however, to be mindful of the fact that both test-based and observation-based models of assessment have their limitations.
- 27 The reliability of test-based models can be compromised by the fluctuations in young children's knowledge and memory, by their tendency to react impulsively to short-term emotional responses, by their lack of understanding of the importance of what they are being asked to do, and by the difficulty in asking questions which effectively isolate the knowledge or skill being tested from other information-processing skills.
- 28 Observation-based models are susceptible to cognitive bias, can require costly and time-consuming processes to standardise and moderate, and can be compromised when included as part of a high stakes accountability system.

- 29 Either model can tell us something about an individual pupil, more about a school's cohort, and more still about a national cohort – but neither is 100% reliable. To reiterate the final point in paragraph 25 above, it is imperative that all agencies involved in holding schools to account are aware of the limitations of testing young children, and therefore resist placing too much weight on a single measure based on such assessments.

#### **Question 6**

If we were to introduce a reception baseline, at what point in the reception year do you think it should be administered? In particular, we are interested in the impact on schools, pupils and teaching of administering the assessment at different times.

- 30 If the progress measure is genuinely to take into account the impact a school has on children throughout their time at the school, the baseline assessment needs to take place as early as possible. This needs to be balanced, however, with the importance of allowing children to settle in to their new school. Attempting to assess children in their first few weeks at school risks compromising both their wellbeing and the validity of the assessment.
- 31 We would recommend, therefore, that the assessment be administered in the second half of the autumn term, at individual teachers' discretion. Children starting Reception later in the school year should take the assessment once they've had a chance to settle in.

#### **Question 7**

Our view is that it would be difficult to change key stage 1 assessment in order that it could be used as the baseline for progress in the long term. If you disagree, what could be done to improve the key stage 1 assessments so that they would be sufficiently detailed, and trusted as a fair and robust baseline?

- 32 We share this view. The end of Year 2 is not the right time for a baseline assessment to take place, and the format of the current Key Stage 1 assessments does not lend itself to functioning as a reliable input measure (as the discrepancy between the Key Stage 1 results of infant and all-through primary schools demonstrates – see response to Question 10 below).

#### **Question 8**

If we were to introduce a new reception baseline measure, do you agree that we should continue to use key stage 1 teacher assessment data as the baseline for measuring progress in the interim years before a new measure was in place? If you disagree, what do you think we should use as the baseline instead?

- 33 We agree that this is the most sensible approach. The inevitable lag in being able to use a new Reception baseline in the progress measure is frustrating and, as outlined in our answer to the previous question, the current Key Stage 1 assessments are not fit for purpose. However, the disruption involved in introducing a different interim measure would outweigh any benefits in doing so.
- 34 Given these points, it is even more important in these interim years that undue weight is not placed on the progress measure, and that this is seen as simply one piece of data among many when holding schools to account.

### **Question 9**

If a baseline assessment is introduced in reception, in the longer term, would you favour removing the statutory requirement for all-through primary schools to administer assessments at the end of key stage 1?

- 35 We are in favour of making the Key Stage 1 assessments non-statutory for all-through primary schools if a Reception baseline were introduced. In many schools these assessments lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and can place unnecessary pressures on children and teachers.
- 36 Some school and MAT leaders, however, value the opportunity provided by the Key Stage 1 assessments to check on the progress and attainment of children at the mid-point of their time at primary school, and to benchmark the performance of their schools against others. The proposal that STA would continue to produce these assessments for schools to use if they choose is therefore welcome. It is imperative, however, that these assessments are genuinely perceived as optional, and that no pressure is applied on schools or trusts to administer them by the Department for Education, Ofsted, the Regional Schools Commissioners or any other body.

### **Question 10**

If we were to introduce a reception baseline to enable the creation of reception to key stage 2 progress measures for all-through primaries, what would be the most effective accountability arrangements for infant, middle and junior schools' progress measures?

