



**LIFE AFTER  
LEVELS**

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# Life after Levels:

## Report from GL Assessment's panel debate at the ASCL annual conference

How will schools adjust to a new assessment landscape without National Curriculum levels?

This was the question discussed at GL Assessment's Life without Levels panel debate at the 2014 ASCL Annual Conference.

The panel was made up of a group of experts who explored the concept of assessment and shared their vision of how schools could adjust to new ways of measuring progress.



### A new era dawns

From September 2014, schools will no longer be required to use National Curriculum levels or level descriptors.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector of Schools, has confirmed that Ofsted will not endorse any particular approach after this date, but the expectation is that schools will be able to show what their pupils know through some form of valid continuous assessment.

Now that schools have the freedom to choose the way they assess their pupils' progress, they need to decide what works best for them.

But what are the options, when should they make changes, and how do they ensure that the assessment system they choose is successful? These were the questions we put to our panel and here we summarise their findings.

### Panel of experts

The panel consisted of the following:

*Sue Kirkham, Curriculum and Assessment Specialist, ASCL and Chair of the Panel*

*Leora Cruddas, Director of Policy, ASCL*

*Patsy Kane, Chair of Education Committee, ASCL and Headteacher, Whalley Range High School, Manchester*

*Brian Cartwright, HMI Inspector, National Lead, Science*

*Andrew Day, Executive Director of The Northumberland Church of England Academy*

*Steve Walters, Vice Principal of St Peter's Collegiate School, Wolverhampton*

*Andrew Thraves, Director of Education, GL Assessment*

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## How to get it right

Naturally, there are high levels of concern among school leaders facing the prospect of a radical change in assessment guidelines. Such issues as national benchmarking and what Ofsted will consider a robust system are central to the discussion and will inform schools' decision making during the transition.

According to our panel, these are some key points that schools need to build into their decision-making process.

### 1. Take your time

Sue Kirkham at ASCL suggested that schools should not overhaul their assessment regime immediately. "You don't need to rush into anything too quickly, and we are grateful to Sir Michael Wilshaw from Ofsted for corroborating that advice."

Indeed, a recurring theme of the debate was that schools should avoid rushing headlong into an unsatisfactory alternative to National Curriculum levels.

Brian Cartwright, HMI inspector and National Lead for Science, agreed. He suggested that, over the coming months, schools might want to decide what their pupils should be learning year by year as that builds towards each end of key stage. "This sort of approach will help organise schemes of work, inform subsequent teachers, and give parents and pupils an idea of how they are doing on the journey towards mastery of the whole lot by the end of stage."

### 2. Consider the alternatives

Finding the path to successful assessment may be achieved in different ways in different schools. The debate included the views of two school leaders who have themselves taken different directions to assessment in their schools.

#### Retaining levels in the short term

Andrew Day from Northumberland Church of England Academy explained that for his school, there were compelling reasons to retain National Curriculum levels for their assessment structure in the short term. As an all through academy serving children aged two to 19, Andrew watches their progress through all the key stages during their time at his school.



"Levels have been really important for us in order to show teachers, especially those who are slightly weaker, how to move and progress the children."

As a 'requires improvement' school, there is still a lot of work to do, particularly in attainment at Key Stage 4. This has informed Andrew's decision to take time over the transition.

"We are going to stick to levels for a while and then we're going to work our way through into the new system."

Andrew is optimistic that with regular assessment and the use of cognitive abilities tests, he can ensure that every single child makes the progress they should. Ultimately, by moving away from levels when the school is ready, they will have the freedom to improve their practice.

#### Moving away from levels

Steve Walters from St Peter's Collegiate School in Wolverhampton found that National Curriculum levels were not working well for his school as long as five years ago.

"Levels had little recognised value," explained Steve. "You don't get a certificate at the end of a Key Stage, for example. We also found that tracking attainment over time meant that we had a mix of levels at the earlier secondary stages and GCSE grades later on, and that didn't work."

So Steve's school moved to a single grading system using GCSE grades from Year 7, so a Level 5 was a Grade E, a Level 6 was a Grade D and a Level 7 was a Grade C.

"The change did not happen overnight, but several years later, tracking over time has never been easier," he said.

One major advantage of using GCSE grades to assess students is that they are more clearly understood than the levels had been.

"Parents, students and teachers can see the big picture and the journey ahead. Everyone is on board. Parents are used to the idea that they're not going to see grade As in Year 7, but they know what their children are working towards and they know what the grades stand for."

**“ I urge you to take the opportunity to revitalise your own assessment system but base it on what you know and build it up over a period of time. Only by doing that can you get the consistency that Ofsted will need to see when they visit. Make sure it is underpinned with additional baseline information – we use the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT) to do that. It worked for us and it can certainly work for you.”**

**Steve Walters** Vice Principal of St Peter's Collegiate School, Wolverhampton

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### 3. Reassure your parents

Good communication with parents was a thread that ran through the entire debate. Steve Walters found that his parents welcomed the move from levels to GCSE grades, particularly as the changes were carefully presented to parents through a series of evening events.

Andrew Day emphasised that any new system needed to be as accessible to parents as possible. “Simplifying the information we give to parents is really important.”

Clarity in reporting pupil progress to parents is essential, whichever assessment system is used, as Leora Cruddas from ASCL emphasised. “Communicate with parents, inform the families about the language of learning and your assessment practices, and build that language with your parents.”

