# Best Practice Network school improvement library

## To accurately capture students’ progress in the Foundation subjects for students working below National expectations

### Headteacher, Special School, North West

Tags: Special, assessment, foundation

### The issue

* Need to review assessment practices in response to national assessment reform
* Difficulty assessing children working below national expectations
* Need to establish accurate baselines and progress tracking
* Disparity in pupil progress between Core and Foundation subjects
* Inconsistent assessment practices across Foundation subjects

Following the removal of National curriculum levels, assessing students working below national expectations has become increasingly challenging. As a secondary special school, receiving students who are working below “The Standard,” the importance of accurate baselines and progress tracking, grounded in robust practice, has never been more significant than it is now.

Since the removal of National Curriculum levels there has been significant assessment support directed at the Core subjects of English, Mathematics, Science and Computing. However, there has been little support or endorsed resources for supporting the assessment of the Foundation subjects (Geography, History, Religious Education, Art, Music, Citizenship, Modern Foreign Language and Physical Education). This has led to inconsistent assessment practices that are not robust. The impact of this is that I cannot accurately gauge student progress in these subjects, intervene in a timely manner or ensure that every student is making the best possible progress in all areas of the curriculum.

The project objective is to have consistent assessment practices that are robust, in all subjects across the school. The impact of robust assessment practices in all subjects will be that an accurate picture of every student’s progress will be available to all leaders to inform strategic planning and all teachers to support academic development and wellbeing of each and every student.

### The solution

* Review of assessment practices across subjects
* Termly review of pupil data
* Communicate the notion that every area of the curriculum is valued
* Develop partnerships with other schools
* Establish a programme of CPD for subject staff and visits to other schools
* Distributed leadership to subject leads
* Organise regular assessment observations and meetings
* Exploit assessment expertise locally
* Work in partnership to develop assessment monitoring and reporting software

The drivers of change are the removal of National Curriculum levels, The Rochford review, Secondary accountability measures and the implementation of Progress 8 and Attainment 8, and in particular the Annex that shows predicted GCSE scores for 11 year olds working. I therefore needed a system of tracking assessment and target setting that is as challenging as the recommendations in the Secondary accountability Measures (January 2018). It was during this process that it became apparent to me that assessment practices across the school were not consistent. Subject leaders of the core subjects, English, Mathematics, Science and Computing, were embracing the changes and moving forward appropriately. However, the subject leaders of the Foundation subjects, Geography, History, Religious Education, Art, Music, Citizenship, Modern Foreign Language and Physical Education, were not able to demonstrate consistent assessment practices.

At the end of the Summer term 2017, data analysis showed a disparity between the progress students were making in the Core subjects compared to the Foundation subjects, particularly in Years 8, 9 and 10. The Inspection data dashboard, (IDSR), and The Analyse School Performance, (ASP), reports do not identify this issue. All our students have an Education, Health and Care Plan, (EHCP) and are working below national expectations. Both the IDSR and ASP analyse performance of students who are able to take GCSE examinations. We have some individual students who are capable of taking GCSEs but unfortunately the recent overhaul of the examination system has put our students, students with retention as a major stumbling block, at a major disadvantage. Hence, very little useable information is now available in the IDSR and the ASP reports. This is a further reason why the school’s own data must be credible and robust.

The School has gone through a period of transition following the resignation of the Headteacher and a senior leader. The substantive Headteacher started in January 2018 and set about recruiting and re-organising the governing board. It is due to these changes that a true supportive relationship with the governing body and the school commenced in February 2018. It was at this time that I was able to present my findings to the governing body. Since this initial presentation our Chair of governors is a regular visitor to the school and I have been able to keep her updated with the progress of the project.

I needed to address the mind-set of Core subjects versus Foundation subjects. This stems from Ofsted focussing on the Core subjects in special school contexts. I produced a report on student progress and I gave a presentation to the staff where I highlighted strengths in many subjects but equally posed questions that would provoke discussion.

I was aware that if I could get the subject leaders to recognise for themselves that there was an issue that needed addressing then they would take ownership of the issue themselves. I did this by producing a series of graphs that highlighted the issue, but rather than presenting these graphs, I gave them to groups of teachers and asked them to discuss the pattern they could see. I wanted to generate high challenge, low threat, in order that I could get the best possible “buy in,” from the subject leaders. I was determined that I must focus the shift of our attention away from simply examining the Core subjects and be aware that this must not be a hollow exercise. Standards in the Foundation subjects had to rise. It was essential that the teaching team constantly seek to develop their practice. I therefore facilitated those learning opportunities.

