



How to keep hold of your teachers

New research into teacher retention has uncovered some of the reasons why teachers quit the profession, as well as those vital 'protective factors' that can help a school to retain, engage and motivate their teachers. Researcher Sarah Lynch breaks down the key findings

Recruiting and retaining enough teachers to serve growing numbers of pupils is one of the key challenges facing education in England. Many of the policy interventions have focused on teacher recruitment, but far less attention has been paid to retaining teachers currently employed in state schools.

Headteachers and senior leaders have an important role to ensure that when a school employs a good teacher they do their best to retain them. NFER's new research – *Engaging Teachers: NFER Analysis of Teacher Retention* – found that teachers who are well supported and valued by school management are more likely to stay in the profession.

NFER surveyed a nationally representative sample of more than 2,300 teachers over the course of a year and interviewed a small sample of teachers who had either left teaching or were considering leaving.

The research found that while the majority of teachers are not considering leaving the profession, the proportion considering leaving has increased significantly in the last year, from 17 to 23 per cent. Smaller proportions than this actually leave the profession (10 per cent in 2015 including retirees), but this figure too has increased in recent years, suggesting that retention pressures are growing. The research investigated how engaged and supported teachers feel and analysed how this relates to their intention to remain in or leave the profession.

Keeping teachers engaged is key to teacher retention

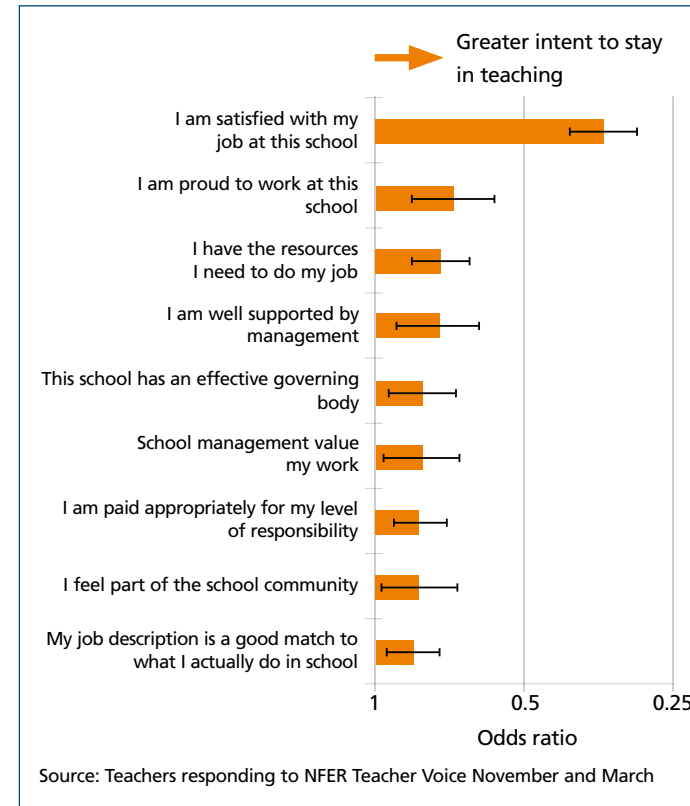
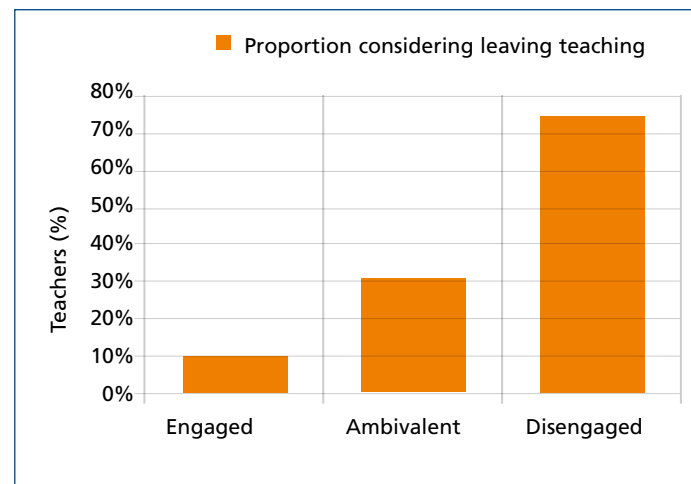
Teachers were asked about the extent to which they agreed with 16 statements about school leadership, reward and recognition, resources, school culture and ethos, and their own professional development. Their responses were used to derive a measure of overall teacher engagement.

The research found a relationship between teacher engagement and retention. Around half of teachers were engaged in their role, and the more engaged they were, the less likely they were to consider leaving teaching. While most (90 per cent) of the engaged teachers were not considering leaving, 10 per cent of them were. Losing engaged teachers could be a serious problem for the education sector.

Protecting teachers from the pressures

We interviewed a small sample of 21 teachers who had left the profession or were considering the move. They gave interesting insights into why some teachers may be leaving the profession and workload was at the centre of these. This was thought to partly stem from trying to keep up with the pace of policy change. One teacher said: "It's ridiculously hard to keep on top of (policy change). I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to be doing and not really sure if I'm doing it right."

Workload was also perceived to result from the pressure to meet the measures in the inspection framework, and the effort it took to gather



Should I stay or should I go? The relationship between teacher disengagement and their desire to leave the profession (below) and the 'protective factors' that lead to teachers remaining in the profession (above) as discovered in NFER's research

evidence that they were meeting requirements. School leaders and school governors were identified as having an important role in protecting staff from these pressures, yet this was not always taking place.

Not all teachers had asked for support though, recognising that leaders are under pressure too, or because they were concerned it would show weakness. As one teacher commented: "The pressures for people in leadership are so great it puts a lot more pressure on people lower down."

