

The impact of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative

This survey of 14 secondary schools and 25 primary schools evaluates the impact of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative on improving outcomes for their pupils. The survey also examined the extent to which assessment was used effectively to support learning and to ensure that the curriculum met pupils' needs.

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Executive summary

In 2007, the former Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) launched a pilot project called 'Making Good Progress'.¹ This took place across 10 local authorities in England and involved around 500 schools. Several complementary initiatives made up the full 'Making Good Progress' pilot. The project included single-level tests, a pupil progression premium, one-to-one tuition, a strong focus on assessment for learning and the development of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' materials. These offered schools a set of criteria, guidance and exemplars for making judgements about pupils' progress in relation to National Curriculum levels. Essentially, they were designed to support the accuracy of teachers' assessment and inform lesson planning.

The focus of this survey was to evaluate the impact of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative on improving outcomes for pupils in terms of their achievement and attainment. The survey also examined the extent to which assessment was used effectively to support learning and to ensure that the curriculum met pupils' needs.

During 2010, inspectors visited 14 secondary schools and 25 primary schools in 11 different local authorities. With the exception of two secondary schools, all of the schools visited participated in the 'Making Good Progress' pilot. Inspectors held discussions with senior school leaders, staff, pupils and local authority officers. In addition, they observed lessons and analysed a range of documentation relating to assessment.

In all of the schools visited, the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative was one of a number of strategies designed to raise pupils' attainment and it was not possible to disaggregate its impact entirely. However, it did help to strengthen assessment practice in the schools. Its impact was greatest when it formed part of a strongly led, whole-school vision of teaching, learning and assessment that promoted high expectations and a shared drive towards consistency. In this context, where the different elements of assessment were connected in a coherent policy for raising pupils' achievement, the use of materials developed through this initiative made an important contribution to pupils' rising achievement in English and mathematics where this approach was most embedded.

The implementation of this initiative increased teachers' accountability and the accuracy and consistency of assessment practice. Teachers also developed their understanding of progression in learning and their subject knowledge. Nevertheless, the use of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' materials did not always improve teachers' evaluation of pupils' progress in lessons because this depended on other key teaching skills and the quality of these varied.

¹ For further information, see:
www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/schoolstandards/mgppilot/.

Engagement with this approach to assessment heightened teachers' awareness of the strengths and weaknesses in pupils' learning. Inspectors found that this had a positive impact on lesson planning and the curriculum because it led teachers to adapt the provision so that it met the needs of groups of pupils and individuals. Teachers, particularly in the primary schools visited, also used the information successfully to refine how they grouped pupils to maximise their learning.

The guidelines produced for implementing the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative helped teachers to clarify success criteria in lessons, and, as a result, pupils were more able to evaluate their progress and identify how they could improve their work. Teachers' expectations were raised because they focused on pupils' next steps in learning as well as their attainment of age-related National Curriculum levels.

The initiative provided a common language for teachers to discuss, and reach agreement about, pupils' progress. This maintained the continuity of pupils' learning at points of transition within schools, but when pupils moved from one phase of education to another this dialogue often broke down. Where local authorities were proactive in setting up arrangements for cross-phase moderation of assessment, collaboration between schools was sustained and successful in supporting pupils' progress and sharing effective assessment practice.

Key findings

- The introduction of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative had helped to strengthen assessment practice in all of the schools visited. However, impact was greatest when it formed part of a strongly led, clear, whole-school vision of teaching, learning and assessment that promoted high expectations and developed consistency. Where this was the case, the initiative was an important factor in pupils' rising achievement, particularly in English and mathematics.
- Common benefits of the initiative seen were improvements in teachers' subject knowledge, in their understanding of progression in learning and in the accuracy of their assessment of pupils' attainment and progress. The extent of the improvement in assessing pupils' attainment and progress was, however, linked to the quality of other aspects of teaching, particularly in skills such as identifying and explaining objectives, questioning pupils and giving them precise feedback; the application of these skills varied in quality.
- Through the use of 'Assessing pupils' progress' assessment criteria, schools were able to construct a detailed picture of the strengths and weaknesses in pupils' learning. Where this information was used well, lessons were better matched to pupils' needs, they participated fully and resources were targeted carefully to tackle gaps in pupils' learning. Teachers, especially in the primary schools visited, also used the information to refine how pupils were grouped to maximise their learning.
- The 'Assessing pupils' progress' materials provided teachers with a common language to discuss and agree pupils' progress. This improved the consistency of assessment practice, increased teachers' accountability for pupils' progress and

helped to mitigate any loss of momentum in pupils' learning at transition points. However, when pupils moved from one phase of education to another, 13 of the 25 primary schools and eight of the 14 secondary schools visited did not take advantage of these benefits.

- Where teachers working in different phases of education had opportunities to meet and reach agreement about the standard of pupils' work, this was highly beneficial. Teachers trusted the accuracy of their assessments, developed a thorough understanding of progression and shared effective assessment practice.
- The implementation of assessment techniques based on this initiative had a positive impact on the curriculum in 19 of the primary schools visited and nine of the secondary schools. In these schools, teachers adapted provision in the light of information obtained through this approach to assessment so that it built on pupils' prior learning and included a better range of opportunities to develop and assess learning.
- Teachers' engagement with the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative helped to raise expectations because they focused on pupils' next steps in learning as well as their attainment of age-related National Curriculum levels.
- The use of materials made available through the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative improved the clarity of success criteria and the consistency with which they were shared with pupils in lessons. This helped pupils to evaluate their progress and identify how they could improve.

