

## Written evidence submitted by the Kyra Teaching School Alliance

### To the Education Committee's inquiry on Primary Assessment

#### Executive summary

- The Kyra Teaching School Alliance is an alliance of 53 nursery, infant, junior and primary schools across Lincolnshire, led by Lincoln Mount Street Academy Teaching School.
- The alliance has a strong ethos built on our vision of being 'ambitious for children', which is at the heart of all we do.
- Collaboration is a cornerstone of Kyra's work and this is a core element of the approach our schools have taken to the development and moderation of their own methods of assessment.
- The experience of Kyra schools regarding primary assessment has broadly reflected schools' experiences nationally, with frustrations around clarity of expectations of pupils, teachers, schools, multi-academy trusts, teaching school alliances, and local authorities.
- The purpose of primary assessment should be to support children to understand their own strengths and areas for development and to therefore enable better learning. It should also serve to inform teachers' planning and practice in a way that serves the needs of all pupils. Primary assessment should not simply be defined by the data requirements of the national accountability system, but should – first and foremost – be about understanding and supporting the progress of children across all areas of the curriculum and their development.
- School leaders and teachers appreciate that there has to be some form of national accountability at primary level, but are concerned that some areas of the curriculum have become so technical there is a risk of taking away the joy of learning for young children.
- In a system where schools are developing many different methods of assessment, opportunities for teachers and leaders to come together to discuss their approaches and moderate children's work are vital.
- The main advantage of assessing pupils at primary school is to identify their strengths and areas for development, including any barriers to learning that might need specific individual intervention.
- The main disadvantage of assessing pupils at primary school is that it can sometimes encourage a disproportionate focus on the core subjects of reading, writing and mathematics, at the expense of delivering a rich, varied and engaging curriculum.
- School leaders feel that overall the recent reforms to primary assessment have had a positive impact on teaching and learning, although they would appreciate access to more nationally recognised examples of best practice that have emerged following the reforms.
- Broadly speaking, school leaders reported no real issues with the logistics and delivery of this year's (2016) SATs. School leaders and teachers accept that there has to be some national testing to gauge pupil progress and to hold schools accountable for that progress.
- Kyra's teacher training now reflects key changes to assessment arrangements. Trainees are encouraged to find assessment models that work for them but that can also work alongside base school systems.
- With regard to existing teachers and leaders, there have been some national training sessions available, but the best development opportunities have come from local schools working together to look at what assessment systems they have chosen to establish and the sharing of information and learning from their different approaches. Kyra's moderation exercises have been a particular strength in this regard.
- Assessments at primary level need to be accessible to all children, so that no child leaves primary school feeling as if they have already failed.
- Looking more broadly, measures of assessment should look at academic achievement, characteristics, progress, equality and equity, and well-being. This is particularly important for pupils with SEND.

- Whilst colleagues felt there were no easy answers to the issues around primary assessment, they would like teachers to be trusted to develop and become experts in the new curriculum and assessment systems and to make the appropriate judgements.
- We welcome the recommendations of the Rochford Review and also the Secretary of State's announcement (19 October) that the DfE will consult on primary assessment in the new year.
- Our recommendations to the Committee are to:
  - support a period of stability with regard to primary assessment
  - request that the Standards and Testing Agency look at the accessibility of the SATs for all pupils, particularly in terms of the language used and the length of the tests
  - through this inquiry and its reporting processes, help to disseminate some of the good practice already occurring within the system with regard to primary assessment.

## **Introduction**

1. The Kyra Teaching School Alliance is an alliance of 53 nursery, infant, junior and primary schools across Lincolnshire, led by Lincoln Mount Street Academy Teaching School. Lincoln Mount Street was the first Teaching School to be designated in Lincolnshire. The alliance was established in 2012. Around one quarter of Kyra schools are academies and the rest are maintained schools.
2. The alliance has a strong ethos built on our vision of being 'ambitious for children', which is at the heart of all we do, including our approach to assessment. We are passionate about providing a high quality education for all the children in our schools, and being able to assess children's progress is a vital element.
3. As a professional learning community, we collaborate on our learning and research, undertake peer review, and operate an environment where staff feel supported in testing innovative approaches to teaching and learning. It is this environment that has enabled Kyra schools to work collaboratively with regard to primary assessment.
4. Kyra's experience has broadly reflected that of schools nationally, with frustrations around clarity of expectations of pupils, teachers, schools, multi-academy trusts, teaching school alliances, and local authorities. Whilst school leaders feel very strongly that the profession should lead and shape assessment, the different approaches to assessment being taken by schools has meant a lack of a shared language. A lot of time has been spent developing new assessment systems, with the concern that this may – in the short term - have been to the detriment of children's progress and development.
5. Despite the frustrations, Kyra school leaders and teachers have innovated in response to the removal of national curriculum levels. Schools have come together to engage in moderation of pupils' work and have renewed their focus on individual pupils through these discussions, in particular through looking in detail at pupils' skills and learning needs.

