



Case Study Making a difference with NGRT



Using the New Group Reading Test to support teacher assessment and aid intervention

Following its last inspection, Torfaen Local Authority has been focused on improving performance across its 33 schools. Here, Torfaen's Head of Learning, Sharon Davies, explains why they introduced the *New Group Reading Test* (NGRT) to support teacher assessment and provide them with extra diagnostic information to aid intervention.

Located in south east Wales, Torfaen borders the city council of Newport, the county of Monmouthshire and the county boroughs of Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent. The employment rate in Torfaen is 65% and 25% of children live in workless households.

Torfaen's last inspection report found that performance in secondary schools was among the lowest in Wales on four of the five main indicators set by the Welsh Government, and too many schools were in the bottom quarter for performance when compared to similar schools. Addressing these issues has been a clear focus for the local authority ever since.

Teacher assessment

Across Wales, teacher assessment is a huge focus for schools, local authorities and consortia alike, and it forms an essential part of annual target-setting. However, following the publication of the National

Reading and Numeracy Tests 2014 results, it was clear that schools in Torfaen needed to review their approach to teacher assessment.

Sharon Davies, Head of Learning at Torfaen LA, explains: "In 2014, our National Reading and Numeracy results showed a large discrepancy between our teacher assessment projections and our actual test results. While teacher assessment placed Torfaen first in the country, our results placed us 16th out of the 22 local authorities in Wales. Clearly this was something we needed to address and we wanted to do it collaboratively, working in partnership with our schools."

Sharon believed that teachers needed an additional, reliable, independent benchmark to inform their judgements. As such, she introduced a standardised assessment across the LA - the *New Group Reading Test*. The core objectives were to support teachers' own assessment, to provide important diagnostic information that would help to inform teaching, and to provide an additional means to identify children with Additional Learning Needs. In all, 24 primary schools and 5 secondary schools took part.

"We believe that of our schools should have hard evidence on which to base their target-setting,"

says Sharon. "We need to have a robust benchmark and we need to be outcome driven. How can you monitor progress effectively if you don't have a clear starting point? This is what NGRT gives us. It's a highly valuable check and balance."

Why NGRT?

NGRT is a screening and monitoring test for children aged 5 - 14 years. It assesses reading and comprehension in a single test and it comprises three sections: phonics, sentence completion and passage comprehension. Test results provide teachers with a comprehensive overview of a pupil's reading and comprehension ability while providing a wealth of diagnostic information identifying areas where they may be experiencing difficulties.

Importantly, it measures how a pupil is performing compared to peers of exactly the same age across the country. It also allows teachers to make a direct comparison between a pupil's scores at the first point of testing and then at the second point of testing. This means that you can see clearly where progress has been maintained (in other words, where the Standard Age Score is the same or very close to that for the first test session) or where pupils have made above or below average progress.



“We decided to administer NGRT in January 2015 so that we could use the data as mid-year marker, with the National Tests every summer,” explains Sharon. “We now know where our weaknesses are and how we can address them sooner than we could before.”

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Working collaboratively

Sharon was determined that the project should be a collaborative effort between the LA, schools and the South East Wales Consortia.

“I’ve been amazed by the commitment from the heads,” she says. “They like seeing where their children are performing and where there are weaknesses. If there are any surprises, they can address them, too. Interventions can make a big difference even in three to four months.”

“Teachers also like the fact that the tests are marked externally.

It means that everyone is taking the test under exactly the same conditions, and we need that for our results to have an impact. As is often the case with teacher assessment, teachers tend to want to give their pupils the benefit of the doubt. However, using NGRT ensures everyone is on an equal playing field.”

Identifying Additional Learning Needs

NGRT is available in paper or digital format, and the vast majority of Torfaen schools opted for the digital version. NGRT Digital is also adaptive; in other words, children see different questions depending on how they move through the test. This has a number of benefits.

“Using the digital version of the assessment gave children confidence,” explains Sharon. “When you have a child with an Additional Learning Need or a child with a lower ability, their confidence can get easily knocked. With the questions changing according to their capacity to answer the questions, it’s a comfortable journey for them – they’re not aware that they are doing different questions.”

“We need to make sure we’re doing everything we can for our learners, otherwise we’re not being fair to them. They need more – and this is what we’re continually aiming for.”

The diagnostic information and narrative reports has indeed meant that NGRT has enabled the LA to identify children who should have been on the SEN Register and put the relevant interventions in place.

Making a difference

Having started the process in January 2015, Torfaen is seeing positive signs already.

“This summer, our teacher assessment was much more accurate,” Sharon explains. “We moved from placing ourselves first in the country to a more realistic 21st, and we all have a much better grasp of where we were. Our results didn’t show any surprises, which is what we were looking for. We were on track.”

Torfaen has also seen an uplift of 3% in their KS4 Level 2 (including English and Maths) results. “As results were fairly static across Wales, we were pleased with a 3% uplift but we have a way to go,” Sharon says. “We’re currently at 56.4% and our target is for 61% to break the 60% barrier. We need to start in primary, though. If we tackle issues in primary, we can sustain the uplift.”

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