Recommendations

The Department for Education should build on the improvements secured through the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative by ensuring that assessment policy:

- clarifies the place and purpose of teacher assessment in improving teaching and learning
- promotes the practices that have been beneficial in improving outcomes for pupils.

Senior and middle school leaders should:

- be clear that the purpose of assessment is to improve achievement not just measure attainment, and develop systematically the teaching and learning skills that drive pupils' progress in lessons
- ensure that all teachers are trained to use assessment to plan teaching that challenges pupils appropriately and improves their learning
- connect all the elements of assessment in a coherent policy for raising achievement that clarifies the accountability of staff and outlines strategies for monitoring and evaluation.

Schools should:

- work in partnership to establish effective arrangements for cross-phase other school meetings where teachers can agree the standard of pupils' work and share effective assessment practice.

The background to the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative

1. The 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative was developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency² in partnership with the National Strategies³. It provides criteria against which judgements can be made about pupils' progress in relation to National Curriculum levels. It aims to:
 - equip teachers to make accurate judgements about pupils' progress
 - help teachers to fine-tune their understanding of learners' needs and tailor their planning and teaching accordingly.

The associated subject materials for teachers include:

- a handbook to help teachers use the materials and implement the approach
 - assessment guidelines for assessing pupils' work in relation to National Curriculum levels, including a recording format that provides assessment criteria for each subject
 - standards files – annotated collections of pupils' day-to-day work that exemplify national standards at different levels.
2. Using these materials in Key Stages 1 to 3, teachers can make level judgements for each of the following National Curriculum subjects: English (reading, writing, speaking and listening), mathematics (using and applying mathematics, number, shape, space and measures, handling data) and science. Materials are also available for Key Stage 3 information and communication technology (ICT).
 3. The former DCSF invested £150 million over three years, starting in April 2008, to support schools in developing their use of assessment for learning. Some of this funding was specifically targeted at the implementation of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative.

² The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency worked closely with the Department for Education to support schools and colleges in assessment and examinations delivery.

³ The National Strategies were professional development programmes designed to help teachers and schools focus on the core business of improving teaching and learning.

Approaches to implementation

4. Implementation of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative took many different forms in the schools visited. Most of them employed a phased approach to suit their circumstances or most urgent school improvement priorities. Timescales and breadth of implementation also varied greatly. In the schools visited, the initiative was most embedded in English and mathematics. It was much less established in science. Two of the 25 primary schools were trialling the initiative in this subject; eight of the 14 secondary schools were using it but in three of them it was at a very early stage of implementation. Only five of the secondary schools were using it in ICT and in three of these it had been introduced recently.
5. The common approach to implementation in primary schools was to focus initially on reading, writing and mathematics with a sample of pupils across the ability range, in each class or in a selection of classes, to pinpoint any gaps in pupils' learning. From this initial position, 17 of the 25 schools moved on to assess all pupils for the target subjects. The pattern of implementation was similar in the secondary schools with 11 of the 14 schools expanding a sample of students to include all students in Key Stage 3 in the subjects where the initiative was being implemented.

The impact on outcomes for pupils

Attainment

6. There was strong consensus among the headteachers, deputy and assistant headteachers, and the teachers interviewed that the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative was making a contribution to raising attainment, primarily because it improved the accuracy of teachers' assessment and intensified their focus on pupils' progress. Schools were unequivocal in their view that the initiative was a useful tool that strengthened systems for raising attainment, such as marking, tracking pupils' progress and target-setting. Inspection evidence gathered during the survey visits supported this firmly held view and corroborated the accuracy of teachers' assessment. Evidence of improving attainment in the schools' assessment information and externally validated performance data was clearest for English and mathematics. In all of the schools, the initiative was one of a number of strategies designed to raise pupils' attainment and it was not possible to disaggregate its impact entirely. This complexity was compounded by schools' varying approaches to implementation. However, the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative underpinned improvements in pupils' attainment where:
 - senior leaders saw assessment as a key driver to raising both achievement and attainment
 - there was an unwavering concentration on improving teaching and learning