## **The purpose of primary assessment and how well the current system meets this**

6. The purpose of primary assessment should be to support children to understand their own strengths and areas for development and to therefore enable better learning. It should also serve to inform teachers' planning and practice in a way that best serves the needs of all pupils. Primary assessment should not simply be defined by the data requirements of the national accountability system, but should be driven predominantly by understanding the progress and evolving needs of children across all areas of the curriculum and their development.

7. Primary assessment should provide the opportunity for an ongoing dialogue between pupils and staff and between teaching staff and school leadership about pupil progress and development, including through effective feedback to pupils. Teaching and learning can then be tailored to enable all pupils to understand what they need to do next to progress and what this will look like when they have succeeded.
8. Regular testing helps determine where the gaps in knowledge and understanding are, so that classroom teaching can be adjusted to ensure these gaps and any barriers to learning are addressed. Schools with early years provision can use assessment in order to support successful transition to school.
9. Assessment at primary level should not be all about formal tests. For example, older pupils might be working on different subjects through investigation and working collaboratively to solve problems, providing opportunities for assessment through observation.
10. Assessment should inform a school's strategic decisions around provision for different cohorts and year groups of pupils. When this is done well it provides key information regarding targets and predicted outcomes in the core subjects and also enables provision to be specific and personalised to address the needs of individual children, ensuring that no pupil can slip through the net.
11. Age appropriate self- and peer-assessment processes are a good way of further engaging pupils with their learning, not least through providing them with opportunities to better appreciate and celebrate their ongoing progress as and when it occurs. This can be very motivating for children and ensures that pupils are able to put their learning into context and better appreciate how it relates to their ongoing development.
12. Whilst the move to assessment without levels has created a period of flux in the system, school leaders and teachers can understand why the decision was made to remove national curriculum levels, as they weren't helpful in showing what elements of learning were missing for each child. It was possible for a child to demonstrate the expected level of development but still to have gaps in the knowledge they would need to progress well in the transition to secondary school. Schools have subsequently been able to develop assessment processes that make the whole approach much more personal to each pupil. Children are better able to relate to new assessment measures which use more accessible language and better connect with their learning, and help to secure their depth of understanding. Setting the bar higher has been a challenge, as has the need to bring staff and governors up to speed so they can understand the requirements of new assessment processes and systems, and to communicate that the old system can't be compared to the new system. This has also meant a period of adjustment for parents as well as pupils.
13. Whilst school leaders and teachers appreciate that there has to be some form of national accountability at primary level, there remains concern that so much rides on assessment and that some areas of learning in the new curriculum have become too technical, with a subsequent risk to the joy of learning for young children.
14. Despite using a range of different assessment systems, Kyra schools have benefitted from collaborating to moderate pupils' work so school leaders and teachers can be reassured about the consistency of their pupil assessments. Moderation workshops have provided a constructive environment for teachers to discuss children's work and have led to a good dialogue on pupil progression, as well as leading to improvements in teaching practice and being a good source of professional development. Colleagues with specialist knowledge of assessment of pupils with

SEND have been able to support mainstream colleagues in their work to assess the progress of pupils with additional needs (but who perhaps do not have an EHC plan in place).

15. Moving away from national curriculum levels has created a tendency to keep children's progress assessments very much within the confines of their year group, often using processes which identify children either as working at the expected level, or above that level, or below that level, for each year group they are in. This can be a particular challenge for primary schools with mixed age classes, but is also potentially demoralising for pupils who are consistently identified as working below expected levels for their year group.
16. It is difficult to discuss primary assessment without reference to the early years, in particular as there is going to be a much stronger link between the early years foundation stage (EYFS) and key stages 1 and 2. RAISE Online is going to have, for example, a pupil's KS1 writing results plotted against their EYFS writing assessment. However, just because a child achieves a good level of development in the early years does not necessarily predict that they will be achieving at the expected level at KS1.