Teachers wanted more non-teaching time to plan, to reflect on their own practices, and to learn from others. Managing workload had, in their view, prevented them from having spare time for effective planning and reflection.

Many of our 21 teachers reported that they did not feel sufficiently valued for all of their efforts, by government or leaders in their schools. For some, a tipping point was reached, such as stress-related illness. The pressure had taken its toll and they decided to leave the profession.

Protective factors associated with retention

Further analysis of teachers' responses to the engagement statements revealed a range of "protective factors" which were associated with intent to stay – and are therefore likely to be critical for improving retention.

Unsurprisingly, by far the strongest predictor was job satisfaction, but other significant predictors included being well supported and valued by management. Having an effective governing body in the teachers' school also increased the likelihood of them staying in the profession. These findings strongly suggest that the right support for teachers could help to retain them. While receiving appropriate pay for their level of responsibility was a protective factor for teachers, a number of those interviewed felt that pay was not the main motivating factor. Rather, they felt other forms of reward and recognition would also make them feel more valued.

How to support teacher retention in your school

Monitor teacher intentions and engagement: The more engaged teachers are, the less likely they are to consider leaving. School leaders should monitor levels of engagement among their staff, either informally or through more formal methods such as teacher surveys. They may be able

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to improve retention rates by investigating the causes of any ambivalence or low engagement.)

Engage (or re-engage) the workforce: School leaders should reflect on the protective factors found to be associated with teacher retention, which could help to engage staff. These include the support they themselves give as managers, but also, job satisfaction, having adequate resources, and being paid (or rewarded) appropriately.

Support staff wellbeing: A greater focus should be placed on staff wellbeing. This could include schools having a governor or trustee responsible for staff welfare, or a member of the management team with specific time and responsibilities in this area. Mentoring and/or mental health provision could be beneficial for some staff. School leaders have a key role to play in protecting staff from what was described as a "tsunami of change". This should include being able to distil policy without it becoming burdensome for staff. School leaders should also help staff to juggle their responsibilities, including by looking more closely at how flexible working opportunities could be implemented more widely and effectively, to ensure that they benefit both teachers and the school.

Value and trust teachers: Too much negativity about the profession and too little support can lead to teachers feeling undervalued. Methods of engaging teachers need to take place within a positive narrative, to ensure they feel valued and trusted.

• Sarah Lynch is a senior research manager at the National Foundation for Educational Research and is part of a team of researchers who have been investigating the challenge of teacher retention.

Further information

The full report, *Engaging Teachers: NFER Analysis of Teacher Retention*, is available for free via www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LFSB01/

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Academisation: To change, or not to change?

Recent research into primary academisation, led by NFER, has looked at whether academy conversion has a notable impact on pupil outcomes. **Jack Worth** looks at the findings

More than 5,000 local authority-maintained schools in England have become academies over the last 15 years, most since 2010, in the largest structural change to the school system in decades. Academies are now an established part of the English school landscape, and the government announced an ambition for every school to become an academy in its 2015 *Educational Excellence Everywhere* White Paper.

Measures to encourage more schools to become academies are expected to be included in the Education for All Bill expected later this term. More than half of secondary schools are already academies compared to only one in five primary schools, so the vast majority of new academies are likely to be primary schools. But what impact has academy status had on the attainment of pupils in the primary schools that have become academies so far?

All of the existing evidence on the effect that academy status has had on pupil attainment is based on the experience of secondary schools.

However, a new piece of research by NFER – entitled *Analysis of Academy School Performance in 2015* and published earlier this year – is one of the first to look at the attainment of primary schools and answer this question. We analysed the 2015 key stage 2 results of sponsored and converter academies that have been open for at least two years, and compared them with groups of similar local authority-maintained schools that have not become academies.

Converter academies are schools with “good” or “outstanding” Ofsted ratings that chose to convert to academy status, while sponsored academies are mostly underperforming schools that converted to academy status and are run by sponsors such as businesses, universities, other schools, faith groups or voluntary groups, who have majority control of the academy trust.

Comparing attainment between schools to tease out what difference the school structure makes is challenging because of the many other things that make those schools different.

Converter academies tend to have higher attainment on average than the typical maintained school, but as their attainment was higher before they became an academy it is difficult to identify what effect becoming an academy had on attainment. On the other hand, sponsored academies tend to have lower levels of attainment, but also had lower levels of attainment before converting. Comparing the average attainment in schools of different types does not compare like with like.

We carefully selected maintained schools that we could use to make comparisons with academies that are as fair as possible: schools that had the same level of attainment, Ofsted rating, proportion of free school meal pupils, and number of pupils at the time that the academies converted.

We also took account of the intake ability of pupils sitting key stage 2 tests in 2015, measuring the amount of “value-added” progress they

made between key stage 1 and key stage 2. The results of our comparisons showed that attainment tends to be slightly higher in academies than in similar maintained schools.

However, the differences are small and are not statistically significant, which means we cannot confidently say that attainment in academies is higher than in similar maintained schools rather than the difference being down to chance.

For example, the proportion of pupils who achieved national curriculum Level 4 in reading, maths and writing was one percentage point higher in sponsored academies than in similar local authority-maintained schools, and in converter academies compared to similar maintained schools. This means that one extra pupil out of every 100 in academy schools reached the government’s Level 4 target threshold.

What do these findings imply for policy?

Based on the performance of existing academies, this evidence suggests that making all remaining local authority-maintained schools into academies is likely to make little difference to pupil performance, at least in the first few years.