- accurate assessment information was used well by teachers to tailor lessons to the needs of pupils
 - the monitoring and evaluation of pupils' progress were regular and rigorous
 - pupils received precise guidance about how to improve their work
 - pupils were involved in setting their targets and evaluating their own understanding and progress.
7. All of the primary schools visited were using this approach to assessment with pupils in English and mathematics in Key Stage 2. Pupils' attainment in Key Stage 2 English tests improved in 14 of the 25 primary schools from 2008 to 2009, and in Key Stage 2 mathematics tests it improved in 11 of the schools. The headteachers of these schools were clear that 'Assessing pupils' progress' methods increased the rigour of assessment and target-setting and thereby helped to drive up standards. Inspectors' observations of lessons in these schools confirmed that pupils were making good progress.
8. As national tests at the end of Key Stage 3 have been discontinued, externally validated performance data for all schools is no longer available. However, internal assessment information that was scrutinised by inspectors and judged to be accurate showed improvements in the percentage of students achieving level 5 and above in English in nine schools, and in seven schools assessment information indicated an improvement in the percentage of students achieving level 5 and above in mathematics.
9. Senior leaders in eight of the 14 secondary schools said that the implementation of the initiative in English and mathematics in Key Stage 3 had led to improvements in assessment practice in Key Stage 4. Inspection evidence substantiated this. From 2008 to 2009, students' attainment improved in GCSE English in six of these schools. In mathematics, it improved in five schools. The proportion of students including English and mathematics in five higher-grade GCSEs increased in all eight of the schools.

Learning and progress

10. Teachers directly involved with implementing the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative were interviewed in all of the schools visited. There was strong agreement between them that the use of this approach intensified their focus on pupils' learning and progress. One teacher summed it up simply when she said, "Assessing pupils' progress' helps clarify success criteria in short-term planning – I am planning for learning not just planning activities.' Another, reflecting on a shift away from a focus just on lesson content in her teaching to one which also supported the progress of individual pupils, said that the initiative had 'completely changed what and how' she taught. A deeper understanding of National Curriculum levels and her pupils' capabilities had improved her planning. She acknowledged, 'Now I can pin down what the next learning steps are for the pupils in my class and work out exactly how I will

move them forward.’ Teachers commonly reported that they knew ‘where pupils were in their learning’ and could discuss the progress of individuals and groups with clarity and accuracy.

- Lessons were observed in each of the schools visited. In total, 120 lessons were seen for 30 minutes each. Forty-seven were in the secondary schools visited and 73 in the primary schools. Inspectors focused on pupils’ learning and progress, and assessment to support teaching and learning. The tables below show inspectors’ judgements for these aspects.

Figure 1: Lesson observations in primary schools (number of lessons)

	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Learning and progress	4	40	29	0
Assessment to support teaching and learning	5	42	26	0

Figure 2: Lesson observations in secondary schools (number of lessons)

	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Learning and progress	4	24	19	0
Assessment to support teaching and learning	6	23	18	0

- Pupils made good or better progress in 44 of the 73 lessons observed in the primary schools and in 28 of the 47 lessons observed in the secondary schools. There was a high correlation between pupils’ learning and progress and how effectively assessment supported learning. There were no lessons where pupils made inadequate progress. A number of features defined the difference between good and satisfactory progress and between good and satisfactory assessment. They were the extent to which teachers:
 - shared information and talked with pupils about learning objectives, learning outcomes and success criteria, hence clarifying expectations about progression and pace
 - developed pupils’ understanding of subject-specific language as part of the sharing of learning objectives and success criteria
 - directed open-ended questioning and whole-class discussion to check, probe and develop pupils’ understanding
 - explained and modelled to clarify progression in key concepts and skills
 - gave oral and written feedback to support the evaluation of progress, noted levels of attainment reached and identified next steps in learning
 - used well-planned group discussions, peer and self-assessment to help pupils develop as independent learners

- provided opportunities for pupils to exercise some choice and control in their learning
 - encouraged pupils to act as learning resources for each other, for example through group work or undertaking research.
13. Pupils' understanding of, and ability to use, success criteria were central to learning and progress in the good or better lessons observed. The success criteria provided a framework for dialogue with pupils. Discussions focused on how well they had been met. Pupils' involvement increased when they were required to think about learning outcomes for themselves and devise their own measures of success. The quality of pupils' engagement with learning defined the difference between good and outstanding progress and assessment.

In one of the outstanding lessons observed in a primary school, pupils were completing a unit of work on fantasy stories. Previously, they had formulated their own detailed success criteria which encompassed character development, plot, setting, atmosphere, style and presentation and publishing options. The final lesson in the sequence focused on evaluating the quality of the stories. Pupils were provided with a template to use in conjunction with the success criteria. They worked well in pairs that were arranged by the teacher, taking it in turns to record notes and scores for different aspects of each other's work. They also identified points for improvement. The success criteria gave structure to pupils' discussions and enabled them to develop their thoughts and apply subject-specific language and concepts with confidence. Pupils then worked in groups of four to select a sample of stories that the authors read to the class. High quality, enthusiastic class discussion of each story ensued. The teacher directed open-ended questions to specific pupils to maximise participation and fix key learning points.

14. The schools' use of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative underlined the importance of employing a range of methods to evaluate and support pupils' learning in lessons. These added to the variety of activities in lessons and strengthened pupils' participation. In addition to those already mentioned, common strategies included pupils:
- holding up traffic light flashcards to indicate their level of understanding (green equalled secure understanding, amber partial and red limited)
 - showing answers and working out on mini-whiteboards
 - giving and assessing presentations in relation to success criteria
 - answering questions in a particular role
 - chairing class and group discussions
 - designing questions to test each other's learning.
15. In 19 of the 25 primary schools and 11 of the 14 secondary schools there was evidence that the use of this initiative extended pupils' involvement in target-

setting. Teachers used the criteria set out in the handbook and related materials to crystallise learning objectives not only in lessons but over time; some adapted them so they were more 'learner-friendly'. Pupils' ability to recognise for themselves where their work was falling short and express what they must improve in curricular targets was developed through class activities and discussions with their teachers.