### **The advantages and disadvantages of assessing pupils at primary school**

17. The main advantage of assessing pupils at primary school is to identify their strengths and areas for development, including any barriers to learning that might need specific individual intervention. Starting with the early years and continuing throughout primary school, the best assessment processes enable pupils to participate fully in discussions about their educational progress, and for schools to extend these discussions to parents and governors. Having continuous assessment as the 'norm' in primary school can help teaching and learning to specifically address areas of need, as well as delivering a rounded curriculum for all pupils.
18. For pupils with SEND, schools are breaking down different areas of the national curriculum to make it more accessible for children with particular needs, so that small steps in progress can be identified, monitored and reported on, including through the use of case studies. The Rochford Review's recommendations provide much-needed guidance on the statutory assessment of pupils working below the standard of national curriculum tests at key stages 1 and 2.
19. For disadvantaged children, schools are clear that the same outcomes should be achieved for these children as their better-off peers, as this is the only way to bridge the persistent gap in attainment. Assessment, not least through identifying the impact of pupil premium funding on progress of 'Ever 6' pupils, plays a key role in ensuring disadvantaged children do not 'slip through the net' and receive the quality of learning, development opportunities and support they need to succeed.
20. More generally, school leaders report that the new assessment systems they have put in place since the removal of national curriculum levels are enabling issues with pupil progress and attainment to be identified swiftly, ensuring appropriate interventions are put in place in a timely manner.
21. The main disadvantage of assessing pupils at primary school is that it can sometimes encourage a disproportionate focus on the core subjects at the expense of delivering a rich, and engaging curriculum. The national accountability system and associated school 'league tables' place a significant pressure on schools and the combination of this high accountability alongside the introduction of new approaches to assessment and the testing of pupils on the new national curriculum has led to probably the most stressful year to date for teachers and leaders in our

primary schools. Policy makers must understand the impact that major policy changes can have when they collide in this way.

22. Whilst the old national curriculum levels had their disadvantages, they did provide a shared language of assessment throughout the system. The system now needs time to develop new language around the range of different assessment processes being developed by schools and to properly embed the changes that are taking place. This requires a period of stability for the profession, so that appropriate training, development and collaborative practice can become established.

### **How the most recent reforms have affected teaching and learning**

23. School leaders feel that overall the recent reforms to primary assessment have had a positive impact on teaching and learning, in that they have made leaders and teachers look more intelligently at data around pupil progress. They have also sharpened thinking around 'additional to' and 'different from' provision for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, as well as deployment of teaching assistants and sharpening appraisal processes.
24. The expectations of the new national curriculum and therefore the new national assessment tests, have meant that schools are focusing even more on some core elements of the curriculum, such as particular skills in maths, or increasing pupils' vocabulary to help them with their reading, writing and SPAG (spelling, punctuation and grammar) expectations. However, the best schools are working hard to maintain a balanced curriculum, with exciting lessons and where links are made between curriculum subjects to encourage higher-level thinking and high levels of creativity amongst pupils.
25. School leaders feel that government can do more to capture successful approaches to primary assessment that have emerged following the reforms. This would not be with a view to prescribing approaches, but to help schools to refine and improve their own processes through the sharing of practice.

### **Logistics and delivery of the SATs**

26. Broadly speaking, school leaders reported no real issues with the logistics and delivery of this year's (2016) SATs. School leaders and teachers accept that there has to be some national testing to gauge pupil progress and to hold schools accountable for that progress. However, schools would have appreciated a longer lead-time between the national assessment framework being released (January 2016) and the SATs being delivered.
27. School leaders also commented that the 2016 SATs were quite "middle class" in their content, particularly the reading test, and also required pupils to sit and concentrate for extended periods of time – automatically putting some pupils at a disadvantage.

### **Training and support needed for teachers and senior leaders to design and implement effective assessment systems**

28. With regard to initial teacher training, the recent Carter Review<sup>1</sup> says that: "*ITT should equip new teachers to use summative as well as formative approaches and should introduce them to*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/carter-review-of-initial-teacher-training>

*important concepts in assessment (such as validity, reliability, norm and criterion referencing). New teachers should also be taught theories of assessment - for example, why, when and how to assess. Trainees also need to be taught how to use pupil data, including training in basic statistics. Following government reforms to remove levels and not replace them, it is up to schools to implement an assessment system that best suits their needs and those of their pupils..... As a result trainees are encouraged to use school data, to use school data/assessment management systems to record and use assessment to inform planning and learning."*