We found no compelling evidence that academy status in primary schools is associated with improved pupil performance in the short-term. This raises questions about whether all schools becoming academies is the best use of government resources.

However, this conclusion comes from comparing the performance of different school types at the same point in time. We are not able to measure what the system-wide impact of more schools becoming academies has been on attainment, either in the short-term or what it is likely to be in the longer term.

What should my school do?

The average differences in attainment between academies and similar maintained schools are very small when compared with how much attainment varies between all schools. Academy status explains very little of the variation in pupil progress between schools. Each school’s experience of academy status is likely to be quite different to that of others, and little research has so far been conducted to determine which schools are making academy status work best for them, and how.

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Each school’s own decision of whether or not to become an academy encompasses a wide set of considerations and will depend on its context (if indeed it has the choice – measures in the Education and Adoption Bill mean that all schools rated as “inadequate” by Ofsted will become academies, and Regional Schools Commissioners have the discretionary power to impose an academy order on schools defined as “coasting”).

Governors and school leaders should carefully consider the pros and cons of how being an academy might affect how the school operates, and thereby enable it to, or hinder it from, delivering the best quality education for its pupils.

Schools that are already academies may have further structural decisions to make as well. The 2015 White Paper made clear that the government expects “most schools will form or join multi-academy trusts (MATs)”.

Joining a MAT has been described by many as like a marriage with no prospect of divorce. The Department for Education (DfE) describes MATs as “the best long-term formal arrangement for stronger schools to support the improvement of weaker schools”.

Schools considering joining a MAT should assess what benefits might

come from a formal grouping, alongside carefully considering whether they share the same vision of education as the other schools. A formal grouping of schools also needs a leader with the right skills and a remit and responsibilities that match the schools’ strategic priorities (See panel below for more information on executive headteachers).

• *Jack Worth is a research manager at NFER’s Centre for Statistics.*

Further information

- You can download the full NFER research report, entitled *Analysis of Academy School Performance in 2015* (June 2016), at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGGG01/LGGG01.pdf
- The NFER’s academies webpages can be accessed via www.nfer.ac.uk/research/academies/

Executive headteachers: What’s in a name?

A NFER report released in July 2016 found that the number of executive headteachers (EHTs) in England is rapidly increasing even though their responsibilities are largely undefined. Key findings from the report are:

- As schools continue to form groups, demand for EHTs is likely to increase.
- There is currently no legal definition for EHTs, leading to multiple sector interpretations of the role.
- EHTs need high levels of strategic thinking, and skills in coaching and delegating. They need to ensure consistency and collaboration across their schools, and have a strong capacity to look outward.

You can view the full report – *Executive Headteachers: What’s in a name?* – at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/EXEC01/EXEC01_home.cfm



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Effective school-to-school partnerships



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Enabling the teaching profession to instigate, develop and lead school improvement is increasingly viewed as the most effective way forward in embedding educational reforms. Robert Smith explains how this has worked in Wales through school-to-school partnerships

In Wales, policy-makers have been keen for the most successful schools to take a lead in transformation and school improvement through partnership and collaboration with colleagues in other primaries and secondaries.

For the past three years, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been analysing the impact of the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinder Project, or “The Pathfinder”, which was carried out in two tranches, the first in 2014 and a second in 2015.

The Pathfinder aimed to raise the standards within primary and secondary schools in Wales by facilitating school-to-school support to accelerate improvement. Lead Practitioner Schools are high-performing primary and secondary schools with a proven leadership track record that has resulted in high levels of performance and/or improvement over a sustained period.

Emerging Practitioner Schools have already shown an early improvement in pupil outcomes but some of these schools have a mixed record of in-school variability over the last two to three years and the support of the Lead Practitioner School is designed to assist with stabilising this variability.

A report into Tranche 2 of the project examined how school-to-school support raises the standards of educational practice and attainment. Overall, researchers looked at 20 schools in all – four matched pairs of secondary schools and six of primary schools.

The analysis found that most schools believed their partnerships improved standards of teaching and learning, and had raised pupil performance in maths and numeracy. There was also evidence that leadership at senior and

middle leader level had been enhanced and that schools’ data tracking and assessment systems had been strengthened.

The headteacher of one Emerging Practitioner School said he felt he “could really benefit from having a critical friend in an experienced, successful headteacher who I could learn from and who could support me to address the improvements I wanted in my school”.

Most of the pairings of schools decided to work on a small number of priorities, the report said, so they were not over-stretched and were able to devote the resources, time and effort needed to make positive changes.

Most of the staff noted the positive impact of the partnerships, with “mutual trust, willingness and respect between the schools which had facilitated effective collaboration”. However, there were some factors which might have constrained the relationships, including proximity and differences in pupils cohorts and characteristics.

One Lead Practitioner School headteacher told researchers: “The key for us in the beginning was trust and we are now in the situation where we are very open with each other, friendly ... it was about developing relationships, going slowly, getting to know each other and having the confidence to be open and honest.”

Teachers who were involved in the project reported that they had refined approaches to teaching and learning, which had had a big impact on the work done. Teachers felt more confident to try different approaches and to experiment with techniques they may not have used previously.

As a result, lessons become more dynamic and interactive, inviting students to become active participants. Quality of feedback was improved and teachers changed the way they asked questions, allowing them to elicit answers which delved into how well learners understood concepts and issues.

Some schools had also used the Pathfinder to look at how they might deliver the curriculum more effectively, including focusing on the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework.

Teachers told the NFER researchers that being involved in a partnership made them more reflective of their own practice, and they had looked at different ways of learning. This included examining how they used data

as part of teaching and learning to suit the individual needs of classes of individual pupils.