In one secondary school, Year 7 students developed success criteria for a 'learning journey' that would map their improvement in creative writing. Initially, through discussion, small groups contributed criteria such as 'use interesting adjectives' then, through whole-class discussion, they created a spectrum of effectiveness from 'beginner' to 'expert'. This was displayed along the back wall of the classroom. As students shared their writing, the success criteria were used to flag strengths and points for development. At the end of the project, some students explained and showed how they had progressed by physically walking from their starting position on the displayed spectrum to their point of improvement. The students then used the criteria to set themselves targets for further improvement; for example, 'I must vary the length of my sentences and think more about their effect on the reader'.

16. These strategies helped pupils to own and understand their targets. Target setting was most powerful in taking learning forward when pupils knew 'how' as well as 'what' to improve. For instance, in discussion with an inspector, one Year 5 pupil was very clear that he needed to develop his vocabulary; he was also able to say that in order to do this he had agreed with his teacher that he would read one graded reader each week and a newspaper article every day, and keep a notebook of new words. In two weeks' time he would talk again with his teacher about how much he had done and what had helped him most.
17. Pupils' capacity to learn independently was increased when they were given the opportunities and skills to assess and manage aspects of their learning. In the lessons observed by inspectors where pupils could select an activity or influence learning outcomes, they assumed responsibility in a very serious way. In these lessons, there were high levels of enjoyment, concentration and collaboration. In addition, learning outcomes indicated that pupils' understanding reached a deeper level.

The impact on provision

Teaching

18. In all but three of the schools visited, teachers' engagement with the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative enhanced the accuracy of their assessment. The associated guidelines and standards files provided a shared, single point of reference for teachers against which they made consistent judgements about pupils' progress. The guidelines also supported teachers in clarifying success criteria for pupils and helping them to understand different levels of attainment.

However schools approached the implementation of the initiative, success was determined by how effectively teachers built their understanding of pupils' learning and, most critically, how skilfully they tailored their planning and teaching to meet the needs of individual pupils and groups.

19. In 36 of the schools visited, through using the materials as recommended to carry out periodic assessments, teachers developed a clearer understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in pupils' learning. Where teachers linked this information to planning and teaching, there was a tight match between learning objectives and the needs of individuals and groups of pupils. In addition, resources were targeted more precisely to tackle gaps in learning by, for example, deploying teaching assistants to give in-class or one-to-one support, or organising extra 'catch-up' lessons.
20. The effectiveness of lesson plans and interventions to support pupils' progress depended largely on the quality of other teaching skills and these varied. Where assessment techniques supported pupils' progress well, teachers reviewed learning effectively during lessons and provided frequent opportunities for pupils to assess their own work or that of their peers. Teachers used aspects of assessment for learning, such as identifying and explaining objectives, questioning and providing feedback, with precision and skill.

In one primary school, the use of 'Assessing pupils' progress' materials led teachers to refine and embed assessment methods in schemes of work for mathematics. At the beginning of each unit of work, pupils were introduced to the learning objectives and given the opportunity to consider related questions and problems through a range of activities that were graded according to difficulty. Pupils used these to evaluate how confident they were about tackling each objective on a scale of one to five. They identified their strengths and weaknesses and wrote notes to their teacher to highlight areas where they felt that their learning was insecure; for example, 'this is too hard because I can't do decimals'. With some guidance, pupils then selected tasks that were matched to the needs they had identified. Completed tasks were marked thoroughly. Misconceptions were challenged. Questions were posed to consolidate or extend learning and, crucially, pupils were required to respond to them. A 'review lesson' at the end of each unit involved pupils in demonstrating independent application of their skills and understanding.

21. The 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative presented teachers with a common language for discussing assessment. There was very strong consensus among teachers and senior leaders interviewed in the schools that this improved the quality of professional dialogue about teaching and learning, increased collaboration between teachers and disseminated good practice. Teachers cited examples of how the implementation of the initiative encouraged them to plan learning with colleagues, discuss patterns in pupils' progress and exchange strategies for supporting pupils' learning. Inspectors were able to evidence this during the survey visits.

22. In 19 of the primary schools and 11 of the secondary schools where teachers of different age groups and key stages were jointly involved in using the published guidelines for the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative, the process of moderating the standard of pupils' work was strengthened considerably. Teachers deepened their understanding of progression through National Curriculum levels in a subject and this improved the continuity of pupils' learning. For example, Key Stage 1 teachers would become familiar with the expectations for learning in Key Stage 2 and thereby heighten their awareness of what pupils were capable of. Key Stage 2 teachers would acquire a better understanding of how and what younger pupils learnt, thereby deepening their insight into how they could build and consolidate learning effectively. In combination, shared moderation and the stronger focus on pupils' next learning steps made teachers more collectively accountable for pupils' progress whereas, in the past, the teachers of year groups preparing for national tests carried a disproportionately high responsibility. Also, senior leaders and teachers placed a focus on pupils' next steps in learning as well as looking at their attainment of age-related National Curriculum levels and this work helped to raise expectations.
23. In both primary and secondary schools, there was clear evidence that this approach to assessment promoted equality of opportunity because it enabled leaders and teachers to secure a detailed picture of the attainment of different groups of pupils and work out what would best support their learning and progress. This sometimes led to some innovative intervention strategies.

