

Reflection

Review of Durrington High School's assessment without levels approach – written by Hannah Knox (Subject Leader in Geography at The Angmering School)

The Assessment without Levels approach within the geography department at Durrington High School fits very clearly with the school's ethos to 'Go beyond your best'. By sharing the excellence criteria as the only success criteria, students are encouraged to work towards the highest standards and to aim to produce the best quality work at all times. This also allows the department to work towards the school aim of true assessment without levels where no student is ever told their baseline or their achievement on a piece of work – they are simply told if the work is above, on or below expected and ways to improve. This totally overwrites the previous levels system and allows the students to be able to concentrate on their own individual skills and knowledge and improving these each assessment without being concerned with what level they are currently working at allowing a growth mindset approach to any assessment work.

A major strength of this approach is it is school-wide. This means that this is accepted and expected by students and the teaching staff have managed a culture shift this year. The knowledge and skills sections of each assessment provide continuity throughout key stage 3 and this allows clear links to the GA framework throughout. By drawing on the skills down from GCSE, this also allows a strong foundation during years 7, 8 and 9. The curriculum at key stage three was also planned from the assessment first which automatically allows for progress and interweaving approach which allowed for any gaps in skills to be addressed. The skills are also mapped for repetition across key stage three which allow for deepening understanding over time.

A weakness of this approach, as with all of the work on assessment without levels across the country, is that this work has only just come to the end of the first trial year. Durrington High School only adopted this approach with year 8 this year, the entry year for the school at present. This means that, long term, there are potential pitfalls which are currently unknown. One key area is that the school are aiming not to share targets for GCSE in the future to try to encourage students to not be restricted by a letter or number. Parents are currently pleased with the system and that their children are 'making expected progress', however if a student's expected progress at GCSE is a D grade equivalent, parents may be happy with progress until grades are released and places for further education are restricted.

Another area for improvement of the Durrington approach is that it is not linked currently to Key Stage two in the locality. Although the transition has been considered through the GA benchmarks, a more concrete approach with feeder schools could support a clear cross over between primary and secondary school which will then ensure that the baseline expected skills in year 7 have been achieved.

Overall, students seem very positive about the approach at Durrington and have transitioned well to only having 'What Went Well' and 'Even Better If' feedback which has meant that, within the course of a school year, there is no longer any talk about levels and grades in year 8. Parents in year 8 have taken longer to be convinced on the new system although I would suspect this is due to the increased focus on levels in primary schools over the past 3 or 4 years which has then made the transition to a new system more complicated.

The Durrington approach has been designed to ensure pupil progress and to keep a clear focus on working beyond expected progress. The level of challenge to students is admirable and the ways these have been clearly applied to knowledge and skills make this a robust assessment system. The first time this will be used across the whole of key stage three is with year 7 in 2015 and, therefore, the real test will be the lessons learnt by the end of 2018 and, more importantly, through the GCSE results in 2020.