In primary schools, one of the chief benefits of participation in the Pathfinder was that it helped teachers to develop a better understanding of what made an excellent lesson. This was achieved through joint training sessions and classroom observations of best practice with partner schools – a process one teacher described as “stepping out of the comfort zone”.

Another found there was a transformation in professional dialogue: “It has raised the conversation about lessons – ‘this has worked really well’ or ‘have you tried this?’”

Teachers became more aware of different teaching methods, including varying the pace of lessons, gaining deeper understanding of the theory and practice of using phonics, and developing more differentiated approaches to teaching maths. They also became better at implementing interventions to stop pupils from falling behind.

At whole-school level, NFER found that what happened in one primary or secondary school in the partnership often influenced how things were done in the other. Headteachers became more reflective of their own leadership styles and in some cases, leadership teams were restructured as a result of the partnership. There were also changes among some middle leadership teams, with some middle leaders taking on new responsibilities.

“Most of the pairings of schools decided to work on a small number of priorities, the report said, so they were not over-stretched and were able to devote the resources, time and effort needed to make positive changes”

The use of data was also strengthened, with schools changing how they collected data and how they then used this to support teaching and learning, in particular in supporting individual pupils. NFER researchers noted that in some partnerships the staff at the Emerging Practitioner School raised their expectations of what learners could achieve.

At the same time, the report said, pupils were made more aware of their targets and the level at which they should be working. This had the knock-on effect of making them reflect on their own needs, even setting down their own success criteria. Partnership schools used pupils’ work from both settings to standardise judgements for assessment and moderation. In some cases, work from the Lead Practitioner School was adapted for use in the Emerging Practitioner School. However, what did not work was an approach based on transferring practice directly from one school to another, or where school leaders assumed that what worked in their school would be effective practice elsewhere.

As a result of all this, NFER found that: “Learners’ motivation improved and they were more engaged with teachers and the learning process. All of these changes were related to work to strengthen learners’ voices, through formal processes for them to make their views known about their own learning and other work to nurture their independence and their enjoyment of their work.”

The most lasting changes, researchers found, came about when there was a shift in attitude and culture, and this was needed alongside structural and procedural changes if reforms were to work. The Pathfinder appears to have helped schools to make sustained improvements.

The study concluded that the partnerships had been effective in supporting and speeding up changes in participating schools. This was achieved partly through matching up schools effectively, the support that was given by the Welsh government and the Project Champion, and the “emotional intelligence” shown by senior leaders in getting their staff on board with the project while being mindful of their emotions and sensibilities.

• Robert Smith is a research manager at NFER and has extensive experience of designing and leading a range of research and evaluation projects, mostly in Wales.

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Further information

- *Mid-point Evaluation of the Lead and Emerging Practitioner School Tranche 1 Pathfinder Project*, NFER, July 2014: www.nfer.ac.uk/path1h
- *Evaluation of Tranche 2 of the Lead and Emerging Practitioner School Pathfinder Project*, NFER, March 2016: www.nfer.ac.uk/path2h
- NFER Self-Evaluation Toolkit: This free tool was developed to help schools evaluate and evidence the work they had been doing as part of the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Schools Pathfinder Project. Visit www.nfer.ac.uk/seh
- Case studies of schools involved in Tranche 1 of the Pathfinder that showed signs of developing and sharing good practice. Visit: www.nfer.ac.uk/csih

Recommendations

NFER researchers recommend the following actions to enable sustained improvement in school-to-school collaborations. Schools should:

- Ensure there is a coordinated strategy for school improvements that responds to the needs of schools, but that different initiatives should be mutually supportive and not lead to overload or duplication.
- Embed CPD across Wales to build on the success of the Pathfinder. In particular, school leaders should develop the skills needed to work with other schools.
- Facilitate the sharing of good practice identified in the Pathfinder so it has the maximum impact in Welsh schools.
- Encourage further collaboration between schools as the Pioneer Schools start reforms to the curriculum and professional development arrangements across Wales.
- Ensure that any specific improvement work forms part of a joined-up approach to their overall school improvement plans.
- Continue to gather and share evidence on what works locally and nationally.



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The building blocks of Pupil Premium success

Drawing on the work of more than 1,300 schools, new research into the Pupil Premium has identified common successful strategies and the key 'building blocks' for their implementation.

Dorothy Lepkowska reports

How to break down the cycle of underachievement by pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and narrow the achievement gap has been an issue of debate for years. However, with the Pupil Premium funding came an element of accountability and an expectation that schools will use the money effectively to achieve the best outcomes possible for those most in need. But, with limited time and resources, how can schools be sure that a certain strategy or approach will work?

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has published a research report entitled *Supporting the Attainment of Disadvantaged Pupils: Articulating success and good practice*.

Commissioned by the Department for Education last year, the report found that schools had adopted an average of 18 different methods of trying to narrow this gap. It also identified common ground between schools on what strategies are effective, and highlights the experiences of the more successful schools.

The report draws on the responses to a questionnaire sent out to school leaders about the strategies they had used. The most commonly used strategies were also viewed as the most effective and included:

- Paired or group teaching.
- Improving feedback between teachers and pupils.
- One-to-one tuition.
- Initiatives introduced earlier, allowing them to bed in to the ethos of the school.

“More successful schools had designated staff to offer pastoral support and had employed strategies to ensure children attended school – such as calling home in the event of an absence, funding or sending out transport, and working with families”

Compared with less successful schools, more successful schools had introduced their most effective strategy earlier. More and less successful schools also differed in their implementation of similar strategies.

For example, when it came to small group teaching, one more successful school took pupils of similar ability out of non-core subjects for additional support. This contrasted with a less successful school which removed pupils from English lessons to use an online tool, supervised by teaching assistants who had no specific training.