29. Kyra's assessment training includes key changes to assessment arrangements, including a reflection of the fact that trainees may come across different assessment systems. Trainees work closely with their mentor to assess pupils against age-related expectations. The top priority for Kyra's trainee teachers is to see how baseline assessment, planning, delivery and outcomes then inform planning and next steps - and for them to see this as a continuous cycle, thereby enabling them to achieve progress for their pupils over time. Trainees are consistently gathering evidence - including assessment/tracking - to show the impact of their teaching. At the end of each of their assessment periods (usually one per term), Kyra's trainee teachers are visited by their programme tutor, who will expect to see evidence of pupil progress using a range of sources, including assessment/tracking. Trainees are required to demonstrate progress from a position where they rely heavily on mentor support through to them undertaking accurate independent assessment.
30. With regard to existing teachers and leaders, there have been some national training sessions available regarding the move to new assessment processes. However, the best development opportunities have come from local schools working together to look at what systems they have chosen to establish and the sharing of information and learning from their different approaches. Kyra's moderation meetings for its schools have enabled a wider field of practitioners to share their data collection methods as well as moderating pupils' work.
31. School leaders noted the findings of the recent workload challenge, and were mindful of their role in protecting staff from further increases to their workload, while at the same time ensuring delivery of an appropriate curriculum and assessment system that benefits all pupils. School leaders recognised that teachers at primary level can't be expected to be experts in all aspects of the new curriculum straight away, so some had inevitably focused development of expertise in the core subjects that they knew would be assessed in the 2016 SATs.
32. Kyra's school leaders are now at a stage where they don't feel they need more support with primary assessment at a national level, with regard to training opportunities. However, they would welcome clarity on what the government are saying is needed at the end of each key stage. Also at a national level, Kyra's school leaders felt that moderation of teacher assessments should be universal, not just picking out a few schools - so that the whole system could have confidence in these results. A core function of primary schools is to prepare pupils for their secondary education, so secondary schools need to be confident that the results of all the pupils they admit are comparable to each other.
33. Kyra school leaders are comfortable with the opportunities provided to them by Kyra to engage in moderation exercises and peer review of their systems and processes. Regular subject leader updates and discussions also ensure that classroom practice is kept fresh and innovative. School leaders felt that Kyra's role is to look at where practice across the teaching school alliance is successful and to disseminate this across the schools in the alliance. In this way, Kyra schools can have a positive effect on all children in the alliance, not just their own.

## Next steps following the most recent reforms to primary assessment

34. Assessments at primary level need to allow children to access them, even if they are lower attainers, so that they don't leave primary school already feeling as if they have failed. This then sets them up with low self-esteem and low aspirations at secondary level.
35. With regard to pupils with SEND, the primary assessment system needs to ensure that good practice in both mainstream and specialist provision can be shared to meet the needs of all children. Being able to demonstrate progress for pupils with SEND is crucial, in particular as this is often demonstrated through quite small steps which require careful and diligent assessment provided by a range of professionals.
36. For children with SEND in particular, but also for all pupils, there needs to be a way of capturing other elements of progress, not just academic progress. We discussed these other possible areas in our previous submission to the Education Committee on the purpose of education. The areas include:
  - a. Academic measures
  - b. Character measures
  - c. Progress measures
  - d. Equality and equity measures
  - e. Well-being measures

The full details of these measures can be found at: <http://kyrateachingschool.com/wp-content/uploads/Kyra-TSA-Purpose-of-Education-Submission-Jan-2016-2.pdf>

37. Whilst colleagues felt there were no easy answers to the issues around primary assessment, they would like teachers to be trusted to develop and become experts in the new curriculum and assessment system and to make the appropriate judgements on a whole range of levels relating to pupil progress. Schools need to be given time to adjust to the new assessment processes, to innovate and to share good practice, and to ensure that their emerging models of assessment meet the needs of all pupils and are well understood by the profession and parents alike. Some stability is also required to ensure that the level of workload and pressures placed upon teachers in particular can be managed more efficiently. We welcome the Secretary of State's announcement (19 October) that there will be no new national tests or assessments introduced before the 2018 to 2019 academic year.

## Recommendations to the Education Committee

- **Support a period of stability with regard to primary assessment** – schools have had mixed reactions to the removal of the national curriculum levels with regard to primary assessment, but the system as a whole has risen to the challenge of developing new assessment processes. Schools now need time to embed these systems, to train and develop their classroom staff and to support their pupils' learning in the best possible way through the most appropriate assessment methods.
- **Request that the Standards and Testing Agency look at the accessibility of the SATs for all pupils** - particularly in terms of the language used and the length of the tests. There are concerns that the content of the SATs would be more familiar to some pupils than others and could therefore risk certain pupils disengaging with the content and not performing as well as they are capable of doing. The length of time pupils have to spend on the tests was also an area of concern, as this may automatically put some pupils, who may have difficulty concentrating for extended periods of time, at a disadvantage. It would be helpful if the STA could look at these areas of concern when developing future SATs tests.

- **Help to disseminate – on a national level - some of the good practice already occurring within the system with regard to primary assessment** - through this inquiry and its reporting processes. School leaders were quick to praise the way that colleagues throughout the system are coming together to discuss their different approaches to primary assessment and to moderate pupils' work to ensure consistency. Whilst this is very much in line with the move to a school-led system, colleagues were conscious that messages about good practice may not be being shared beyond the confines of groups of schools such as multi-academy trusts and teaching school alliances. Finding out more about this good practice could be an area for the Committee to explore further during its oral evidence sessions, and to include in its report on this inquiry. This would help to disseminate the good practice already in place across the system.