

The STEPS Approach

Darrick Wood School

Darrick Wood School in Orpington, Kent is the 'birthplace' of what is now STEPS (Strategic Targets for Educational Progress and Success in Key Stage 3), published by Scholastic. Darrick Wood sought to develop its own new assessment and progress monitoring, tracking and reporting programme for Years 7-9 following the end of levels in September 2014.

The project was led by Assistant Headteacher Martin Smith, in conjunction with a team of specialists at Darrick Wood, which holds both Teaching School status and the World Class School Quality Mark. "When we started this work there was a mixture of excitement and concern amongst those of us involved," Martin admits. "Excitement because it presented a genuine opportunity to devise an entirely new system from scratch, one that fulfils the objectives and ethos of our school, but concern because we were going into the unknown in terms of creating additional workload on top of everything else we do as teachers. Then the excitement really took over and now I believe we have a system that works not just for our school but is flexible enough to be adapted to all schools."

The cornerstone of STEPS is a simple grid for each subject and a progressive set of attainment targets that present challenge at all levels of ability throughout Key Stage 3. The grids are broken down into a template of nine 'steps' across four, five or six different subject strands. This level of detail means pupils can make fine levels of progress and teachers can create incremental, personalised targets based on assessment in Key Stage 3. 'Expected' progress is the equivalent to movement of one whole step in each year of Key Stage 3.

Martin explains: "At the beginning of the first term in Year 7, all pupils undertake initial baseline testing in the form of a written test or practical assessment, depending on the subject in question. This subject-specific testing gives every pupil an entry point into each strand. Through ongoing formative assessment the pupils' progression can then be measured over the course of Key Stage 3. Constant exposure to the 'big picture' is achieved by promoting the use of STEPS in class and more widely to parents."

An initial pilot began in September 2015 for Year 7 pupils and, at a presentation to parents in January, Martin says the positive feedback was overwhelming: "STEPS provides a very simple overview of where a pupil is at and what they need to do to improve. Parents have loved the simplicity of a quick check via the 'Step Point' score but also the level of detail that is there if they want to see it."

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They have realised the potential of having several ready-made targets and have appreciated the level of detail in each 'Step Grid' that the breakdown of a whole key stage provides them."

Teachers, too, have seen significant benefits already. "Colleagues are really relishing the advantages that such a focused approach can bring and, as they have learnt the system, have really come to value its structure," Martin reveals. "Many have commented on the new-found focus to parental meetings and the guidance and support it gives them during the report writing process. Subject leaders have started to analyse the results from each data collection window to identify strands of their subject which the pupils are finding more difficult and/or which teachers are finding more difficult to deliver."

It has also increased support for pupils, Martin says: "The level of detail has helped to raise an early warning to individual pupils, as well as teaching groups who are seemingly making unusual rates of progress. It has allowed them to put in place support for pupils and/or groups and in some cases additional training for teachers."

Now, with backing from Scholastic, other schools are able to purchase STEPS themselves. "What schools are looking for is confidence that any new system will not disappear overnight," Martin says. "As teachers, we don't want to be changing systems again in five years' time - we are looking for security, and STEPS provides that. We have shown that our system is effective - it measures progress and assessment simultaneously, and creates easily understandable data and a structure for teaching. It also ultimately saves time. There is initial work to be done in getting to grips with the system, that is normal, but once that time investment has been made the return is huge. Finally, it is completely flexible and adaptable, so schools can adapt STEPS for their own purposes."

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