



CRUNCHED BY NUMBERS?

**HOW EFFECTIVE DATA CAN REDUCE
TEACHER WORKLOAD**



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Foreword

Geoff Barton, General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders

We know that teachers have always worked long hours and put a great deal of effort into curriculum planning, preparing lessons and assessing pupils' work.

But in recent years, something has changed for the worse. The impact of an increasingly high-stakes accountability system has changed teachers' perception of the reasons they do all this work.

What was once a focus on pupils and their learning has become an exercise in fuelling accountability – of filling in data forms as a kind of obsessive auditing culture.

And we know from national surveys and local feedback that teachers are voting with their feet. Too many are leaving the profession within a few years of qualifying, putting enormous strain on schools which then try to recruit from scratch, wasting huge amounts of money on teacher training and diminishing the pool of great teachers for our nation's children.

Data is often cited by teachers as one of the key areas which drives excessive workload, but there needs to be nuance here. It's not that teachers are opposed to data. They recognise the value of useful, accessible information that supports and shapes the learning of their pupils and shines a light on areas pupils may get stuck on.

In particular, standardised assessments such as those offered by GL Assessment can bring a wealth of information to teachers about their pupils, in turn helping those pupils to do better.

I would suggest that there are three steps we need to take with data.

First, we must stop using bad data – full stop. Obsessive data-drops say little that is meaningful about pupils and providing false notions of their progress need to go. A limited number of really powerful assessments through the year is much more meaningful.

The second step is to stop using good data in ways which are unhelpful or unsound. For example, GCSE targets for individual pupils based on national data can sometimes be motivating and helpful but aggregating those targets to form part of a teacher's performance management is inappropriate.

Thirdly, we must all undertake to use good data wisely, being discerning about what can and can't be inferred and knowing the limits of that data.

This report is firmly at the wise end of the list.

Workload: teachers have their say



No one connected with education can be in any doubt that excessive teacher workload is a serious problem. In recent years, both Ofsted and the Department for Education have devoted time and resources into investigating the issue. Both have concluded that, if left unchecked, workload can have a seriously damaging effect on teacher wellbeing, morale and retention.

There isn't much mystery over the causes of excessive teacher workload. According to the government's own Workload Challenge, 53% of teachers cite the "excessive/depth of marking" and 56% blame "recording, inputting, monitoring and analysing data" as the chief culprits¹.

If there is general agreement on the workload problem and its causes, however, there is little sign that it has been effectively addressed. In fact, according to the OECD's latest international survey this summer, teacher workload in England has actually increased². In the wake of its findings, Damian Hinds, the former Secretary of State for Education, pledged to do more.

What, then, can be done to reduce teacher workload, and specifically the component of their working lives that teachers say contributes most to it – the recording, inputting, monitoring and analysing of data? To find out, GL Assessment commissioned pollsters YouGov to ask a representative sample of teachers how much time they spent dealing with data, what their attitudes to it were, how they felt their school dealt with assessment and so on³.

Main findings

800 senior leaders and classroom teachers in secondary and primary schools were polled by YouGov over a three-week period in June and July of 2019. They confirmed that marking and data collation are still seen as the biggest causes of excessive workload.

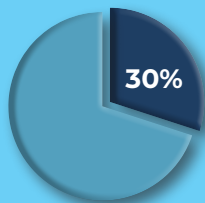
A third of teachers say tackling data issues would have the biggest impact on their workload, second only to marking (32% vs 38%). In fact, three in ten (30%) said they spend more time recording, analysing and monitoring data than they do preparing for lessons.

Teachers are divided over whether they think their school takes workload seriously as an issue – a third think they do (32%) but slightly more think they don't (38%).

Three-quarters of teachers (75%) say their schools expect them to co-ordinate and oversee assessments, with little difference between secondary and primary schools. Just over a tenth (12%) say they don't. And seven in ten teachers (68%) think schools could do more to make assessments less time-consuming for teachers.

That finding isn't surprising when you consider the time teachers say they spend on assessment. On average our respondents say they spend six hours and 48 minutes testing and assessing students every week. Across a 39-week school year that is the equivalent of more than 265 hours.