In a primary school with a high proportion of pupils learning English as an additional language, the use of techniques developed through the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative to moderate samples of writing from pupils in Years 3 and 4, highlighted a group of underachieving learners. Their writing development was being constrained by their lack of fluency in spoken English, an insecure knowledge of grammatical structures and limited exposure to accurate language models. Parents also expressed concerns about their own capacity to support their child's writing because English was an additional language for them and they were unfamiliar with current teaching methods.

The pupils and their parents were invited to a six-week programme of one-hour workshops. The workshops were designed to improve pupils' spoken language, vocabulary choices, sentence structure and the sequencing of information. Parents were encouraged to participate as learners. For example, if the activity was to find synonyms for 'said', the parent and child worked together to build a word bank. Parents and pupils were shown how to use the assessment criteria to evaluate progress and improve work.

At the end of the programme, seven of the 12 pupils secured a higher National Curriculum level in writing and five were attaining more highly within a level.

24. The approach of securing pupils' attainment through the acquisition of incremental steps in learning was effective in supporting the progress of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities in 22 of the schools visited. These pupils benefited from teachers' and teaching assistants' improved expertise in recognising and encouraging small steps in learning.
25. In 16 of the primary schools and nine of the secondary schools, there was evidence that this approach to assessment was used successfully to evaluate the learning of groups of pupils who were at risk of, or who were, underachieving. These included pupils with special educational needs and/or difficulties and boys. Teachers used the 'Assessing pupils' progress' assessment guidelines to identify weaknesses in teaching and learning, devise appropriate support and refine how pupils were grouped to maximise learning.

In one primary school, teachers systematically used assessment information to group pupils and tailor learning activities. They discussed weaknesses in pupils' learning and jointly planned learning activities for cross-class groupings. In Years 4 and 5, a number of boys were identified as underachieving in writing. The boys were difficult to motivate and reluctant writers. The teachers developed practical, first-hand activities to kindle enthusiasm. Pupils dressed in period costumes to re-enact the events leading to the Battle of Bosworth. The reluctant writers became journalists. They were given the responsibility of writing a newspaper article describing the battle and explaining the underlying grievances. To do this they were required to interview those in role as key historical figures. In preparation, a teacher worked with the boys to compose questions and a structure for their writing. This helped them to produce some lively and well-developed articles. The boys were engaged by the activity and extended their understanding of writing in a particular style for a specified audience.

26. Inspectors found that this assessment initiative had a positive impact on the quality of marking in nine of the secondary schools and 15 of the primary schools. Teachers used the assessment criteria as a checklist to clarify what pupils had done well and what they needed to do to improve. As a consequence, the quality of marking was more consistent and feedback to pupils was detailed and precise. However, opportunities for pupils to respond to teachers' suggestions for improvement were often overlooked.

One secondary school adopted a common system for marking students' work. 'What went well' (WWW) and what could be 'even better if' (EBI) signposted strengths and weaknesses. Although these were mainly used in written feedback, teachers sometimes used the same 'signposts' to give sharp, immediate, verbal feedback to students in lessons. Feedback was usually specific to the work being undertaken but, at appropriate points, would also relate to students' short-term targets, such as for reading or writing. This helped to link marking to broader targets for improvement. The WWW gave students confidence and the EBI provided clear and

precise guidance about how to improve; both supported self-assessment. Students were encouraged to add their own comments in their books to create a dialogue with teachers about their progress.

27. Teachers interviewed in 17 of the 25 primary schools and seven of the 14 secondary schools reported that their subject knowledge had improved as a consequence of using assessment techniques developed through the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative. In discussions, teachers were clear that familiarisation with the assessment guidelines clarified how component skills, knowledge and understanding add up to successful learning. In the words of one teacher, '[this approach] has helped me to isolate and tackle the underlying causes of any wobbliness in pupils' subject understanding'.

In one of their regular discussions of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning, a successful secondary science department agreed that while pupils enjoyed practical work there was a lack of clarity about how it developed subject knowledge and skills. Using the 'Assessing pupils' progress' materials, the team defined the precise learning outcomes for all practical activities. The strengthening of the team's subject knowledge was an important by-product of this process. Teachers could talk precisely about the purpose of practical work and saw how the intended learning linked with, and consolidated, other aspects of subject knowledge. They were clear about how the building blocks of knowledge, understanding and skills combined to develop subject expertise. Consequently, they promoted the place of scientific enquiry in science education with an authority that totally convinced pupils of its importance.

28. In schools where teaching assistants had been trained in these assessment techniques, they were far more effective in supporting pupils' learning in lessons. This was because they had a clearer understanding of pupils' prior attainment and what they needed to do to progress to the next step in their learning.