Furthermore, as part of their feedback to pupils, the more successful schools had implemented detailed consistent marking schemes to recognise pupils' achievements and identify the next steps in their learning and time was set aside specifically for discussion between the pupil and teacher. The researchers found that the more successful schools emphasised teaching and learning alongside emotional and social support, too. They also had highly effective assessment for learning systems which were straightforward to administer, provided clear feedback for pupils and contributed to each pupil's tracking and monitoring.

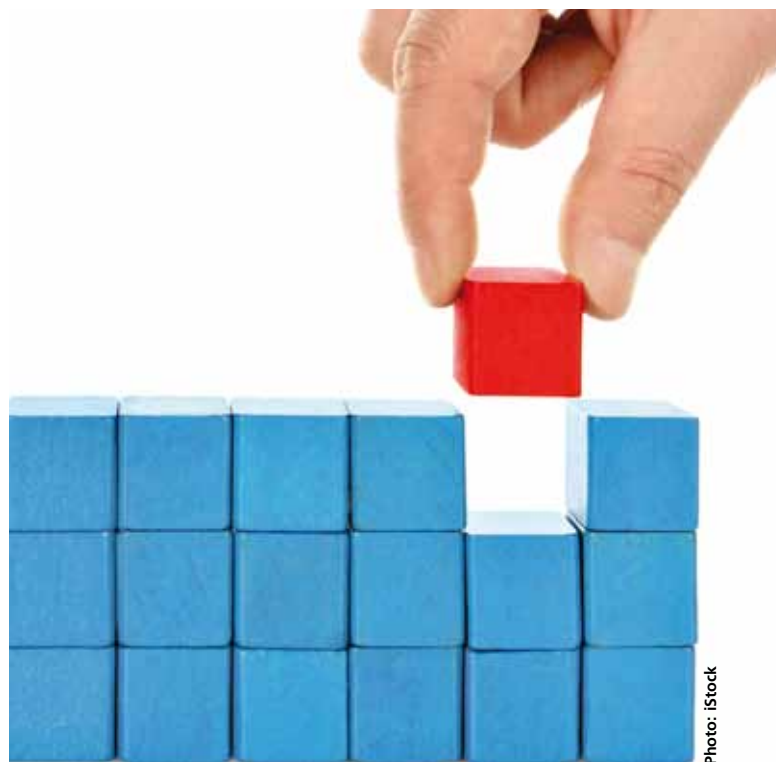


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Tailoring strategies by responding to the needs of pupils was another characteristic of more successful schools. The study found that heads from more successful schools “had adapted interventions or developed new ones based on their experience and understanding of what they were trying to achieve”.

It continues: “Their adaptations and developments were based on clear use of evidence, direct experience and observations of the initiative in practice. Less successful schools were more likely to be using ‘off the shelf’ interventions and less likely to be deviating from the prescribed approach.”

The effectiveness of approaches used by different schools was not, therefore, simply a matter of implementing targeted strategies but relied on them being “embedded in a whole-school ethos of aspiration and attainment”.

Crucially, the study identified seven “building blocks” that are common in schools that have achieved more success in raising standards among disadvantaged pupils.

The first aspect the schools had in common was a whole-school ethos of attainment for all, which meant the avoidance of stereotyping disadvantaged pupils as having less potential to succeed or as having similar barriers in the way of learning.

The head of one less successful school said: “Whatever we throw at these disadvantaged children, some of them are still struggling to make that progress. They just haven't got it. That sounds awful, but it's a fact of life. So we don't throw loads at these children. They make the progress that I think they are capable of.”

The leader of a more successful school, however, said: “When I am talking about our disadvantaged students I am absolutely determined that I see each of them as an individual rather than generalising them and moulding them together.”

The second common element was a clear strategy relating to behaviour and attendance, incorporating strong pastoral care in the form of social and emotional support and a quick response to non-attendance, as well as working closely with families.

The report found that “the features associated with less successful schools offer some potential insight into opportunities to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils: in particular, the finding that higher levels of pupil absence were associated with poorer outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in both primary and secondary schools”.

More successful schools had designated staff to offer pastoral support and had employed strategies to ensure children attended school – such as calling home in the event of an absence, funding or sending out transport, and working with families, often in the home, to address the barriers they face in getting their children to school. They also understood the link between behaviour and absence and emotional support, and had put extensive social and emotional support strategies in place including strong links with local mental health services.

“When I am talking about our disadvantaged students I am absolutely determined that I see each of them as an individual rather than generalising them and moulding them together”

Another building block was a commitment to high-quality teaching for all alongside consistently high standards and expectations of teachers and pupils, monitoring performance and sharing best practice in the school.

In the more successful schools, staff were able to meet the learning needs of individual pupils, which required them to know every child's challenges and interests, and to look closely at ways of supporting them to achieve their very best.

Rather than bolt-on strategies and activities outside school hours, in some more successful schools, pupils had bespoke timetables based on their needs. Children with specific learning needs were given the appropriate support, which might include group support for pupils with similar needs.

The effective deployment of teaching staff was seen as vital in raising standards among disadvantaged pupils, with the best teachers working with those who needed most support, and using teaching assistants to support pupils' learning.

Appropriate training was deemed vital by the more successful schools, many of whom had trained a teaching assistant in pedagogy so they understood the drivers for educational practice, how to provide quality questioning and give appropriate feedback.

One school leader said: “Before, teaching assistants would simply follow around students on the SEN register from lesson to lesson. They were as transient as the students. What we did instead was we made every teaching assistant a subject-specific teaching assistant, so they only worked within one subject. They became deployed by the subject leaders and had high-level knowledge.”