- 37 The current accountability measures are already problematic for infant, junior and middle schools – and indeed also for all-through primaries whose results are compared against them. We know from analysis carried out by Education Datalab and others, for example, that Key Stage 1 results in infant schools are significantly higher than those in all-through primaries, with children much more likely to be assessed as working at greater depth (or previously as Level 3) in infant schools.
- 38 It's difficult not to conclude that this is a result of perverse incentives in action. Infant schools are incentivised to achieve the highest Key Stage 1 scores possible. Primary schools are incentivised to depress Key Stage 1 scores in order to maximise their progress scores. Junior schools bear the brunt of these differing incentives, making it extremely difficult for them to demonstrate good progress. Relying on teacher assessment as part of a high stakes accountability system, unfortunately, creates these types of problem.
- 39 The challenge, then, is to design and implement an approach to accountability which not only works with a new Reception baseline, but also addresses some of the anomalies in the current system. The principle should be to ensure that, as far as possible
- all schools are held to account for the progress they enable their pupils to make throughout their time at that school, and
  - all schools are subject to the same incentives.
- 40 There is no simple answer. We would encourage the Department for Education to take their time to consider possible approaches, and to fully assess their likely impact. In this spirit, we offer the three approaches below for consideration.

### Model 1

- 41 This approach would require a fundamental rethink of the current assessment and accountability system. The result, however, could be a much fairer and more accurate picture of the value added by different schools.
- 42 In this model, all schools would be encouraged to administer low stakes standardised annual progress assessments. They would be required to do so for children on entry and exit, and could choose to do so in intermediate years if they wished. A school's progress measure would be constructed using the distance travelled from children's performance on entry and on exit, whatever school years those corresponded with.

### Model 2

- 43 This model combines existing end of Key Stage 'output assessments' with standardised 'input assessments'. All schools, whatever age range they teach, would be required to administer a high-quality, age-appropriate, moderated baseline assessment to pupils on entry. This would take place in Reception for all-through primaries and infant schools, in Year 3 for junior schools and in Year 5 for middle schools. Each school could then be held to account for the progress they enable children to make from this baseline to the statutory assessments at the end of the relevant key stage. In other words:

Type of school	Input measure	Output measure
All-through primary	Reception baseline	Key Stage 2 assessments
Infant school	Reception baseline	Key Stage 1 assessments
Junior school	Year 3 baseline	Key Stage 2 assessments
Middle school	Year 5 baseline	Key Stage 2 assessments

### Model 3

- 44 This final model would hold all schools to account for the progress children make from their Reception baseline, that is:

Type of school	Input measure	Output measure
All-through primary	Reception baseline	Key Stage 2 assessments
Infant school	Reception baseline	Key Stage 1 assessments
Junior school	Reception baseline	Key Stage 2 assessments
Middle school	Reception baseline	Key Stage 2 assessments

- 45 This approach is not perfect, but it has the benefit of not requiring the development of further assessments while still levelling the playing field to some extent by ensuring that all schools are incentivised to behave in the same way. The following aspects would need to be carefully considered if this system were to be introduced:
- Some schools (all-through primaries and infant schools) would be solely responsible for the progress of children between the input and output measures. Others (junior and middle schools) would not. The resulting incentive for schools to work together more effectively could bring benefits, but could also lead to resentment. Mechanisms such as only directly comparing schools of the same type may need to be introduced to ensure fairness.
  - This approach would require making it statutory for infant schools to administer Key Stage 1 assessments, while potentially making these non-statutory in other types of school (as would Model 2).
  - The system would need to be able to track individual children through their education, so that they 'bring their Reception baseline with them' if they transfer



to a junior or middle school. This tracking would, though, have the additional benefit of addressing the issue of mobility, meaning all schools could be more effectively held to account for the progress of children who are actually in their school when they sit their statutory assessments.

- This approach is still not ideal for middle schools, as they would only have had children in their schools for two years when they are judged on their progress, and still have two further years in which their efforts aren't recognised. The first issue could be mitigated to some extent by only comparing middle schools against other middle schools. The second is insurmountable without a major (and undesirable) shake-up of accountability at Key Stage 3.

#### **Question 11**

Do you think that the department should remove the statutory obligation to carry out teacher assessment in English reading and mathematics at key stage 2, when only test data is used in performance measures?