When teachers have more control over curriculum design, teaching methods, and student assessment, they are more inspired. I wanted to be the facilitator of change, and for the subject leaders to determine the direction. Giving teacher’s ownership aids the process of change. I had to facilitate the right resources, people, time, finances and teaching resources in order for this plan to be a success.

I created new learning opportunities for the teaching staff, initially setting up the sharing of good practice within the school and using my contacts within the area to set up new learning opportunities between the schools. This is particularly important as Pasi Salberg states that, “competition among schools, prescriptions of teaching and learning, and test-based accountability are the most common toxic aspects of today’s school systems.”

Hogan reports on the Singapore model and in particular the, “Teach Less, Learn More.” This framework urged teachers to focus on the “quality” of learning. Tim Oates uses this idea in many of his speeches to demonstrate the reasoning behind the changes in the National Curriculum. What I find particularly interesting is the positive shift towards effort rather than ability. This idea that diligence is prized over talent, in Singapore, underpins their Mastery method. Carol Dweck has published many books and papers on this very idea and particularly for students who have been labelled by our education system as not performing to National Expectations, the idea that effort not ability is the key to success, is a liberating concept to our students.

The summer data review, 2017, clearly showed a developing divide between the progress students were making in the Core subjects compared to the Foundation subjects. This data was presented to the staff. It was clear from the discussions taking place, in the room, that most people had noticed that the Core subjects were doing much better than the Foundation subjects, in terms of student progress towards their targets. The Geography, Art and Physical Education leads approached me straight away to discuss why this could be. I posed some questions relating to teaching and learning and assessment practices and asked them to get back to me with their thoughts.

My action plan consisted of regular meetings with all the Foundation leads. Now that I had presented the issue, my role was to facilitate the solution by maintaining the spotlight on the issue throughout the year.

The plan was designed to empower the Foundation subject leads to develop their own practice and raise pupil standards at the same time. It included a series of regular meetings and observations of assessment practice as determined by the subject leads.

The contacts made within the other Special schools were an invaluable source of expertise. I therefore, encouraged the subject leads to visit and work with other colleagues.

My key message was that student progress in every subject is of paramount importance; progress in all subjects is valued, praised, expected and judged. In order to empower the Foundation leaders to embrace this change, they needed significant support and training. The most effective way of doing this was a supportive approach that enabled colleagues to work together within school and to engage with colleagues in other schools.

The developing relationship with the governing board is now being felt across the school. Regular termly meetings are now taking place. The benefits of having the governors involved throughout the life of the project had an impact on its development. The Chair of Governors wanted to see classroom examples of assessment to understand how my vision would be implemented. This led to a refinement in how I articulated my vision moving forward. The governors’ mindset also focussed on the core subjects as being the priority, which brought about a discussion on how the school was preparing students for adult life and the importance of each curriculum area. Each challenge, by the governors, to the project enabled me to clarify exactly what it was I wanted to achieve and why it was so important for the students at the school.

I planned a series of meetings with each subject leader. I recognised that the subject leaders would present to these meetings in different ways. My plan was to meet in their classroom, low threat, and start the discussion about the elements they felt were successful in their subject. I then moved onto assessment practice and looked at examples and I observed assessments taking place. I did this to build a picture of current practice but also to praise the elements that reflect good practice.

After reading about the critical aspects of emotional intelligence on leadership effectiveness, I made sure that I was aware of my impact on the subject leaders. For example, the leader for physical education’s main concern was evidencing the assessment practices. He is an excellent teacher who has spent a great deal of time developing the subject. I tailored my approach to make sure he knew that I recognised this excellent practice, and that the focus for him would be on evidencing student progress. Our meetings focussed on supporting him to develop a unique system of assessment based on the Entry Level Award scheme. I knew this approach was effective as the leader engaged straight away with the change.

A further example was the leader for Geography who showed signs in our initial meeting of concern, about how the change could take place. I facilitated time with the science lead to support to support her. This approach made a significant difference to the success of the progress in Geography. Day states that a vision of new possibilities is not enough to effect change. Indeed, as with any aim or aspiration, objectives need to follow. I made sure throughout this project that the vision was clear, I led with objectives but I distributed the leadership of the change to the subject leaders.

