

The biggest test of all



If Britain is to prosper in the future we will need sharper assessment tools to make sure pupils are developing essential basic skills.

Andrew Thraves investigates the Assessing Pupils' Progress scheme

The UK is currently ranked 14th in the international league tables of literacy and numeracy and the Government is investing billions to improve these essential basic skills. However, according to a newly published report by the Public Accounts Committee, progress in tackling this issue has been slow, and research has shown that many adults in England remain functionally illiterate and innumerate.

One way to improve the UK's attainment of basic skills is for school leaders to use more effective strategies for monitoring pupils' progress. This will help to ensure that children get the best possible learning support during their critical school years.

Mandatory Key Stage 3 standard assessment tests (SATs) have been abolished and schools are now being encouraged to look at a balanced combination of assessment and regular





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identify problems with learning more quickly than classroom observation alone. This process allows teachers to build up a clearer picture of their pupils’ individual needs, which can then be used to ensure that every child makes good progress in their learning.

Ian says: “As we move on, teachers will become much more secure in trusting their judgement, trusting their range of evidence and being much more secure in what they’re doing and coming up with something that really represents that child, no matter what a test says.”

The Making Good Progress pilot offers a range of additional support, such as one-to-one tuition, to those pupils who are behind national expectations or whose progress has stalled.

This can help prevent children who might be struggling with their basic skills from falling through the net. It also makes sure that gifted and talented pupils are engaged and challenged, to boost their achievement too.

Steve, the deputy head from another pilot school, says: “The results of the project so far have really convinced the staff that it’s the right way to go. They’re reporting that their evidence and their knowledge of children is far greater than it was before, and that their teaching is far more geared towards the children’s needs.”

The APP initiative enables teachers to make reliable judgements of what a child has achieved based on the evidence they have collected in class and their discussions with colleagues. The APP assessments support teachers in this task and are intended to give them tools for effective assessment, rather than outlining specific learning objectives.

A number of existing paper-based or online standardised pupil assessments will measure a child’s attainment in terms of their National Curriculum levels and scores. These include GL Assessment’s *Progress in English* and *Progress in Maths*. Teachers can use these tests as part of the evidence gathering process and to support their own judgements.

methods for teachers to check their pupils’ achievement in the key curriculum subjects. As part of the Making Good Progress initiative, the Government has been piloting the Assessing Pupils’ Progress (APP) scheme in 10 local authorities. The first phase of the scheme has focused on raising attainment in Key Stage 2 and 3 English and maths.

Ian, a headteacher from one of the schools involved in the pilot, says: “I haven’t really had to crack the whip to get people involved. People have seen that APP makes their lives easier, and the sorts of conversations in the staff room are: ‘Well, I’ve found out much more information about that child now. I now know why that child’s making progress.’”

A major advantage of the APP initiative is that it is designed to reduce the emphasis on end-of-Key-Stage assessments and support teachers in judging soundly what their pupils are achieving within lessons.

Drawing on evidence based on classroom observation, teachers regularly gather information on their pupils’ learning. This can include what teachers hear and observe in class, which is just as important as what pupils are able to write. They can also make use of the standardised and diagnostic tests that are available, which can perhaps



Testing windows

The Making Good Progress pilot has tried so-called single level tests, which give an indication of how assessment might be approached in the future. Once teachers have completed their classroom assessments and are confident that their pupils have reached a certain level of achievement, each child will be entered for the relevant single level test to confirm this. Two 'testing windows' are proposed for each year, so teachers would be able to put their pupils forward when they feel they are ready.

Research has shown that children who understand where they are in the learning process and know what they need to do to raise their attainment can often achieve more. Teachers working in schools that implement APP will be able to share with their pupils the accurate and up-to-date information gained from their class assessments and observations, giving learners a greater opportunity to discuss any problems they might be having in a particular subject area. This will help each child value what they have achieved so far and encourage them to take more responsibility for their learning progress moving forward.

The detailed information that schools using APP will gather on their pupils' ongoing progress can be incredibly powerful in encouraging parents to support their children's learning at home. Parents' involvement is vital to good progress in literacy and numeracy. If a child falls behind in these key subjects, this can have implications for their achievement in many other areas of the curriculum.

Another headteacher, Lin, says: "This is definitely the way forward because the evidence is there in terms of the progress that children are making, whether that's looking

at what children are producing in terms of their work, the conversations that you have with them, or even the levels that they get at the end of a Key Stage."

Schools wanting to implement APP will need to set up systems that let teachers check their pupils' progress quickly and easily as they learn. The introduction of e-assessment can also support this aim. Online testing can be carried out simply – and it can save time for teachers, as scores are instantly available for analysis. A number of assessments are specifically designed to allow teachers to check their pupils' knowledge and understanding of a topic once it has been covered in class.

"What has particularly come out of the project," says Lin, "is that teachers have really honed their assessment skills in terms of making judgements about the children, and that's not purely looking at children's written work. There are a whole range of evidence sources that are being used."

The face of educational assessment is changing and many schools are keen to embrace a shift in the focus away from the end-of-Key-Stage test. APP is the first step in putting the responsibility for monitoring pupils' achievement back in the hands of teachers. It heralds a new era of greater flexibility in how schools provide learning support for pupils in the essential basic skills, as well as many other subjects across the curriculum.

Andrew Thraves is group head of publishing at GL Assessment, which provides a broad range of standardised pupil tests that support teacher-led assessment across the curriculum: see www.gl-assessment.co.uk