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Almost seven in ten teachers (68%) are asked to submit assessment data once a term. But a fifth (20%) have to submit data at least once a month and a few (3%) once a week, despite advice from the DfE that schools “should not have more than two or three data collection points a year”⁴.

Perhaps even more surprising, given Ofsted’s repeated warnings about schools relying on non-standardised internal assessments, over half of secondary school teachers (54%) and a third of primary school teachers (32%) say their schools write their own progress tracking assessments. Though the fact that almost half of all respondents (48%) admit they find Ofsted’s advice on data and assessment in the new framework confusing could partly explain their prevalence.

Effective data

Nevertheless, despite the demands over-assessment and bad data practices make on their time, teachers are not ‘anti-data’. On the contrary, most recognise its value. Six in ten teachers (61%), rising to seven in ten senior leaders (70%), agree that data can help them do their jobs more effectively. Less than a fifth (18%) disagree.

Moreover, almost half (48%) find it easy to use assessments to understand pupil progress and put in place the necessary interventions – and less than a sixth (16%) do not. This echoes a similar finding from an earlier study by GL Assessment, which found that three-quarters of teachers acknowledged that data had highlighted pupil issues that they hadn’t been aware of previously⁵.

The majority of teachers (58%) say their school has at least one member of staff primarily responsible for data collection and analysis – in line with official recommendations – only a quarter say they don’t (24%). In secondary schools that rises to 69% but falls to 49% in primary schools.

By a margin of 3:1, teachers say their school shares assessment reports with parents (61% vs 20%). Conversely, well over half (57%) say parents don’t really understand the way their school reports on children’s progress, or understand why their school assesses in the way it does (51%).

Conclusion

Our survey clearly supports the findings of other national and international studies – teacher workload remains a problem and ways to address it remain, for many, elusive. Ineffective data and assessment practices continue to blight schools and teaching in ways that are ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst.

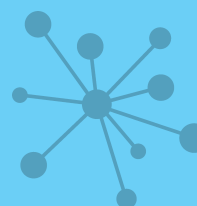
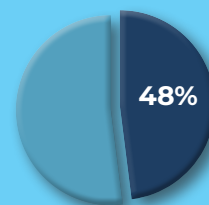
Nevertheless, there is cause for optimism. The vast majority of teachers are not ‘anti-data’ – they want consistency and clarity over its use. Most professionals appreciate that targeted assessments, well designed and used sparingly, can inform and enhance their practice and lead to better student outcomes. Moreover, effective assessments can reduce workload rather than add to it.

Footnotes

1. Workload Challenge, DfE, February 2015
2. Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), June 2019, OECD
3. Research was commissioned by GL Assessment and carried out online by YouGov among a random sample of 801 UK teaching professionals between 26 June and 11 July 2019
4. Ways to Reduce Workload in Your School(s), DfE, March 2019
5. Smart Data, GL Assessment, April 2016



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View from a MAT

What does effective assessment look like from a Trust perspective? Maria Roberts outlines how her MAT is using assessment to drive improvement and support teacher retention.

The Woodard Academies Trust is responsible for six state schools, the majority of which were in special measures when the Trust took them over, says Maria Roberts, Director of School Improvement, but which are now improving. The schools are spread throughout the country from the North East to the South Coast, but Maria says Sir Robert Woodard Academy in West Sussex is typical.

"It serves a mainly white, working-class coastal community. Sixty per cent of the students are boys, attainment on entry is lower than average and aspiration can be low. It's a very tough demographic," she says. And improvement takes time, "quick fixes aren't fixes". But Headteacher Kieran Scanlon is turning the academy around – the quality of teaching is stronger, recruitment of staff is less challenging and numbers on roll are increasing – "all the metrics are going in the right direction".

Staff retention and recruitment have been key. "Previously, no one wanted to go and work at the school," Maria says. "But Kieran has made the school somewhere where NQTs and other recruits want to be in and to stay. Young teachers know that you will be supported and your workload will be manageable."

The role of assessment

Smart assessment has played a crucial part in that strategy, she says. "As a Trust we're conscious that we have to make sure staff workload is manageable, and that involves ensuring no one feels obliged to do things or processes just for the sake of it. You have to be absolutely ruthless and cut out any superfluous system that doesn't give you good or useful information."