Effective use of data by staff and responding to evidence was a hallmark of more successful schools and enabled teachers to identify individual children's needs, review progress regularly and swiftly address underperformance. Such schools were those with manageable assessment for learning systems, allowing teachers to give pupils clear feedback. Where schools used evidence to support their strategies they were able to make effective decisions about what worked best.

The seven 'building blocks'

The NFER research identified seven “building blocks” for interventions to raise the attainment of disadvantaged children. They are:

- Whole-school ethos of attainment for all
- Addressing behaviour and attendance
- High quality teaching for all
- Meeting individual learning needs
- Deploying staff effectively
- Data-driven and responding to evidence
- Clear, responsive leadership

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The schools that were found to be more effective in raising disadvantaged pupils' performance monitored children regularly and scrutinised their progress. They also scrutinised the effectiveness of their strategies.

Finally, the most effective schools benefited from strong and clear leadership from headteachers who lead by example and set high aspirations. Senior leaders held their staff accountable, rather than accepting low attainment and variable performance. They shared their thinking and invested in staff training.

The report said: “Senior leaders in more successful schools said that deciding to alter or stop strategies that were proving ineffective was as important as deciding to adopt them in the first place.”

Overall, the report concludes that schools are able to improve disadvantaged pupils' performance and make a positive difference to their life chances. There is no single strategy that will make this difference and achieving better results for disadvantaged pupils does take time. Schools need to select the strategies that work best for their pupils and their school's circumstances.

In doing so, they need to bear in mind that the quality of their implementation of strategies is as important as their choice of strategies. Even with all of these building blocks, implementing change and reaping the benefits takes time. More successful schools reported that it took “around three to five years for changes to ‘bed in’ and lead to a sustained change in pupils' attainment”.

• Dorothy Lepkowska is an education writer who has written this article on behalf of the NFER.

Further information

To download the final report, *Supporting the Attainment of Disadvantaged Pupils: Articulating success and good practice* (NFER, November 2015), www.nfer.ac.uk/hpp

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The recipe for effective assessment



Image: iStock

In the uncertain world of assessment without levels, it is paramount that schools opt for solutions founded on experience and research. **Dorothy Lepkowska** looks at how NFER puts together its pupil assessments

Ask any teacher what the chief challenges are in their working life these days and they will probably mention work/life balance, the impact of curriculum reforms and the lingering fear of Ofsted.

But among the major concerns remains the brave new world of assessment without levels. Some headteachers have claimed that the final report of the government's Commission into Assessment Without Levels, published last autumn and focusing on the future of assessment in primary schools, has proffered little in the form of clarification about what should happen next. Schools say they remain unclear on what needs to be tracked, and how.

What is evident from the exercise, however, is that there is to be no replacement for levels, nor was the government's Commission willing to recommend any one system of assessment over another.

Schools are pretty much on their own in deciding how they are going to test, track, monitor and record pupil progress and those who had waited to see what was going to happen next will now have to make some decisions.

For some, the removal of levels was welcome news. Some teachers believed they were unhelpful and a distraction. Others had come to rely on them. Levels, they said, offered some sort of uniformity across the board, which had now been removed.

Crucially, they were concerned at how the lack of levels might affect the evidence required by Ofsted in making its judgements. In short, will schools be left alone to develop systems that meet their needs unhindered by the inspector looking over their shoulder?

Developing any sort of successful approach to assessment requires some understanding of the principles and purpose of assessment. NFER has many years of expertise in designing and developing reliable and robust assessment systems, and is able to support schools facing the daunting task of what lies ahead. It works with teachers to find out what is required and what works best.

So, how does NFER develop its assessments?

First, its researchers identify schools' needs. Working with heads and teachers, they find out what needs to be tested, the age of the pupils and what the assessment is intended to achieve. A small expert group then begins to develop the assessment in conjunction with schools, which help the group to identify priorities and features.

Every NFER assessment is carefully developed to ensure it is fit-for-purpose, valid and robust. The expert panel will consider existing evidence and research, which will help to inform and develop their work before it is trialled in a minimum of 10 schools to see how the materials or package actually perform in the classroom. As part of this process, they will conduct a cultural review, when an expert considers whether the test under development is suitably worded and presented to take into account aspects such as religion, ethnicity, gender and the school environment generally. The tests are then trialled on a more formal basis with a selection of schools and pupils.

A crucial element of assessment is standardisation. This reflects the extensive and robust trialling and analysis that is undertaken in test development. A robust standardisation allows teachers to compare the performance of individual children or a larger group, such as a class, with that of a nationally representative sample of pupils.

Now in NFER reading and maths tests, assessments can be linked both across and between years to show the progress of individual children or classes. This is important for monitoring pupil progress.

