

The Issue

“Over-complicated, vague and unambiguous” – these were words used by the Department for Education (DfE) to describe assessment levels when announcing its decision to remove these from September 2014. However, following the end of well-established attainment levels at Key Stage 3, secondary schools have been required to develop their own methods for effectively measuring attainment and progress in Years 7–9.

So what was actually wrong with levels? “Levels effectively became a control tool – and that’s not what they were meant for,” says John Henrys, Executive Principal at Brooke Weston Trust. “In some subjects the difference between A/B/C was marginal and open for interpretation. In the worst-case scenario levels were used to illustrate pupil progress that wasn’t there.”

Mark Woods, Chief Executive of Cambridge Meridian Academies Trust, agrees that change was needed: “Levels were simply not designed to do the job they ended up doing, and there was too much variation in the criteria for what constituted a ‘best fit’ grade. They didn’t work very well in terms of formative assessment and were limited in terms of scope for summative assessment. Saying that, teachers all knew and got used to the weaknesses in the system and made them work for the children. It’s what we continue to do with the A Level or GCSE grades that students leave education with.”

Nic Spearman, Assistant Headteacher at King John School, Benfleet adds: “National Curriculum levels enabled consistency across schools and as a result there was more confidence in a system we knew. Levels were all pupils knew, we had the security and we felt them to be reliable. However, it got to the stage where schools neglected the criteria aspect of levels and instead were looking at progress as moving pupils up a sub-level every half-term rather than providing valuable feedback.”

School leaders interviewed for this report were generally united in their view that what levels had become was no longer fit for purpose. However, Stephen Munday, Chief Executive of Cam Academy Trust, says the aftermath has left schools with a number of common headaches: “The obvious challenge, and opportunity, is how can we measure progress through Key Stage 3 with proper integrity? We had all got used to levels, even those who disliked them, and it was a nationally agreed measure. Now we have to ensure that, with little guidance on the issue, what we report to parents, pupils and the regulator is appropriate and supports progress. The assessment commission report laid out some key broad principles to follow, but it’s been up to schools to work out how to implement them going forward. Equally, you can’t demonstrate progress without a clear framework. It’s really highlighted the need to sort out the whole principle of assessment.”

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Executive Principal
Brooke Weston Trust

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Cam Academy Trust

Finding a consistent and comparable system was highlighted by many interviewees as the most significant issue. “The main challenge we were faced with was comparing like for like, and across all subjects,” explains Bethanie Goodliff, Leadership Coach at Ridgewood School. “We also lost something which says clearly to parents where their child is and where they are aiming for. We have clarity, to some extent, with Levels 9-1 at GCSE - but at Key Stage 3 we’ve had to find something that is meaningful.”

Dawn Morton, Executive Headteacher at The Duke’s Middle School and Lindisfarne Middle School, says her key challenge has to be “to find a consistent system to track progress across a wide variety of subjects and to build confidence in the system: staff initially, pupils, parents and governors”. Like Munday, and many others interviewed for this report, Morton also says there has been little guidance on how best to respond to the situation: “The changes were thrust upon us with very limited direction. Our local authority did not support or direct schools to work together in partnerships and therefore we have a situation where our feeder schools use a weird and wonderful array of systems that all work for them individually, but cannot be used to provide an effective entry baseline.”

The issue of entry baseline is also pinpointed by Cambridge Meridian Academies Trust. “When we were first told that Key Stage 3 attainment levels were ending we recognised that a rainbow would appear in terms of the information we would receive from primary feeders,” admits Woods. “We have moved now into a position of not at all understanding the data that is coming through from primary schools. This has been accompanied by a complete lack of faith in the tests used this summer. At least with levels we had some understanding of where we were, and had standard tests and a sense of moderation in English, maths and science. Now all that work has been undone, we are unclear about what to do. To measure progress, we need to know where we are starting from and where we are going to. This allows us to set milestones at various points in the journey. How can you say that a pupil is doing better than expected if we don’t know what expected is? You need something to pin it too - we don’t have that.”



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*Leadership Coach
Ridgewood School*

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The Duke’s Middle School
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School Trust*

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There is also a cultural issue to overcome in schools, according to Neil Maslen, Area Advisor at Plymouth CAST. “The biggest challenge is that secondary schools have become so used to and comfortable with levels,” he says. “Most teachers have only known levels. Initially there was some uncertainty, and no-one was there to help us, but that moved on to feeling quite liberated and being comfortable in developing our own system. People have been hung up on linear progress and now we get to choose our own terminology. However, the language of assessment is problematic. We have two secondary schools, one of which has 41 potential feeder primaries, and there is no uniform language. There is a lag in the language that primaries use compared to secondaries.”

King Edward VI School has also been keen to embrace the opportunity around developing its own approach to Key Stage 3 assessment. “We had mixed emotions following the end of levels, both within departments and between departments,” says Sarah-Jayne Whyand, Assistant Headteacher - Data and Assessment at the school. “On the one hand, nobody likes change and we all like to be told what to do. On the other hand, whilst we understood the levels we didn’t use them in their fullest sense. It has brought an opportunity to broaden yet re-focus our approach. Developing our preferred model has been a very long and slow process but it has given us an opportunity to come up with an approach that works for the whole school, at a subject level and for individual teachers.”

John Henrys at Brooke Weston Trust suggests that the ‘preferred model’ in schools should not necessarily involve dismissing the principles behind levels. “Rather than the discussion being about ‘life after levels’, what we are really talking about is life where there is an opportunity to do things differently but not throw everything out of the window and start from scratch,” he says. “In that sense, I think the issue has been misbadged. What is more accurate is looking at flight paths and the track from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4, and therefore what the points on that journey look like. We need to track, and for there to be measurement, but some of the principles of levels are still appropriate.”

And Steve Colledge, former Secondary Director at The White Horse Federation, believes the general direction of travel for the profession is understood: “Michael Gove made it very clear at the time - it’s up to the system to decide the way forward post-levels. Teaching has become too much about box-filling a number. Teachers must have knowledge of the child. Before the world of levels teachers understood the class in front of them. It has become a habit to set a module of work, teach it and test it. There needs to be more concentration on whether the child is learning the best way they can.”



(a) The image below shows the parts of a plant. Write in the boxes the correct name for each part.
One has been done for you.

(b) “It has become a habit to set a module of work, teach it and test it. There needs to be more concentration on whether the child is learning the best way they can.”

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