Maria said this entails doing "sensible assessments that mean something, less frequently, which in turn means we now have more teaching time". The Trust now collects performance data centrally three times a year (it used to be six) – "but even though we have less it tells us more".

At a Trust level, she says, her colleagues and trustees need to know the bigger picture as far as assessment is concerned. Is the assessment system a school adopts sensible, useful and manageable? And if it is, are children making the progress they are expected to make, and if they're not, which specific aspects need addressing?

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What's more, she says, that process has to be rapid and 'nimble'. "We need to have that assessment information quickly, so interventions happen before the gaps grow even bigger. We have to be reactive at KS3 – because at KS4 it's too late."

"For us knowledge about how well pupils are doing at KS3 is crucial. We have had a range of systems across our schools, some of which are confusing for colleagues and parents, overly complex and quite subjective. The beauty of a standardised test is that it shows clear evidence of progress in aspects such as literacy, Maths and Science and also allows schools to benchmark students nationally, as well as allowing the Trust to compare schools within the group." Maria also points out, that data on behaviour and attitudes can be just as illuminating as progress data – "especially when you link attitudinal PASS data with academic outcomes".

Making things simple

Maria says that GL Assessment provides data which is more targeted and user-friendly in aspects such as Maths, reading and spelling.

"Life is a lot easier now, because teachers have a common understanding of what they are doing and what assessments are for. A few years ago, schools that were in challenging circumstances tended to assess everything all the time – often in a very subjective way. Staff were on a hamster wheel of repeat assessments and had almost lost the ability to ask what it was they were for or what the data was telling them." Because teachers didn't own assessment, she says, they too often felt that they weren't required to think about whether assessment was useful.

Nor, in Maria's opinion, did the constant drumbeat of frequent assessment – the revising, testing and post mortems on those tests – help students who were struggling. "Children who weren't learning well would get another affirmation six weeks later that they weren't learning well – and then often nothing would happen. So weak learners just got confirmation they were struggling."

Ultimately, she says, assessment cannot be bolted on, and getting it right is essential. "What Kieran has done at Sir Robert Woodard is to grasp that what we teach and how it is assessed is at least as important as how we teach."

View from a headteacher

How can schools use assessment to reduce teacher workload? Headteacher Kieran Scanlon explains the key role effective assessment has played in turning around a struggling school in West Sussex

When headteacher Kieran Scanlon first joined Sir Robert Woodard Academy five years ago, the school wasn't in great shape. The school had drifted in and out of special measures for five years, student intake was falling and staff morale was low. But this wasn't because colleagues didn't want to improve or were unwilling to put in the effort to make improvement happen. On the contrary.

"People were working extremely hard," says Kieran. "The problem was that there was a very directive approach about how to teach, what to teach and when to teach. I think a kind of paralysis had set in."

Kieran believes that schools that are Requires Improvement, like Sir Robert Woodard, often make the mistake of focusing on rapid progress that isn't sustainable, doesn't work and runs staff ragged. As a new head, he realised that he had to adopt a long-term vision which acknowledged that a student's time at the school was a five-year journey rather than an exam-focused sprint which neglected Key Stage 3.

Kieran knew that if the school was to get on a sustainable path to recovery, he had to go back to essentials – "to go back to what we were teaching and why we were teaching it. We had a group of talented teachers teaching in a very restrictive way and we weren't allowing them to be as creative as they might be or allowing them to really enjoy their subjects."

Before the school grappled with the 'how' he decided they had to discuss the 'why'. He encouraged colleagues to discuss why they taught, "the moral purpose of the job, the self-belief, why they liked their subjects". It was pretty abstract stuff, he says, but it was essential to get under the bonnet, to understand what we wanted to achieve and why. "That started the ball rolling," he says. "It signalled to everybody that we were going to take a different approach."

Why assess?

Asking 'why' was particularly pertinent when it came to assessment. "I think a lot of the workload issues are around how schools do assessment," Kieran says. "Where it's done well, where it has a genuine impact and gives teachers good information about who they're teaching, everybody appreciates that. But where you are doing something that doesn't have an obvious benefit to anyone other than external accountability systems, I don't think people are interested in it."