The curriculum

29. In 19 of the 25 primary schools and nine of the 14 secondary schools visited the use of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative had a discernible and positive impact on the curriculum. Teachers' more in-depth understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in pupils' learning gave them the confidence to plan and adapt schemes of work so that they built on pupils' prior experiences. This created a curriculum that was more flexible and responsive to pupils' needs. For example, material was added to meet the needs of higher attaining pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. In such cases, the curriculum was modified to fill specific gaps in pupils' learning, or increase the level of challenge, rather than offering work that simply consolidated learning regardless of which pupils required this. This increased responsiveness was also extended to an improved range of integral, standardised assessment opportunities that supported, as well as tested, pupils'

learning. In 16 primary schools, teachers mapped assessment opportunities across the curriculum in a coherent way. This had the effect of enhancing creativity in the curriculum because teachers were confident that pupils' learning experiences were anchored to a clear framework for assessment.

A junior school brought teachers from across the age range together to review the quality of assessment opportunities across the curriculum as part of the implementation of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative in English and mathematics. They considered the effectiveness of assessment for learning as well as assessment that summed up pupils' attainment. They concluded that assessment was too narrowly focused in written tasks with insufficient consideration for pupils' different learning styles; there were too few opportunities for self- and peer-assessment and success criteria were not shared with pupils consistently. In addition, 'summative' assessments were not always well timed to coincide with recently introduced, regular 'learning conversations' with individual pupils.

In response, teachers constructed an assessment map that determined the timing and type of assessment. To support more varied assessment techniques they created a professional development programme where good practice within the school was shared. The effectiveness of methods used to evaluate pupils' learning in lessons also became a focus for lesson observations. Teachers' involvement in this review inspired them to be more creative in devising cross-curricular topic work because they were clearer about what they were assessing and when and how continuous and periodic assessment happened.

30. In 16 primary schools, the initiative was instrumental in forging cross-curricular links that supported the development of pupils' literacy skills. As teachers were able to be much more precise about the gaps in pupils' skills, they planned learning in subjects other than English that would boost literacy. Pupils benefited from applying skills in different contexts and the relevance of literacy skills was reinforced sharply.

In one primary school, teachers were focusing on improving pupils' ability to retrieve and understand information from a range of texts with Years 5 and 6 pupils. Opportunities to develop these skills were included in a history topic that focused on soldiers' living conditions in the First World War. Pupils worked in small groups to look at a range of historical evidence. Each group was required to examine an aspect of the evidence such as: photographs and film footage, extracts from history books, internet research and soldiers' first-hand accounts of their experiences. The groups were given different open-ended questions to answer in relation to the evidence; for example, 'What thoughts and feelings do you think the soldiers experience?' and 'What do the soldiers see, hear, smell, taste and touch?' Before beginning the task, the class identified the reading skills they would need to use, for instance, finding and selecting information. Finally, pupils shared their work to create a vivid picture of

the soldiers' conditions. They also went back to the reading skills and talked about how successfully they had used them.

31. In the secondary schools visited, adjustments and improvements to the curriculum were more frequently seen in English and mathematics than in other subjects and usually in Years 7 to 9. However, there were instances where teachers of subjects such as modern foreign languages, history and geography also applied the principles set out in the published guidance for the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative and devised their own assessment criteria. In one secondary school, the use of this approach to assessment influenced the development of different curriculum 'pathways' in Key Stage 4 that encompassed Diplomas, as well as GCSE courses. Usually, the use of this assessment methodology was discrete to each subject area and links across areas were not commonplace. Where cross-curricular provision existed, for example in literacy, there was not always corresponding assessment across the subjects.

In a non-selective school for students aged 11 to 16 the implementation of the initiative had an extremely positive impact on the development of schemes of work used in English and mathematics. The schemes were based securely on the steps for learning and progression outlined by the assessment criteria. They could be tailored easily to the ability of any given class, group or individual to ensure appropriate challenge.

Schemes included levelled assessment tasks. Some of these were done by students in formal and controlled conditions (to help them prepare for external examinations) and others were undertaken less formally. Teachers could decide to miss out lessons in a sequence if students' existing knowledge merited this, as determined through the use of assessment. The process of developing the schemes of work deepened teachers' understanding of progression in the subjects, increased the accuracy of their assessment and gave them the confidence to be flexible in their delivery.

Leadership and management

32. In all of the schools visited, there was a consistent link between the impact of the initiative and the quality of leadership and management. Inspectors found that this approach to assessment had the greatest impact on improving outcomes for pupils when it was part of a clear whole-school vision of teaching, learning and assessment that promoted high expectations and a shared drive towards consistency. Where senior leaders understood the strengths and weaknesses of their schools and incorporated the 'Assessing pupils' progress' approach into a range of coherent strategies, it became a useful school improvement tool. Assessment practice was usually a priority in the schools' improvement planning and training programmes. These schools saw assessment as central to raising attainment and key to inclusive practice. The different elements of assessment were connected and carefully linked with the

roles of staff. Clear systems enabled all staff to know how well pupils were doing at all times in all subjects. The common components were:

