

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Performance descriptors for use in key stage 1 and 2 statutory teacher assessment for 2015/16

Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

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About ATL

ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. AMiE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members' conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally. ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

ATL policy

ATL's education policy is underpinned by the professionalism of teachers. Teachers should be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in promoting social justice. Development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders and assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools should work collaboratively to provide excellent teaching and learning with a broad and balanced curriculum, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. This means that mechanisms must be developed that ensure a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, and which supports collaboration rather than competition.

Response

To a large extent, the descriptors replicate what is in the Programmes of Study. For example, the KS1 pupil working towards the national standard in maths will be working slightly higher than the year 1 Programme of Study, while the pupil working at national standard will be achieving the outcomes of the year 2 Programme of Study. The Mastery level, beyond

identifying that the national standards are 'embedded', provide a range of additional activities that pupils might do.

While we would not expect the assessment system to be divorced from the curriculum programmes of study, this level of detail provides nothing more than teachers could have worked out for themselves. It embeds into the assessment system an idea of linear progress for children through the yearly blocks of the national curriculum – an idea that is expressly denied within the national curriculum itself (*Schools are, however, only required to teach the relevant programme of study by the end of the key stage*). It lends itself to a tick-box approach to teacher assessment, limiting itself to the skills, processes and knowledge set out within the programmes of study. Because of the high stakes nature of this teacher assessment (for floor target purposes) its focus purely on the PoS is likely to narrow the curriculum further. Where is the assessment of the wider aims of the national curriculum within these subjects?

Not even within 'Mastery' level is there any suggestion of pupils enjoying maths for example (although they are expected to enjoy reading), or using maths (by their own initiative) in other subjects, or understanding the uses of maths in the real world. These are difficult things to assess, but are identified as key aims for the national curriculum in maths. By limiting statutory assessment to what can be tested and the items identified in the PoS, the danger is that teaching, and learning, will be limited to those aspects. This is a particular concern within English, where speaking and listening are (once again) entirely missing.

ATL is concerned about the disparity in the number of performance descriptors across aspects of subjects and across key stages. No explanation is given for why some have four descriptors and some five, while the only explanation for some having a single descriptor is that those aspects do not feature in the floor targets. This is an administrative explanation, not an educational one.

No explanation is given for having both a 'below national standard' and a 'working towards national standard' descriptor. We believe that this will cause confusion for parents, as it is not clear which of these is the 'higher' attainment.

It is not clear how much of the performance descriptor must be 'attained' in order to be confident that a pupil is working at that standard, nor what 'sufficient' evidence is. But these measures are to be used to assess whether schools meet floor targets, making teacher assessment extremely high stakes. We know from the problems with the ways in which levels were used that within a high stakes environment this will lead to increased 'guidance' about what exactly 'attainment' should look like at each point on the scale in order to make sure that comparisons between pupils, and between schools, can be made. And because of the unhealthy close relationship between assessment data and Ofsted inspection, teachers will be concerned to know what level of detail inspection teams want to see in order to make sure they are not penalised within inspection.

The consultation document is somewhat confused as it states both that 'The performance descriptors are designed to only be used to inform teacher assessment at the end of each key stage (paragraph 10) and 'The

assessment and test data will enable parents to compare attainment and progress in different schools.' (paragraph 4). It is not clear how descriptors of performance can be used to measure progress, unless by 'progress' we mean whether more or fewer children have achieved the national standard this year compared with last year. The danger is that parents will expect to measure their own child's progress using this system – and we will end up with pupils who are 'at mastery standard' in maths at key stage 1 who can only be 'at the national standard' at key stage 2 because there is no other descriptor. Many schools will also use this system as the basis of their own progress measures within key stages, as it is even more confusing to use different terminology. This will lead to a limited and limiting curriculum and assessment system.

Conclusion

Assuming that these performance descriptors are only to be used at the end of the key stages, for national accountability purposes, ATL believes it would be simpler to use a single performance descriptor to underpin statutory teacher assessment – to ensure that we know how many pupils have met the national standard. This is the measure that should be monitored each year. As it is not yet clear that the new national curriculum is set at a reasonable level, we should expect some fluctuation around the percentages reaching the national standard, and potentially some review of where that standard is set.

We further recommend that the national standard should better reflect the aims of the national curriculum, both broadly and within the individual subjects being assessed.

It must be made absolutely clear, to teachers and heads, to parents and governors, to inspectors and to Ministers, that the performance descriptors are designed *to only be used to inform teacher assessment at the end of the key stage* (paragraph 10). Schools will then need to be properly supported to develop useful formative assessment systems that can also be used to report progress and achievement to parents and governors.