DEVELOPING AN NFER ASSESSMENT

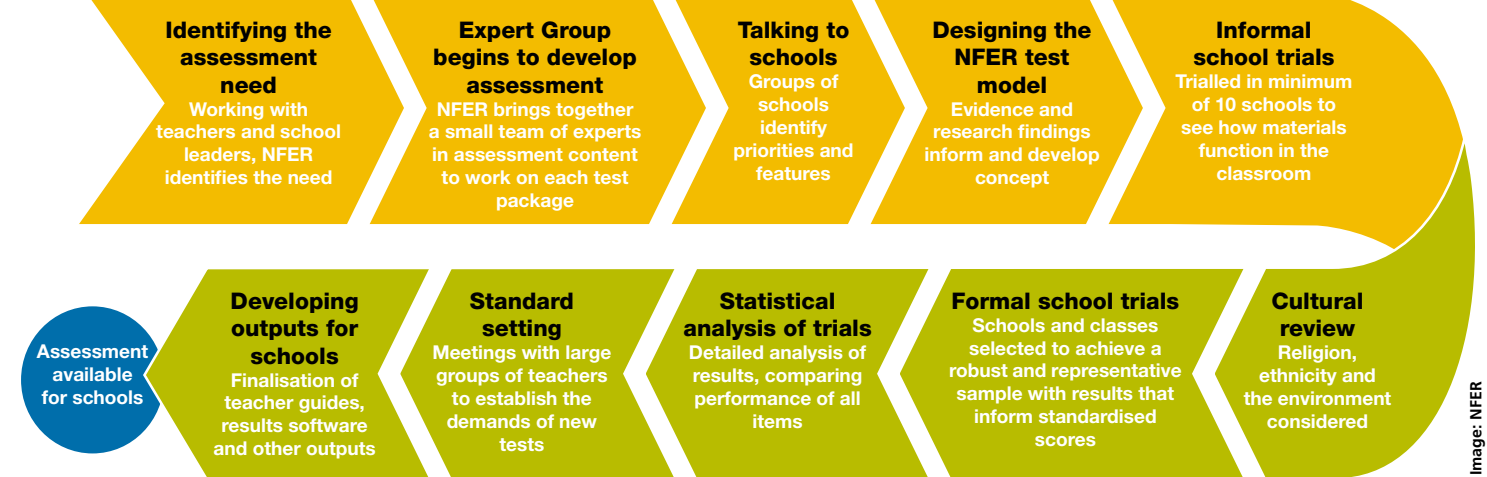


Image: NFER

A statistical analysis is carried out by NFER experts, in which the performance of all parts of the tests are compared and this allows standardisation to take place. At this stage, the NFER team will meet with teachers who scrutinise the tests and provide another perspective on the level of demand of the assessment. Once these have been agreed, the NFER produces teacher guides, software and any necessary resources.

NFER regularly engages with around half of all schools in England and 55 per cent of all state-funded schools, plus around 46 per cent of state schools in Wales in any one year. Overall, that means around 280,000 pupils and 8,000 teachers have an input into the work of NFER.

Its experts – in such varied fields as curriculum, assessment and qualifications, test development, reducing attainment gaps and supporting education – have a reputation for being professional, reliable, trusted and rigorous, and the Foundation is recognised as a leading independent education research organisation with its evidence frequently cited in government reports and used to inform policy-making.

In-depth: The illustration shows the extensive process that is completed in order to create an NFER assessment

She continued: “This expertise enables us to support schools in developing the best approach to assessment for their particular context, their curriculum, pupils and staff.”

• *Dorothy Lepkowska is a freelance education writer.*

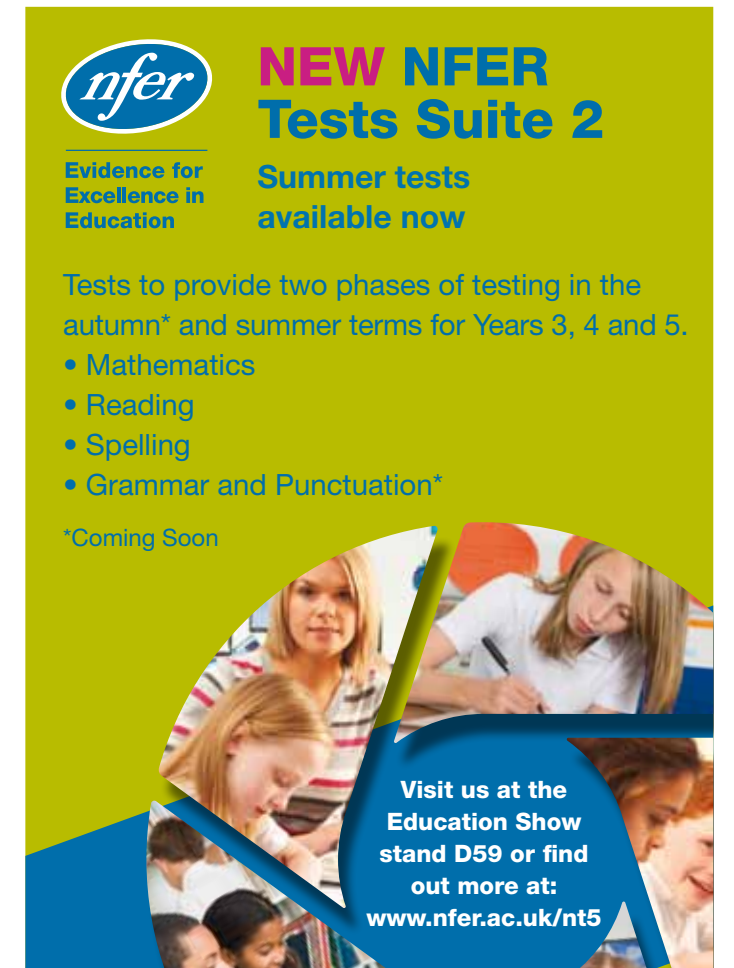
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“The NFER team will meet with teachers who scrutinise the tests and provide another perspective on the level of demand of the assessment. Once these have been agreed, the NFER produces teacher guides, software and any necessary resources”

But it is NFER's Centre for Assessment that continues to be one of the areas of highest demand. To support schools facing the challenges ahead, NFER devised a series of practical guides to areas of the new curriculum and assessment of pupils at key stage 2. It updated its tests to reflect the new requirements and talked to teachers about how they envisage the future without national curriculum levels.