- improving classroom practice as an overriding priority that was spearheaded and monitored by senior and middle leaders
- assessment used effectively to inform the curriculum teaching and lesson planning
- teaching that was planned carefully to meet clear learning objectives and provide opportunities for pupils to go beyond expectations
- effective assessment of pupils' progress during lessons. that focused on the quality of outcomes as well as the completion of tasks
- robust monitoring and evaluation of accurate assessment information that identified pupils' difficulties and underachievement and led to an effective range of intervention activities and programmes
- a framework of training and support that ensured that teachers and middle leaders could interpret data and adjust teaching and learning as necessary
- information systems that provided the data that staff needed in timely, strategically smart ways
- pupils who were supported and fully involved in setting meaningful targets to improve their knowledge, understanding and skills
- middle leaders, individual teachers and tutors who were accountable to senior leaders for the progress of pupils in their charge
- lines of communication between school and home that were open, easy and well-used.

33. The effective school leaders seen were quick to utilise the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative to strengthen target-setting and the monitoring of pupils' progress at all levels. They took the opportunity to ensure a tight and productive relationship between systems for tracking pupils' progress and teaching. The more reliable picture of progress at class level generated by using this approach underpinned the robustness of individual teachers' targets for pupils' progress, subject and whole-school targets. One headteacher explained:

'Teachers are more confident in interpreting data because they know it is built on their own judgements and not just on test results; it has more meaning. Teachers see the individuals behind the headline progress and attainment targets. Previously, they regarded tracking as something external but now they see the connection with their teaching and examine tracking information to find the gaps in pupils' understanding and learning experiences.'

34. Importantly, senior and middle leaders used assessment information about pupils' progress in core subjects to ask questions about progress in other

subjects. Regular meetings attended by class teachers and senior and middle leaders to review assessment information and evaluate the progress of groups of pupils across subjects helped to reduce variation in pupils' progress.

35. Where the implementation of the initiative was most successful, it distributed leadership and management responsibilities, increased accountability and, in particular, developed middle leaders. The effectiveness of subject leaders and coordinators was crucial to the success of this approach because, where necessary, they spearheaded adjustments to classroom practice to ensure that strategic objectives for improving pupils' achievement were met. In one primary school, a senior leader, responsible for developing assessment practice, clarified how taking part in the initiative contributed to strengthened middle leadership:

'We knew that subject coordinators would be key to the success of the initiative. They received training alongside senior leaders and were clear about how we wanted to use the initiative as part of a whole-school push to improve assessment and learning. Their belief in the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative convinced others. They modelled teaching methods that accelerated pupils' progress and encouraged teachers to try different approaches. As leaders, they grew in confidence and developed into a cohesive team with a shared view of the place of assessment in effective teaching and learning. Their involvement in monitoring the impact of the initiative was welcomed as an opportunity to reflect on and develop teaching practice.'

36. The quality of leadership and management influenced how well the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative supported pupils' progress through transition points, although impact was more evident within schools than between schools. Where cohesive leadership structures existed with open lines of communication between senior leaders, subject and year leaders, they ensured that the detailed profiles of pupils' learning were passed on when pupils moved up a year group and/or changed teachers. This helped to sustain the momentum of pupils' progress and prevent any regression.

In one primary school, assessment approaches were aiding transition from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to Year 1 because ideas and terminology promoted by the initiative were used in the EYFS while early learning goals were used for the first few months in Year 1. This developed teachers' understanding of progression across EYFS and Key Stage 1, supported the continuity of pupils' learning and made it easier for Year 1 teachers to consolidate their assessment of pupils' attainment.

37. When pupils moved from infant to junior schools or primary to secondary schools, opportunities to share assessment information were missed because not all schools had developed effective structures for liaison. The exchange of information was also hampered where schools worked with paper rather than electronic systems for transferring information.

38. Interviews with senior and middle leaders indicated that any consideration of how the schools' assessment processes might help parents to support their children's progress was at an early stage. In 14 of the schools visited, the teachers spoken to said that they used assessment criteria to highlight strengths and weaknesses in learning when they were writing reports for parents; formulate targets for pupils that were shared with parents; and when they were having informal discussions with them. There were instances where parents were involved in specific intervention programmes that included the use of assessment, but these were exceptional.
39. In all the schools visited, leaders reported concerns about how the approach to assessment contained in the initiative would increase teachers' workload. However, as the initiative became embedded and teachers and leaders worked through how it could best be used within the context of their schools, worries about workload diminished. One teacher summed up the views of many:

'When it first came in, I sat there in shock, but because I am very familiar with it now, I feel confident about using it as a planning and teaching tool. I have found it manageable and right for my class.'

