

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales  
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and  
Education Committee

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg |  
Priorities for the Children, Young People and Education Committee

CYPE 50

Ymateb gan : GL Assessment

Response from : GL Assessment

**Question 1** – Within the remit set out above: what do you consider to be the priorities or issues that the Children, Young People and Education Committee should consider during the Fifth Assembly?

- i. Professor Graham Donaldson's *Successful Futures* report on the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales made a number of wide ranging recommendations about assessment practice in Wales. Good assessment is at the heart of good teaching; it is only through knowing the capabilities, strengths and weaknesses of each pupil that teachers can tailor their teaching for maximum effect. The Children, Young People and Education Committee should therefore focus on the uptake of Professor Donaldson's recommendations to transform the Welsh assessment framework over the course of this Assembly.

**Question 2** – From the list of priorities or issues you have identified, what do you consider to be the key areas that should be considered during the next 12 months (please identify up to three areas or issues)? Please outline why these should be considered as key priorities.

- i. As a priority over the next 12 months, the Children, Young People and Education Committee should look into the transition from an assessment system that focuses too heavily on accountability to one that places pupils' educational needs at the centre of the framework, as recommended by Professor Donaldson. There are suggestions that it will not be long before the Welsh Government begins the procurement process for new standardised English and Maths assessments as part of its overhaul of the education system. If this does happen, it is important that the Committee review any plans that the Welsh Government develops to replace the current national standardised tests in English and Maths to ensure that

they meet Professor Donaldson's objectives and avoid creating further top-down accountability.

- ii. The success of the new assessment framework should be judged by the Children, Young People and Education Committee according to the following indicators: the proliferation of low-stakes formative assessment; the appropriate use of standardised assessment alongside other forms of assessment; and how well teachers are able to keep their workload under control.

### **Delivering the principles of the Donaldson Review**

- iii. The most important message from Professor Graham Donaldson's *Successful Futures* report was that assessment should pivot from a school accountability focus to delivering information that is useful for teaching. This is a view shared by GL Assessment. It is our belief that the purpose of all formative assessment should be for learning and development. All future improvements to the Welsh education system will rely heavily upon the quality, reliability, and usability of information available to teachers about their pupils.
- iv. Any new or updated standardised tests in English and Maths must therefore have genuine utility to teachers and avoid simply adding to top-down accountability. The Committee must therefore give careful oversight to the Welsh Government's plans in this area, ensuring that the data generated by any national assessments is rich and granular enough to be of practical use for teachers trying to target individual pupil-level interventions. Assessment models that deliver only single subject "scores", essentially levelling pupils, should be avoided, as these do not provide the wealth of diagnostic and formative information necessary to guide good teaching. The Committee should particularly be aware that adaptive testing, whilst highly fashionable because of its ability to deliver a reliable score with reduced testing time, generally does not ensure curriculum coverage and is therefore poorly suited to identifying specific gaps which teachers need to help individual pupils to address.
- v. Since future improvements to the Welsh education system will be founded on the new assessment framework, new assessments must also be realistically deliverable in a short timescale. In particular, this means that the Welsh Government should avoid trying to implement complex data-management systems from the outset; initial focus should be on ensuring teachers have the information they need for learning and development. The Committee should also ensure that the Welsh Government is mindful of different assessment types and how they are used so that any new standardised assessments are age-appropriate and are suitable for their intended purpose.