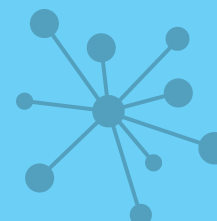
Kieran says he's not surprised so many teachers in GL Assessment's YouGov poll agreed that addressing data issues would have a positive impact on their workload. Most teachers, he says, are prepared to put in a lot of work if it means they get better as a teacher and their students do really well. "But where teachers are being asked to do things that aren't about improving things in the classroom, that is hard work."



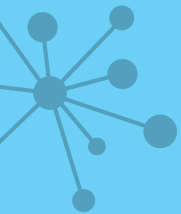
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Kieran says another key step in making data work for the teacher rather than vice versa was to define clearly what assessment was and to allot separate tasks to different people. “Assessment is such a big word; there’s so much in it. We spent a lot of time breaking assessment down into its various forms – ipsative, evaluative, formative or summative. We wanted absolute clarity about why we were assessing students and what it was for.”

As headteacher, for instance, the information Kieran needs most to communicate with governors, with his Trust and with Ofsted, is evaluative data. “And I don’t need that much of it. I just need to know start and end points and something in between to see how well we’re doing.”

Light-touch summative assessments were made the responsibility of the school’s curriculum directors and he gave the ownership of pretty much every other type of assessment back to the classroom teacher, “where it belongs”. Kieran says the school tries to avoid duplication where possible “but just by separating the different types of assessment we’ve become much clearer about what it’s for and why we’re doing it.”

Getting ahead is also crucial. When he first joined the school, Kieran says, there was a culture of very fast-moving assessment cycles “but they left no time for re-teaching, no time for genuine moderation – they just hadn’t got far enough ahead of themselves”. Now, the school is a year ahead. “Assessment for next year is done. We know today in every year group, probably in every subject, what the assessment looks like for the whole year.”

Highlighting the red flags

Kieran points out that all data at Sir Robert Woodard is shared live and is available to all teachers. Focus, however, is key, particularly on those children who have been ‘red-flagged’. The school compares Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4) data with Progress Test Series data to spot any discrepancies, which tend to be around 10% in any cohort.

“If you’re a typical classroom teacher and you’re teaching a foundation subject, you might be seeing 400 or 500 students a week, especially at KS3 – so just really highlighting those students helps. Even if you aren’t teaching in a core subject, you’ll be teaching 200 students. You need the red flags there, you need to know who those students are.”

He says the school has sometimes just focused on one specific student, and extrapolated the lessons learnt to children who are similar. “In our Inset days we will look at the 10% we’ve identified in Year 7. We will look at what they have done over the summer and what we need to do to make sure they’re successful in Year 8. And we’ll just keep checking in on them.”

When it comes to data, Kieran says, “the biggest difference is always going to be that a classroom teacher has clocked if a kid has an issue and made an adjustment. That’s the thing that’s going to make the biggest difference. Good assessment just ensures the teachers have the necessary information.”



Reaping the rewards

One of the biggest benefits of changing the way the school approaches assessment, Kieran says, is that he and his colleagues are now as motivated by what the data at Key Stage 3 is showing them as they were in the past about data around GCSEs and A-levels. “We are as excited about seeing the names of those who are doing well at the end of the lower years and as equally motivated to do things for those who aren’t doing so well. In some respects, it’s even more rewarding because you get to do something about it.”

What he likes about GL Assessment’s digital tests is that they are “very quick, very tidy”, that comparisons can be made across all years and multiple subjects, and that they are statistically robust and benchmarked to national standards. He says adopting them has made a big difference, especially at KS3, where assessments tended to be teacher-led rather than nationally benchmarked.

Kieran cautions, however, that embedding change takes time. “It doesn’t happen very quickly. Just being honest about where this information is going to be most useful and to make sure that everyone was coming with us probably took us at least a year. A year fixing assessment and another two years to change the schemes of work – so three years in total.” The secret, he advises, is to get a year ahead.