The role of the local authority

40. Staff and leaders in 22 of the primary schools visited spoke positively about the support provided by local authorities in implementing the initiative. Views in secondary schools varied more widely but, in the main, the support was valued and seen as effective.
41. The impact of local authority support often depended on the skills of individual consultants and advisers. Accordingly, schools valued specific elements of support and not others. For example, one school viewed the support materials provided by the local authority as very effective but was far less content with its work in developing school networks. There was general appreciation for the following aspects of support:
- initial training and development of materials
 - establishing collaboration between schools to exchange ideas and experiences
 - moderation of students' work
 - consultancy work tailored to the needs and priorities of individual schools.
42. Of all the activities undertaken by local authorities in support of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative, it was the provision of opportunities for staff from different schools to meet and moderate assessments that had the greatest impact on improving assessment practice. Cross-school moderation contributed to the accuracy of teachers' assessments and was fundamental to their understanding of progression and their accountability for pupils' achievements. Five local authorities had well-established arrangements for cross-key stage and

phase moderation between primary and secondary schools. Teachers explored different approaches to assessment and learned from each other. For example, in one authority, teachers in Key Stage 3 were encouraged to learn from cross-curricular assessment strategies used in Key Stage 1.

43. Collaboration between primary and secondary leaders and staff developed a collective trust in the reliability of assessments. Pupils' progress was supported through transition and they also benefited from improved continuity in teaching and learning. The secondary schools visited within these authorities reported that they no longer felt that it was necessary to undertake additional assessment of pupils' attainment on entry to Year 7. These opportunities to share and develop effective practice across key stages and phases were not provided by all local authorities and, left to their own devices, schools often failed to establish arrangements that would sustain collaboration.

Notes

The aim of this survey was to judge the impact of the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative on improving outcomes for pupils.

Between June and November 2010, inspectors visited 14 secondary schools and 25 primary schools in 11 different local authorities. With the exception of two secondary schools, all of the schools visited participated in the 'Making Good Progress' pilot. Schools were selected for the survey because: they had been involved in implementing the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative (part of the 'Making Good Progress' pilot) for at least two years; reflected most of the types of schools in the pilot; and included a range of overall effectiveness from satisfactory to outstanding as determined by their previous institutional inspections.

Inspectors focused on:

- pupils' achievement and attainment
- pupils' learning and their progress
- the quality of teaching, taking into account the use of assessment to support learning
- the quality of the curriculum and how well it met pupils' needs
- the effectiveness of leadership and management in implementing the 'Assessing pupils' progress' initiative.

Discussions were held with senior leaders, staff, pupils and local authority officers. In addition, 120 lessons were observed and a range of documentation, including assessment information, school improvement plans and records of monitoring and evaluation, was analysed.

Further information

Ofsted publications

Assessment for learning: the impact of National Strategy support (070244), Ofsted
www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070244

Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds (090170), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090170

Twelve outstanding secondary schools: excelling against the odds (080240), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080240

Twelve outstanding special schools: excelling through inclusion (090171), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090171

Publications by others

Assessment for learning: 10 principles, Assessment Reform Group, 2002.
Available in the publications section; www.assessment-reform-group.org/

2020 vision: report of the teaching and learning in 2020 review group (DfES 978 1 84478 862 0), DCSF, 2006;
<http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFES-04255-2006&>

Assessment for learning strategy (DCSF/QCA/National Strategies/QCA) 2008;
<http://c9s.e2bn.net/e2bn/leas/c99/schools/c9s/web/public/main/Staff%20only/AfL/DCSF-00341-2008.pdf>

Evaluation of the Making Good Progress pilot: interim report, DfE, 2008;
<http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-RR065>

Getting to grips with assessing pupils' progress, DCSF/QCA/National Strategies/QCA, 2009; <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/160703>

Report of the Expert Group on Assessment
<http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-00532-2009>

Annex A. Schools visited

Primary schools

Alfriston School
 All Saints' and St Richard's Church of England Primary School
 Bentley Heath Church of England Primary School
 Blue Coat CofE Primary School
 Castle Hill Primary School
 Cressing Primary School
 Etchingham Church of England Primary School
 Glenmere Community Primary School
 Hawkes Farm Primary School
 Heron Primary School
 Highwoods Community Primary School
 Hoddern Junior School
 John Bunyan Junior School
 Marsden Primary School
 Mercenfeld Primary School
 Millbank Primary School
 Minchinhampton School
 Mortimer Primary School
 Riverside Junior School
 Stanhope Primary School
 Slimbridge Primary School
 St George's Hanover Square CofE Primary School
 St Luke's CofE Primary School
 West Rise Junior School
 Yorkswood Primary School

Local authorities

East Sussex
 East Sussex
 Solihull
 Gloucestershire
 Calderdale
 Essex
 East Sussex
 Leicestershire
 East Sussex
 Gloucestershire
 Essex
 East Sussex
 Essex
 South Tyneside
 Leicestershire
 Westminster
 Gloucestershire
 South Tyneside
 Calderdale
 South Tyneside
 Gloucestershire
 Westminster
 Westminster
 East Sussex
 Solihull

Secondary schools

Calder High School, A Specialist Technology College
 Chatham Grammar School for Boys
 Christ College
 Mortimer Community College
 Philip Morant School and College

Local authority

Calderdale
 Medway
 Gloucestershire
 South Tyneside
 Essex

Smith's Wood Sports College
St Augustine's CofE High School
The Causeway School
The St Marylebone CofE School
Thomas Keble School
Uplands Community College
Varndean School
Westminster City School
West Derby School

Solihull
Westminster
East Sussex
Westminster
Gloucestershire
East Sussex
Brighton and Hove
Westminster
Liverpool