## Formative Assessment

- vi. The *Successful Futures* report identified a need for more effective use of formative assessment in particular. The primary purpose of assessment should be to build a greater understanding of a pupil's needs so that teaching can better progress their learning. The best way to achieve this is for schools to have in place a comprehensive and consistent programme of assessment that builds a complete picture of child's capabilities, achievement and progress.
- vii. Formative assessment can be used to identify a pupil's underlying ability, or potential, at the start of a programme of study. This information can initially be used to identify specific areas with which a pupil will struggle, allowing teachers to provide additional support to help pupils to overcome these barriers before they become entrenched. Our *Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4)*, which includes a Welsh language version, is used by schools throughout Wales for this purpose. CAT4 assesses a pupil's ability to reason with and manipulate different types of material through a series of Verbal, Non-Verbal, Quantitative and Spatial Ability tasks, giving teachers a comprehensive profile of a pupil's core learning abilities. A pupil's underlying potential can also be compared with their actual attainment, allowing teachers to identify where pupils are not reaching their potential. This information is instrumental in identifying hard to spot pupils, those that appear to be progressing but are not in fact reaching their potential, giving teachers the opportunity to further explore and address the underlying causes of their underachievement.
- viii. Formative assessment is most useful where it provides diagnostic information that teachers can act upon. Identifying barriers to a child's learning or development as early as possible provides the greatest chance of teachers' interventions succeeding. The *New Group Reading Test (NGRT)* is a screening and monitoring test for groups of pupils that assesses reading and comprehension in a single assessment. It is used extensively in Wales to provide a wealth of diagnostic information identifying the cause of any difficulty that pupils may be experiencing in these areas. NGRT also uses adaptive questioning which automatically generates questions that are appropriate for a learner's level of ability. Teachers can use the information drawn from NGRT to design interventions that address the specific aspects of reading and comprehension with which individual pupils struggle.
- ix. Torfaen Local Authority adopted the NGRT to help raise standards across its 33 schools after an inspection report stated that performance in secondary schools was among the lowest in Wales

on four of the five main indicators set by the Welsh Government. Torfaen decided to introduce NGRT to provide an additional, reliable and independent benchmark to inform their judgements regarding pupil progress. The core objectives were to support teachers' own assessment, to provide important diagnostic information that would help to inform teaching, and to provide an additional means to identify children with Additional Learning Needs.

- x. The Authority now knows where its weaknesses lie and how they can be addressed sooner than before. Having started the process in January 2015, Torfaen is already seeing positive results, with an uplift of 3% in their KS4 Level 2 (including English and Maths) results by December 2015.

### **Standardised Assessment**

- xi. The *Successful Futures* report highlighted the importance of nationally benchmarked, standardised tests as part of a wider assessment programme. The Children, Young People and Education Committee should ensure that these assessments are being used appropriately throughout the Welsh education system. Standardised assessments provide an objective, reliable way of tracking pupil progress. However it is important that these tests are used sparingly and with a clear understanding of how to use the resulting data.
- xii. Standardised assessments are particularly useful in that they place pupils in the context of other pupils of exactly the same age nationally. This means that they can highlight school-wide issues, which can often be difficult to pick up because teachers assess their pupils with reference to other pupils in their own school; if all pupils have the same difficulty, a problem will not necessarily stand out. A nationally-benchmarked assessment brings these issues to the fore because pupils are being compared on a much larger scale.
- xiii. Year-on-year tests guarantee a level of consistency over and above that which can be offered by teacher observation alone. This is vital for preserving an accurate, reliable picture of pupil progress as they move between teachers, year groups or even schools. Having reliable data means that teachers can track the impact of their interventions to ensure that they are achieving maximum benefit.
- xiv. Judicious use of standardised assessment can support more accurate teacher judgements. In 2014, Torfaen local authority noticed that there was a large discrepancy between teacher assessment projections, which placed Torfaen first in the country,

and actual results, which placed Torfaen LA 16<sup>th</sup> and of 22 local authorities. Since implementing NGRT, Torfaen's projections and teacher assessments have become much more realistic.

- xv. Sharon Davies, Head of Learning at Torfaen LA, explains: "We believe that of our schools should have hard evidence on which to base their target-setting. We need to have a robust benchmark and we need to be outcome driven. How can you monitor progress effectively if you don't have a clear starting point? This is what NGRT gives us. It's a highly valuable check and balance."