“*You ought to consider a structure that is helpful when it comes to informing parents, so that you can explain where a typical Year 7 youngster might be in order to decide whether they have achieved what they need to by the end of the year.*”

**Brian Cartwright** HMI inspector

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### 4. Involve your students

Engaging your students in the way they are assessed will encourage them to take responsibility for their own progress. Andrew Day recognised the importance of this. “Our children have to understand the process. If they are asked “What is your target?” they have to know, and be aware of, how they can improve.”

Steve Walters agreed that students need to be clear on the way they are assessed. “It’s important to spend time explaining a new system to students, so we did that through lessons and special assemblies.”

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### 5. Equip your teachers

School leaders will need to ensure that their teachers are completely confident with the assessment regime a school uses.

Leora Cruddas, ASCL’s Director of Policy, stressed the importance of building teacher capability. “The best teaching is not about employing top teaching strategies, it comes from feedback about how teachers are driving student progress.”

Sue Kirkham recommended that schools analyse the skills of their staff and plan a CPD programme that addresses gaps in knowledge and helps to develop a whole school approach to assessment.

This certainly rang true for Patsy Kane, Chair of ASCL’s Education Committee who is also head teacher at Whalley Range High School in Manchester. “We need to do our best to make sure teachers have a deep understanding of whatever changes you move to.”

For Patsy’s school, which has around 75 feeder primary schools and very high mobility rates across all years, she needs a team of teachers who can quickly assess their students’ attainment. “It’s going to be a huge challenge for us as leaders working with heads of core subjects and faculty areas to ensure that there is consistent understanding.”

It is not enough to rely on one or two capable professionals within your school to lead the process, explained Patsy. “You may be fortunate enough to have a really strong head of English, but what if you lose them at a key time?”

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### 6. Work with other schools

When schools work together, they can pool their skills and share best practice to the benefit of everyone. In the transition to a new assessment regime, collaborative working will be particularly beneficial.

Patsy Kane expanded on this point. “I’m conscious of the absolute importance of working with a number of schools locally or networks. Someone else might have a visionary head of maths who can help you, for example, and networking encourages teachers to work together.”

This ties in with Sue Kirkham’s advice. “Wherever possible, schools will want to work together to develop good practice and avoid unnecessary workload.”

“*One of the things we need to do is to establish collaborative partnerships between schools to show us we are meeting the same standards as the school down the road.*”

**Andrew Day** Executive Director of the Northumberland Church of England Academy

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### 7. Empower your governors

Sharing good practice also depends heavily on strengthening all of your school’s capabilities, including those of the governors. Sue Kirkham from ASCL stated that school leaders should involve governors in the decision-making process, from planning the curriculum through to the qualifications themselves and any changes in assessment.

Andrew Day found that his school had to change their approach in sharing data with governors. “My governors were not au fait with the sorts of data we were using, so they came back to me and said they wanted new data to understand the school and give accurate reflections on it to other people.”

Reviewing the school’s use of data helped to simplify processes and ensured that important messages were not lost. “We’re looking for the simplest possible approach that manages progress all the way through for every single child.”

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### 8. National benchmarking

With greater freedom to assess as they choose, schools still need to account for the progress their students have made. Brian Cartwright from Ofsted reminded us of schools’ responsibilities. “We’ll be looking to see if the work your youngsters are doing more or less stacks up to the right page in the National Curriculum.”

Whichever path a school decides to take, it needs to include some form of national benchmarking, according to Andrew Thraves. “Assessment needs to ensure that results reflect the picture across the country.”

This was the argument made by Leora Cruddas, who advised schools to manage the changes by keeping a careful eye on the curriculum in response to national measurements such as the new Progress 8.





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### 9. Have an eye on the future

In considering a new assessment structure, schools need to reflect on how well it will take them into the years to come.

Leora Cruddas touched on the importance of this. "You will probably want to look at your staffing structure to see how you might deliver some of the big changes, especially in the maths curriculum."

Patsy Kane talked about how schools' decisions will affect their students' futures, too. "If we don't prepare students now in the fullest sense they may well struggle at the start of A Level or university level."

However, the freedom to assess without levels may open the way for schools to embrace a system that works better for their own particular set of circumstances.

Andrew Day agreed that there are opportunities for schools. "The levels have been a restrictive practice rather than a liberating practice, and actually I think moving into this brave new world may help us to become better educators rather than just monitoring progress in a very limited way."

**“For all students to make maximum progress, schools need to work within a nationally benchmarked system of assessment that spans through the key stages, and allows for data to follow students coherently through their time in education.”**

ASCL position statement

### 10. The big picture

While schools need to work within a nationally benchmarked system of assessment, ASCL recommended that the data should follow students coherently through their time in education.

Andrew Thraves suggested that the best way to achieve this is to take a holistic view of each pupil using data that you can trust. He encapsulated this in a 4-dimensional model which considers the big picture in assessing a child.

- **First and foremost, the teacher's professional judgement.** If you nurture and develop the skills of your teachers, as recommended by the panel, you can trust their judgement.
- **Second, the child's ability.** You need to measure what they are capable of and gain an insight into unlocking their potential.
- **Third, the child's attainment.** This is how you measure where they are and how they are progressing.
- **Fourth, the child's attitude to learning and the school environment.** This should identify what is helping them or hindering them in their learning.

With these four elements, schools will know what their learners can achieve now, what they will be able to achieve in the future, and the best way to get them there.

**For more information, guidance and case studies on assessing in the new national curriculum, visit [www.gl-assessment.co.uk/levels](http://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/levels).**