The future

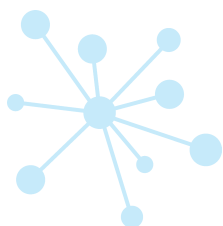
Thanks to the changes he and his colleagues have made, Kieran says the future for Sir Robert Woodard Academy is bright.

“We’ve had a huge increase in student enrolment. In Year 7 we’re going to have 295 compared to 161 in Year 11. And people are staying; we’re now fully staffed.” Reducing teacher workload, has been key, Kieran says. “We’re very classroom teacher focused – they are the most important people in the school – they are the ones we want to invest in.”

Kieran thinks that good, thought-through assessment has played a big part in reducing teacher workload and changing round the fortunes of the school. But he says schools can easily get it wrong.

“We talk about being an evidence-based culture but doing it is a different thing.” Basing performance on evidence requires schools to take a look at several years’ worth of data and compare it to the national average. “You actually have to have the numbers,” he says. “If assessment is feeding through to a culture that’s evidence-based that’s great, and good data is giving teachers the tools to help them make a difference and that’s about job satisfaction.”

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View from a teacher

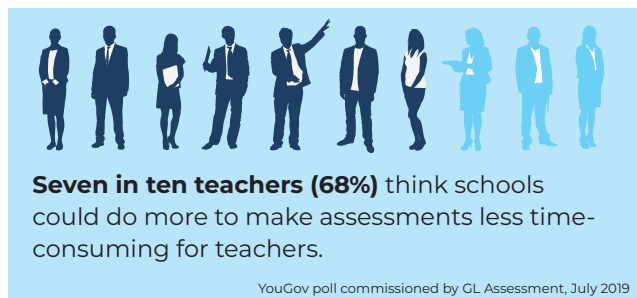
What does effective assessment look like from a teacher's perspective? Phil Daniell explains that if a school gets it right, the impact on workload can be big

Phil Daniell, Curriculum Director of Maths, joined Sir Robert Woodard Academy two years ago, when the school was beginning its journey of improvement under headteacher Kieran Scanlon. Getting the right approach to assessment was key to that improvement because, as Phil explains, data issues can have a significant negative impact if they are not handled in the appropriate way.

"From a workload aspect, if a teacher doesn't see the value of assessment or the reason why they're doing it, they begrudge the time spent on it. Looking at the data, we're continually asking 'what's the point, what's its purpose?'"

Staff don't mind doing assessment, Phil says, if they see the benefit and the reason for it. "It's when you think you're just going through the process for the sake of it that there's a problem."

He says a problem he's witnessed elsewhere is the amount of time teachers spend "looking at data that means nothing". "I've seen assessments that are so complex no one knew what the gradings were – so nobody knew what it meant or how to improve."



'How' as well as 'why'

Besides making staff aware of why the school is doing assessment and for what purpose, Phil says that how assessment is carried out has been just as important as far as workload is concerned. Not least, centralising assessments has made a big difference to colleagues' teaching load.

"Reducing the number of people that need to be involved really helps. If assessment isn't centralised you need chains of communication to go through, with a lot of to-ing and fro-ing. And if you ask your staff to create their own end-of-year assessments, you're expecting too much from them. You can't expect them to be objective."



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Phil also advises that schools should reduce the number of data drops to once a term and he queries why schools would do more. "Anecdotally, the number of data drops at other schools seems to be very burdensome. You have to ask why, who is it for, for what benefit?"

It's not a question of less data but how it is collated and used. "There is actually more data available for us now, but teachers' workload is much less because the admin is done by the data team, it's all done in advance and what is provided to teachers is streamlined and pertinent."

Phil also points to things like pupil reports, which now concentrate on the core aspects of a child's development. "And it's reduced teacher workload considerably."

Standardised assessments

Benchmarking using standardised assessments is essential, Phil says. "When you run your own internal assessments, you don't have the confidence that your judgements will be reliable. Now we can get a reliable picture of where our students are currently at and where they would map to nationally."

He also agrees that data must be used to supplement a teacher's judgement rather than replace it. "Given the amount of decisions we make as teachers, the more information we have the better. Pupil performance can vary from one day to the next, though, so we can't take it too literally. Assessment is a powerful snapshot but it's a snapshot taken in context."