The team at the centre has also been developing NFER's Reception Baseline Assessment and the organisation was one of three chosen by the Department for Education as an approved provider of these assessments. NFER experts also work closely with the Standards and Testing Agency as it delivers national assessment from early years to the end of key stage 2 in England. This has involved the development of questions and large-scale trialling of national assessment.

Liz Twist, head of the NFER Centre for Assessment, said: “Developing a successful approach to assessment in these changing times depends on a clear understanding of the purpose and principles of assessment. NFER has many years' experience designing robust and reliable tests across the primary phase.”



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Summer-born pupils: What's the evidence?



Photo: iStock

The government recently decided to give the parents of summer-born children the right to delay their child's entry to reception. **Jack Worth** considers the implications of this policy, its potential impact on disadvantaged families, and other possible alternatives

For decades, research has found large differences in test scores between autumn-born and summer-born pupils in attainment at school (1).

The differences are evident at the earliest ages and remain (though are smaller) at GCSE and A level, and in further and higher education too (2).

The artificial advantage given to autumn-born pupils in tests of educational attainment can have an impact on their wellbeing at school, and matters for pupils' later outcomes.

There are, of course, other characteristics which affect attainment – in particular, coming from a disadvantaged background (which has a much larger effect on attainment than month of birth), having an SEN, and gender. However, many consider the lottery of birth date to be particularly unfair, and one which has not been properly addressed in our education system.

On average, the oldest in the class outperform the youngest in tests of attainment because they are older when they are tested (3). Even when all pupils have had the same amount of schooling at the time of any test, the oldest have been alive for longer, giving their brain longer to develop and having more time interacting with their parents, their family and the world. Which children are the youngest in the class and which are the oldest is determined almost completely at random because it is difficult to manipulate.

So the government's willingness to solve the problem that arises from within-year age differences should be welcomed. A new policy announced recently proposes to allow parents of summer-born pupils (covering those born between April 1 and August 31) to have the option of delaying their child's entry into reception class (see panel, opposite).

For years, some parents have campaigned for the right to delay their summer-born child's entry to reception. Their motivation is understandable and clear: if their child was allowed to wait another year they would benefit from becoming the oldest in the class rather than the youngest.

“Even when all pupils have had the same amount of schooling at the time of any test, the oldest have been alive for longer, giving their brain longer to develop and having more time interacting with their parents, their family and the world”

“If pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to delay entry to primary school, then the already large attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers will widen”

Let's follow the incentives presented to parents by the new policy to their extreme logical conclusion. Being among the oldest pupils in the class is best and being the youngest the worst, so all parents of summer-born children could potentially choose to delay their child's entry to primary school.

This will, of course, depend on what the alternatives are – what kind of free entitlement to another year of pre-school will be on offer to children who don't start reception class at age 4? Peer effects will also come into play – children will want to do what their friends are doing, whether that means staying in pre-school or starting in reception class.

Year groups would then be made up of summer-born pupils as the oldest in the year and spring-born the youngest in the year. This would simply shift the oldest/youngest threshold from September 1 to April 1 and fail to solve the underlying problem that relatively older children will perform better, on average, in tests than younger children.

In practice, however, we know that parents from different backgrounds tend to behave differently. Our recent research, entitled *School Choice: The parent view* (4), showed that parents with higher incomes tend to value examination results in their choice of school more than lower-income parents.

American research from 2013 (5) suggests that it is likely that the parents who choose to exercise their opportunity to delay school entry will disproportionately come from more advantaged backgrounds (this hypothesis will be easy to test using future School Census data).

If pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to delay entry to primary school, then the already large attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers will widen, undermining one of the government's key commitments.

So, what are the alternatives? Part of the answer could be to make greater use of age-standardised test scores (6). Age standardisation is used in many tests of educational attainment to overcome the problem of within-year age. Because within-year age is randomly determined we can accurately predict what attainment level younger pupils would have achieved if they had been older, and vice-versa. Age standardisation scores pupils on a common scale and removes the effect of their age on raw marks on a test.

Age standardised scores are already used widely: for example, the NFER Baseline assessment provides schools with age-standardised scores (as well as scores not adjusted for age) for pupils in their first few weeks of primary school (7). They allow teachers to assess whether children are achieving

The DfE's summer-born policy

In September, schools minister Nick Gibb said the current system for handling summer-born admissions was “flawed”. In an open letter to parents, local authorities, schools and admission authorities, he said that while parents could request that their child begin school in reception class rather than year 1, they often found themselves unable to agree with admissions authorities on what was best for the child.

He was concerned that some parents felt “forced to send their child to school before they are ready and before they are required to do so, or else miss out on their reception year at school”.

He was also worried about stories of some children being admitted outside of the normal age group but then later being required to miss a year and move up against their wishes.

The letter states: “We have, therefore, decided that it is necessary to amend the School Admissions Code further to ensure that summer-born children can be admitted to the reception class at the age of five if it is in line with their parents' wishes, and to ensure that those children are able to remain with that cohort as they progress through school.”

You can read Mr Gibb's letter at <http://bit.ly/1hS7oKp>

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effectively, given their age, and give a better indication of children's potential than looking at raw scores alone.

Some have argued that high-stakes GCSEs and A levels that influence pupils' progression into further and higher education should also be age-adjusted. However, as the Institute of Fiscal Studies has argued, “when pupils leave school, they should take with them their non-age-adjusted grades, to ensure that employers can be confident that pupils have achieved a particular absolute standard”.

This perennial question is a difficult one with no straightforward solution. A greater focus on children's progress, and ensuring that those who are struggling (for whatever reason) get high-quality teaching, will help address month of birth effects.

• Jack Worth is a research manager at NFER.

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