- 46 Yes. Teachers will, of course, assess children themselves whether or not there is a statutory requirement to do so, and pupils and parents value these assessments. The obligation to assess the tested subjects against a standard framework, however, is unnecessary.

#### **Question 12**

Do you agree that the key stage 1 English grammar, punctuation and spelling test should remain non-statutory beyond the 2016 to 2017 academic year, with test papers available for teachers to use as they see fit?

- 47 Yes.

#### **Question 13**

At what point in key stage 2 do you think the multiplication tables check should be administered?

- 48 We do not believe that the introduction of a multiplication check is necessary or helpful. There is a clear requirement to teach times tables in the national curriculum, and universal agreement among primary teachers that rapid recall of multiplication facts is essential. Children's multiplication skills are already tested in the existing Key Stage 2 maths assessments. Teachers are well aware of which children have mastered their tables and which need further support to do so. An additional 'check' is not required.
- 49 If the government is determined to press ahead with this policy, however, we see little point in waiting until Year 6 to administer the check, when children in Year 6 already carry a heavy assessment load, and the national curriculum requires children to be fluent in their tables by the end of Year 4. The end of Year 4 or partway through Year 5 would be a more logical time for a check to take place.

#### **Question 14**

How can we ensure that the multiplication tables check is implemented in a way that balances burdens on schools with benefit to pupils?

- 50 As stated above, we see no benefit to pupils in introducing a multiplication tables check. If the policy were to go ahead, the approach proposed appears as light touch as it could be. We would certainly agree with the suggestion that the data from the check would not form part of the accountability system.

### **Question 15**

Are there additional ways, in the context of the proposed statutory assessments, that the administration of statutory assessments in primary schools could be improved to reduce burdens?

- 51 The most burdensome aspect of statutory assessments to primary teachers and leaders is the extent of the constant, poorly managed changes they have had to implement over the last few years. There is a clearly a balance to be achieved between improving a badly designed system and imposing yet more change on schools. Our responses to this consultation have been made with this in mind, recommending changes where necessary but encouraging continuity where possible.
- 52 As outlined in the introduction to our response, we believe that further change to the Key Stage 2 assessments, beyond those proposed in this consultation, may also be required. Our recently launched independent review of primary accountability will make recommendations on this in the autumn term.
- 53 We would encourage the government, however, once this current round of changes is complete, to implement a period of stability to allow the new assessments to bed in, and to give teachers, leaders, pupils and parents the time and space to become familiar with them.

### **Question 16**

Do you agree that the statutory assessment of writing should afford teachers greater flexibility in determining a pupil's overall standard of attainment than is currently the case? Please give reasons for your answer.

- 54 Yes. The proposed move back to a 'best fit' model for writing goes some way towards addressing the concerns many teachers and school leaders have over the disproportionate focus on the procedural aspects of writing in the interim assessment framework. 'Best fit' is not without its problems (like the previous National Curriculum-based model it can mask the detail of what children can and can't do), but it is a better indication of children's broader writing ability than 'secure fit'.
- 55 Given the problems in 2016 and 2017 with consistency around the application and moderation of the writing framework, however, we would urge caution on the use of the data from these assessments, whether a 'secure fit' or a 'best fit' model is used. Schools, understandably, have lost all confidence in the accuracy and robustness of the writing assessments. These should be excluded from the accountability measures unless and until this confidence can be restored.

### **Question 17**

Please give details of any robust alternative approaches to the assessment of English writing, which the Department for Education should explore.

- 56 We have been following with interest the ongoing pilots of comparative judgement. This approach appears to have some significant benefits in enabling schools to accurately and consistently assess children's writing. We would encourage the Department for Education to explore this approach, and particularly to consider how it might perform when used in a high-stakes context, which so far remains untested.

- 57 Our members are clear that test-based approaches to writing at Key Stage 1 or 2 should not be considered. Such approaches are either open to subjective application of a mark scheme or overly reliant on assessing the technical aspects of writing, and are therefore not fit for purpose.
- 58 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Julie McCulloch  
Primary and Governance Specialist  
Association of School and College Leaders  
20 June 2017  
Primary assessment consultation – ASCL response