But he is in no doubt that more effective data has been crucial in reducing teacher workload and putting the school firmly on a path to recovery. Morale, Phil says, has never been higher. "Even though the school requires improvement, kids are happy, staff are happy, lessons are great. What you have is a school that is really changing, the kids know, the parents know, the teachers know, it's a school that is really improving."

Kieran's top 10 tips – how to use assessment to reduce teacher workload

- **Be clear what assessment is for** – good assessment is intended to give usable information to a classroom teacher to enable them to improve teaching and learning. If the purpose isn't clear, or if it doesn't benefit students and teachers, it just adds to workload
- **Be precise about what type of assessment it is** – 'assessment' is a very imprecise term. Do you mean formative assessment, summative, evaluative, or ipsative? Each has a role to play but not every assessment is appropriate for every setting
- **Be empowering** – teachers work best when they are allowed to be the creative professionals they are. If all your assessment does is tick external accountability boxes, don't be surprised if your colleagues don't buy into it
- **Be focused** – less is more, so don't over assess. Guidance from the DfE and Ofsted suggests that one data collection point a term is generally sufficient
- **Plan in advance** – get a year ahead if you can, then the information gathered can be more effectively managed. Assess at the end of the academic year for the next, alert colleagues and parents well in advance, manage assessments carefully between subjects
- **Share data with colleagues** – it's important your colleagues constantly have access to live data if you want them to get the most out of it and to inform their practice
- **Share data with parents** – parents naturally want to know how their children are doing. But too much detail can be confusing and data in isolation isn't informative. Aim for a happy medium
- **Be upfront** – explain to students why you're assessing them and what you are looking for. Students have to know why they are doing things if they are going to be motivated to do them. That is as true of assessment as it is for everything else
- **Be ambitious** – don't use data solely with exams in mind. Use it to build up a complete picture of a child – their social interactions, behaviours, extra-curricular activities – as well as their academic potential – and over the course of their entire school career
- **Be honest** – putting in place good assessment takes time and there are limitations. The best data isn't a substitute for professional judgment. It can enhance, inform, focus and target appropriate interventions and is designed to complement teacher judgement not replace it



Top (non-assessment) tips for reducing workload

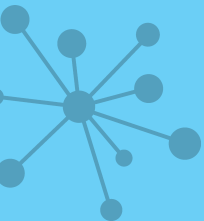
- **Cut the working day** – Kieran sliced 20 minutes off the end of the school day – classes finish at 3pm
- **Invest in teacher health** – the school now has a full-time wellbeing lead for teachers and offers staff regular health checks
- **Use Inset days judiciously** – they are spread throughout the year and no longer feature many outside consultants
- **Share best practice** – lesson plans are worked on collaboratively and peer observations are encouraged
- **Harness parent power** – most parents want to help but don't know how to. But if schools communicate clearly and explain what is needed, parents can play a part in targeted interventions like quizzes, for example

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What I like about GL Assessment's digital tests is that they are very quick, that comparisons can be made across all years and multiple subjects, and that they are statistically robust and benchmarked to national standards.

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Kieran Scanlon, Headteacher,
Sir Robert Woodard Academy



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How GL Assessment can help you

The Sir Robert Woodard Academy is a fantastic example of the way GL Assessment works with schools to provide teachers with the information they need, and free up more time to plan and teach, reducing workload in the process.

We have been providing schools with trusted assessments for almost 40 years. Our assessments, many of which are now available digitally, provide instant scoring and advice for next steps, removing the burden of marking and analysis. In all, we've delivered over 10 million online tests in the last five years. That's half a billion questions that teachers haven't had to mark.

Sir Robert Woodard uses our KS3 Assessment Package, which is specifically designed for the crucial first years at secondary school. It includes our most popular digital tests – our *Cognitive Abilities Test®* (CAT4), *Progress Test Series®* (covering English, maths and science), *New Group Reading Test®* (NGRT), *New Group Spelling Test®* (NGST) and our *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School®* (PASS) attitudinal measure.

Together, these assessments can identify your students' potential achievement, measure their attainment and progress in core subjects, and uncover any barriers to learning they may have, so you can plan appropriate interventions.

Find out more:

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