ANOTHER LEVEL

THE OPPORTUNITY TO CHOOSE THEIR OWN ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK COULD OPEN SOME EXCITING DOORS FOR SCHOOLS, SUGGESTS JAMES BELL...

Now is the time that teachers are starting to think about how they will adapt to the challenges of the new academic year. Significant changes to the curriculum have come into play across the board and one change in particular will take some consideration to make it work on the ground; the removal of traditional levels and descriptors from the curriculum without a replacement.

There is a chasm between testing students and students learning, but the best assessments provide a bridge between the two. The Department for Education believes existing levels have become too abstract with ambiguous criteria, and are complicated and difficult to understand. This single approach to assessment has been removed, and instead it will be for schools to decide how they assess pupils' progress.

What matters

The new approach is an opportunity for schools to measure students' progress based on the criteria they believe is important. Schools can freely choose their own assessment framework to incorporate measurement of the needs, skills and criteria that will work best in their school environment. However, finding a way that is easy for teachers to use and helps better communicate progress and achievement to students and their parents is not a simple task. This has left some feeling unsure of what approach to take and how to embrace it. When we surveyed teachers earlier this year only 14% said they had a clear understanding of what Ofsted and Government will require from schools in light of the changes in assessment.

However, as we found in our own research, there is information out there that can help. Ofsted has issued some guidance about what they expect to form the basis of assessment in schools; any new assessment criteria must collect relevant data, be consistently applied and stand up to scrutiny. Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, also made clear in his speech at the North of England Education Conference in January that he expects schools to base their new assessments on both continuous assessment and summative tests. He particularly emphasised regular testing as an essential tool to allow teachers to measure progress and inform future teaching.

A school's new assessment framework will need to be built into the school curriculum, so

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that schools can check what pupils have learned. Ofsted inspections will also be informed by whatever pupil tracking data schools choose to keep, so clear measurement of progression is an essential criteria. The key for any school is finding a system that will reliably track progress both for day to day teaching and Ofsted inspections whilst remaining time effective and easy to implement for teachers.

Some schools are developing their own internal points systems to track and measure progress. Others are planning to use tools which use online skills test to tell teachers how their students compare with other UK schools and track progress. Any and all of these are valid frameworks if applied consistently and reliably.

All in

Whatever schools choose to use, the key will be ensuring that the system implemented has the full buy-in of teachers, is easy to track over time and forms a reliable metric which is clear to those outside the school environment. The assessment should be able to have a direct impact upon teaching and learning and to guide the next steps to success.

There are a lot of options and it allows the people who know better than anyone how their school works – the school's own leadership and teachers – to create a solution that will work for them and their students and parents. The most important thing is that the chosen approach offers effective, understandable assessment based on what teachers know and trust. Given time and consideration I am sure that schools and teachers are in the best possible position to meet this challenge.