It became quite clear early on that there were two distinct groups to support. Firstly the leaders who demonstrated excellent teaching practice. Secondly, the leaders who required support to use this as an opportunity to evaluate their schemes of work and assessment practices. The termly progress review conducted in December 2017, showed a clear increase in progress for a significant number of students in Art and Physical education. This was because progress was being evidenced and moderated. The review revealed the overall the gap between the Core and Foundation subjects still remained.

 In March 2018, following several developments in each of the Foundation subjects, the graph showed that the progress difference in Year 7 and Year 10 was not significant. Though this is not the case in Year 8 and Year 9. On closer examination of the data, I can see that a significant number of Year 8 students made outstanding progress in Science and this is represented in the chart.

Year 9 was still showing a significant gap in the progress students were making. Anecdotal reports suggested behaviour in the foundation subjects by a number of Year 9 students may be a possibility. On investigation I found no difference in the reported behaviour incidents across the Core subjects compared with the Foundation subjects.

During each termly review of student data, I monitor groups of students of particular interest, Pupil premium (PP), Cared for students and Gender. All our students have an education, health and care plan and therefore are not identified. My analysis has showed that for the last three years that there is no significant difference in the identified groups. Cared for students and students entitled to Pupil premium are matching the progress of their peers, in fact PP students in Year 8 and 9 are slightly above non PP though this is not significant. And there is no gender gap in terms of progress. However, following each data review I identify a group of students who are not making expected progress in four or more subjects. The percentage of students in this group has declined from 14.3% in the Autumn term, through to 9.8% in the summer 2018. The purpose of this group is to create a whole school effort to support these students who are under performing in multiple subjects. This is done by targeted intervention, support and counselling.

When I designed the assessment system following the removal of National Curriculum levels I was particularly aware of adding to teacher workload. By listening to feedback, taking a collaborative approach and facilitating timetable time, the subject leaders have not had an additional burden during this academic year.

My communications engagement strategy identified the key stakeholders in this project. My communication began with the whole staff team, followed by regular face to face meetings. Each meeting was followed with an email to thank the leader for their time and the agreed next steps. I found dropping in to speak to leader along the course of this project enabled me to smooth out issues. By maintaining this supportive relationship throughout the project I recognised that the staff were prepared to take on board the necessary changes.

Mary Myatt, states that the lack of collaborative work within schools prevents the sharing of good practice. By facilitating time for teachers to observe each other, plan together and reflect on their own learning is such a powerful learning experience and one that we were not doing. As I worked through this project I utilised every opportunity to bring staff together in pairs to help each other reflect on their own journey. I truly believe that this has made a significant difference to the success of the project.

Partnerships with other schools were limited and this was something that I particularly wanted to change. I used my contact through the local Special Schools assessment group to facilitate termly opportunities for the English, Mathematics and Science leads to moderate their assessment practices with other schools. The impact has been further demonstration of robust assessment practices within the school. This has led to further opportunities as the lead teachers make their own contacts and I have since facilitated one of our English teachers to spend the morning in another school evaluating reading assessments.

The History and Geography leads benefitted from a visit to a mainstream secondary school to see how they managed their department. The impact of this was that they then had the confidence to make changes in their own department. The science lead is now attending regular wellbeing meetings at a partner school. Each partnership within school and outside of school has had a demonstrable impact on my project as professionals work together for the benefit of our students.

I undertook a school placement project locally. As a result the relationship between our business managers has strengthened and both schools would like to expand peer observation. I am devising a plan to put this in place in the autumn term.

I continue to strengthen our partnerships with the contacts made through the Assessment Leads group and am working another Special School, introduced via a software supplier, supporting them in creating a robust, moderated assessment system that satisfies their needs and that of any external agency. This partnership will also continue to develop as they are keen to share further.

### Impact

* The end of year student progress data shows that the progress students are making in the foundation subjects is now matching that of the Core subjects.
* The profile of the foundation subjects has been raised and I have clear evidence of progress that has been evidenced and moderated, both within and outside of the school.
* The overall percentage of students making at least expected progress in all subjects has increased by 12%.
* The wider implications of this project will continue to have an impact as peer observation and collaborative working becomes further embedded.
* Initiating the discussion and empowering subject leaders to participate in professional discussion and collaborate with each other has been felt across the school.
* Progress, across all areas for all students has increased and there continues to be no significant difference in the progress made between PP students and Non PP students.
* Interim performance management reviews gave further evidence of positive changes happening within the foundation subjects.