### **Using smart data to minimise teacher workload**

- xvi. It is important that, as Welsh teachers transition to a new assessment system, that this does not increase teacher workload. Good quality, 'smart' data is crucial to a self-improving education system, but it is essential that this data enhances teaching and is never a burden.
- xvii. The most fundamental way to guard against increasing workload is to ensure that all assessment data is generated for a purpose. Teachers should therefore be mindful of the purpose of every assessment that they undertake and the way that the generated data will be used to inform their teaching. Good quality teacher training and professional development is central to building this understanding.
- xviii. Secondly, teachers should only assess as often as necessary. A guiding principle of assessment should be to "assess once, use the data often." Assessment data is only as good as the use it is put to, and it is essential that teachers only use assessments when they deliver a demonstrable benefit.
- xix. Finally, where possible and where appropriate, teachers should make use of digital assessments. Assessments that provide automatic marking and reporting can vastly simplify the task of assessment for teachers, ensuring that their focus is on how the data is used, rather than how it is collected, collated and managed.

### **Example of Best Practice**

- xx. Porth County Community School is an 11-18 Local Authority maintained school at the heart of the Rhondda Valley. Just under 27% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, well above the Welsh national average of 17.4%. Around 45% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas in Wales. Richard Jenkins, Deputy Headteacher, explains the challenges that this poses the school:

- xxi. *“We often have children entering the school with literacy and numeracy at below the expected level for their age. Typically, about 40% of our intake is up to two years behind where they might be expected to be. We do work with our feeder schools in our cluster, and that is getting better all the time, but our focus on Key Stage 2 to 3 transition is to work very hard to get our children and their families to feel very positive about joining the school.”*
- xxii. To achieve this goal, Porth uses GL Assessment’s *Complete Digital Solution* (CDS) package alongside the National Reading and Numeracy Tests and teacher-led assessment to gain a whole pupil view. CDS incorporates seven digital assessments, including *Cognitive Abilities Test: Fourth Edition* (CAT4), the *New Group Reading Test* (NGRT) and the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School* (PASS) survey, which together provide critical insight across ability, attainment and attitude. The school uses the data drawn from these sources to create a banding system in Year 7, allowing the teachers to target a great deal of their intervention work on the lower ability classes. The school particularly aims to improve pupil confidence and competency.
- xiii. Because of the school’s diligence in measuring progress over time and the quick turnaround of results from digital assessments, Porth is able to quickly and efficiently evaluate the success of its interventions. This means that failing interventions can be adjusted early without wasting weeks trying to establish if they are having the desired effect. Richard comments:
- xiv. *“We are much better equipped to understand our children very well now that we have this strategy. We are much more confident that we are targeting interventions properly and we are tighter in monitoring that we are on course to hit targets. This gives us much more confidence that these interventions in Key Stage 3 will have an impact on the performance of these children in Key Stage 4.”*

### **Conclusion**

- i. As the Welsh education system continues to adopt and integrate the recommendations of Professor Graham Donaldson’s *Successful Futures* report, it is essential that the Children, Young People and Education system monitor the success of these changes, particularly as they pertain to assessment.
- ii. The most important change is the shift of emphasis from assessment for accountability to assessment that focuses on pupil’s learning and development. For this transition to be successful, schools should make better use of formative assessment to build a more complete picture of a child’s ability

and evaluate their pupils in a wider context through the use of standardised assessment. Throughout the whole transition, schools should be wary of an adverse impact on teacher workload and guard against the generation of spurious data.

- iii. When the Welsh Government publishes further details on the specifics of the new assessment framework, the Committee should closely review those plans to ensure that they are deliverable and meet the expectations set out in Professor Donaldson's *Successful Futures* report. The availability to teachers of reliable, objective information on their pupils will be the foundation of a stronger Welsh education system and it is essential that any new assessments support and encourage better teaching, rather than recreating a top-down accountability system.