

BASELINE TESTING

Just one of a profusion of expert challenges to the idea of baseline testing.. .

WARWICK MANSELL'S NAHT BLOG 31/03/14

<http://www.naht.org.uk/welcome/news-and-media/blogs/warwick-mansell/dfe-primary-assessment-plans-some-reactions/>

So the government is proposing to introduce a baseline assessment for children shortly after they start reception, mainly to facilitate “value-added” comparisons between schools. Statistically, **this is in opposition to the clear majority of responses to the consultation**, as I spell out below.

And, if we consider the detail of some of the technical objections, **which were voiced by a range of expert groups, which were not mentioned in any detail in the DfE summary of consultation responses** but which I attempted to chart in this blog <http://bit.ly/1laliFb>, there must also be wide concerns. These range from the wisdom of putting children through an assessment which will have high-stakes consequences for schools to perhaps more technical worries.

On the latter, my autumn blog setting out consultation responses reported how several groups were raising the worry that the new system **would give schools an incentive to depress pupils' results in these first assessments, in order then to be able to show greater “progress” with them on the outcome measures being used for school accountability.**

This, I would guess, might have serious implications for many pupils, if true, in that it would be giving them an unrealistically low assessment of their – I hesitate to use the word “performance” in such young children, but you get the picture – just as they are entering school. **How horrendous as a first impression, I think, as the parent of a child who looks likely to be one of the first to go through this structure.**

With high stakes remaining, if not being raised, for schools under this new system, this must surely be a worry.

But, again, this potential, I would have thought, major unintended consequence is not even discussed in the new paper.

10 Still on the baseline assessment, what is being proposed retains an element of choice for schools effectively being ranked and judged based on pupils' performance in these new measures. But again, there is an incoherence: a clash between the ideas of autonomy and centralisation which I, and seemingly many consultation respondents, do not think augurs well.

So schools are to be given two types of choices. First, they can choose which type of baseline assessment they opt for, from an approved list of providers. Second, they are even being given the option of whether or not to choose to enter the baseline assessment system at all, in that institutions can decide to have their performance based solely on pupils' “raw” results, rather than progress. In this case, schools would not need to enter the government's baseline assessment system, as the results effectively would not be needed for that school's accountability.

This might have its attractions to NAHT members, I guess, in terms of the flexibility it would give an individual school over the assessment system which might be best for that school and its pupils, however “best” is defined. But **it does seem to be me to be a recipe for confusion, if not chaos: if the aim is to compare school performance, using different measures to try to do that does not seem very wise.**

And the idea of allowing schools – presumably those with “good” intakes – simply to opt out of the system altogether and just be judged on raw results conflicts directly with statement in the DfE's press release on the reform which says that the new system would “expose coasting schools”. Well, I don't believe that “coasting” is the right word to describe any school under our hyper-active

accountability system. But, under this structure, a school with a very able intake which chose not to be measured through progress data would appear to be in a good position, suggesting the statement in the press release is untrue. So, again, I doubt the coherence of what is being proposed.

11 The idea of conducting a DfE pilot of baseline assessments currently in use, from September, sounds good. But in reality no pilot will be able adequately to judge how schools will react to these changes without making sure that they take place under the full accountability conditions which will accompany the baseline assessments “for real” in schools. In other words, possible side-effects, such as any tendency for teachers to depress the results of pupils as scores are used to judge the institution, cannot be checked for unless those scores are being used to judge the institution for real. And it doesn't seem that this is going to happen in the pilots.

12 On the floor targets – sorry “standards”, to move from Labour to coalition terminology, even though they are the same thing – the use of progress measures alongside “raw” outcomes will be welcomed by many readers of this blog, of course. But the standards themselves continue to look super-demanding, at least based on current performance.

So schools will have to fare badly on both measures in order to be deemed to be below the floor.

That said, the “raw” floor standard of at least 85 per cent of pupils achieving the “expected” standards in all of reading, writing and maths – which is unchanged from the July consultation – is much higher than the current floor.

Staggeringly, it means that the definition of the floor – below which schools will widely be deemed, presumably, as “failing” and where intervention and change of management could follow – is actually poised to be 10 percentage points above the average performance of schools now on the corresponding measure.

So, last year, 75 per cent of pupils nationally achieved at least a level four in all of reading, writing and maths. Now, 85 per cent will be expected to hit the new expected standard in all schools.

And consider, also that that new measure or expectation of performance is said by this government in itself to be more demanding than the current level four, having been set out in the July consultation document – and not contradicted in the latest paper – as the equivalent of not just the lowest achievement of level 4, as currently, but at the mid-level: level 4b.

As I say, this is staggering. And again, for all the seeming easy political wins of appearing to be tough and on the side of higher standards etc, I wonder about the reality of its impact on the profession in future years. Again, politics above all, rather than professional opinion, drives our system, with the results of this consultation perhaps underscoring that above all.

For consider, as my 13th point (nearly there now...) some detailed results of the consultation, as highlighted even in Thursday's document itself.

Of 1,063 responses to the DfE's question, in its July “consultation” as to whether the principles of that paper were right, 57 per cent said no, with only 18 per cent in favour. Yet, as argued above, I think the thrust of the proposals are unchanged.

The July paper also said the DfE was “seeking views on the most appropriate point for baseline assessment”, having tentatively suggested its use in reception. Some 51 per cent replied that there should not be a baseline check at the start of reception, Thursday's paper conceded, against 34 per cent in favour, with the detailed concerns of expert groups not even mentioned. Yet it is happening.

Similarly, 73 per cent of consultees came out against allowing schools to choose from commercially available baseline assessments, compared to 12 per cent in favour. Again, it is happening.

And 68 per cent said that if the baseline assessments were to happen, they should not be made optional, against 19 per cent who said they should. They are being made optional.