

GL Assessment response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee call for input into its scrutiny of the Welsh Government's implementation of the Donaldson Review recommendations

GL Assessment is the leading provider of formative assessments and supporting data analysis to UK schools.

1. We specialise in SEN, literacy, numeracy, reasoning and attitudinal assessments, and have relationships with over a third of primary and two thirds of secondary schools in the UK. Our tests are nationally standardised, giving measures such as standard age scores, and include parental reporting where appropriate. We have delivered over 7 million online tests to schools in the UK and worldwide and our assessments are used by 74 of the pioneer schools in Wales.
2. We provide training and continual professional development for teachers in the most effective use of formative assessments and the interpretation and analysis of assessment data. A particular emphasis is placed on the 'triangulation' methodology of assessment which combines the use of summative and formative assessments alongside teachers' experiences to most accurately assess the progress of pupils.
3. We believe that it is vital to make effective use of the standardised data which emanates from formative assessments. By using standardised data, teachers and schools can compare the progress of pupils taking into account factors such as their age within a year group. Without this standardisation process, data is less reliable and performance cannot be benchmarked nationally.

Philosophy of Assessment

4. GL Assessment has a distinct philosophy of good assessment practice. We believe in a 'whole pupil' approach, examining an individual's attitude, ability and attainment to provide a complete understanding of their needs. This enables schools and colleges to get to know each pupil as an individual, appreciating their strengths, identifying areas where they might need support and intervention, and removing any obstacles that are impacting negatively on attainment. Crucially, this philosophy places the individual pupil at the heart of a school's programme of assessment and makes sure that no child gets lost in the system.

Pioneer School Case Study: Gwyrosydd Primary School

5. GL Assessment has been working with Gwyrosydd Primary School for several years. Gwyrosydd is a primary school in Swansea with 488 pupils aged between three and eleven, of which 36% are on Free School Meals. Recently, Gwyrosydd was selected to be a Pioneer School, giving us the opportunity to help the school to tailor its assessment framework to be consistent with the aims and philosophy of the Donaldson Review. Headteacher Jonathan Atter explains:
6. *"Pioneer schools have been encouraged to innovate. The opportunity to take a step back and consider afresh how we might use assessment with the new curriculum is very welcome. But it is worth considering that about 80% of the workforce in our schools hasn't experienced anything else apart from the existing national curriculum and the way it has influenced assessment."*

7. “As the new curriculum takes more shape, and the needs it will place upon teachers and learners become clearer, I’m keen to hold onto robust measurements of how my pupils are doing, what needs to improve and, at a future point, how well have they progressed.”

A comprehensive assessment strategy

8. The *Successful Futures* report identified a need for more effective use of formative assessment in particular. The primary purpose of assessment should be to build a greater understanding of a pupil’s needs so that teaching can better progress their learning. The best way to achieve this is for schools to have in place a “coherent, agreed assessment and evaluation framework with a clear vision and strategy”.
9. At Gwyrosydd, a coherent approach to assessment is at the heart of how the school achieves strong outcomes for its pupils. Gwyrosydd has recently adopted our *Complete Digital Solution* (CDS) package of assessments. CDS incorporates seven digital assessments, including *Cognitive Abilities Test: Fourth Edition* (CAT4), the *New Group Reading Test* (NGRT) and the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School* (PASS) survey, which together provide critical insight across ability, attainment and attitude.
10. These assessments provide a holistic, whole-pupil view of each child, meaning that teachers can identify the root cause of underachievement, whether it stems from issues as diverse as hard-to-spot problems with reading ability or underlying problems with attitude or confidence. The school uses these assessments to supplement and inform teacher-based assessments and teachers at Gwyrosydd are clear of the purpose and utility of each of the individual assessments, meaning that the time invested in the tests is always worthwhile.

Formative assessment

11. Formative assessment can be used to identify a pupil’s underlying ability, or potential, at the start of a programme of study. This information can initially be used to identify specific areas with which a pupil will struggle, allowing teachers to provide additional support to help pupils to overcome these barriers before they become entrenched. Our *Cognitive Abilities Test* (CAT4), which includes a Welsh language version, is used by schools throughout Wales for this purpose. CAT4 assesses a pupil’s ability to reason with and manipulate different types of material through a series of Verbal, Non-Verbal, Quantitative and Spatial Ability tasks, giving teachers a comprehensive profile of a pupil’s core learning abilities. A pupil’s underlying potential can also be compared with their actual attainment, allowing teachers to identify where pupils are not reaching their full ability. This information is instrumental in identifying hard to spot pupils, those that appear to be progressing but are not in fact reaching their potential, giving teachers the opportunity to further explore and address the underlying causes of their underachievement.
12. Formative assessment is most useful where it provides diagnostic information that teachers can act upon. Identifying barriers to a child’s learning or development as early as possible provides the greatest chance of teachers’ interventions succeeding. For instance, The *New Group Reading Test* (NGRT), one of the assessments used by Gwyrosydd as part of the CDS package, is a screening and monitoring test that assesses reading and comprehension in a single assessment for groups of pupils. It is used extensively in Wales to provide a wealth of diagnostic information identifying the cause of any difficulty that pupils may be experiencing in these areas. NGRT also uses adaptive questioning which automatically generates questions that are appropriate for a learner’s level of ability. Teachers can use the information drawn from NGRT to design interventions that address the specific aspects of reading and comprehension with which individual pupils struggle.

Standardised Assessment

13. The *Successful Futures* report highlighted the importance of nationally benchmarked, standardised tests as part of a wider assessment programme. Standardised assessments provide an objective, reliable way of tracking pupil progress. However it is important that these tests are used sparingly and with a clear understanding of how to use the resulting data. Using standardised assessment sparingly ensures that teachers get the benchmarking information they need without unduly adding to their workload or inadvertently making the tests the focal point of teaching.
14. The assessments in the CDS package used by Gwrysydd are nationally standardised and the data generated gives the school a robust marker for the attainment of their pupils at a given time. Using these assessments, the school tracks the progress of each pupil and evaluates its teaching strategies accordingly.
15. Headteacher Jonathan Atter explains:
16. *“We have a history of using externally sourced and standardised assessments to support our teacher-based assessments. It is important to us that we have a robust marker for the attainment of our pupils at a given time. Without it, we can’t honestly track the progress of the pupil and then evaluate our teaching strategies, either as a whole school or for the needs of the individual child.”*
17. Standardised assessments are particularly useful because they place pupils in the context of other pupils of exactly the same age nationally. Often teachers assess their pupils with reference only to other pupils in their school. This means that it can be difficult to highlight school wide issues because if all pupils have the same difficulty, a problem will not necessarily stand out. A nationally-benchmarked assessment brings these issues to the fore because pupils are being compared on a much larger scale.
18. Year-on-year tests guarantee a level of consistency over and above that which can be offered by teacher observation alone. This is vital for preserving an accurate, reliable picture of pupil progress as they move between teachers, year groups or even schools. Having reliable data means that the teachers at Gwrysydd can track the impact of their interventions to ensure that they are achieving maximum benefit.

Using smart data to minimise teacher workload

19. It is important that, as Welsh teachers transition to a new assessment system, teacher workload does not increase. Good quality, ‘smart’ data is crucial to a self-improving education system, but it is essential that this data enhances teaching and is never a burden.
20. The first and most fundamental way to guard against increasing workload is to ensure that all assessment data is generated for a purpose. Teachers should therefore be mindful of the purpose of every assessment that they undertake and the way that the generated data will be used to inform their teaching. Good quality teacher training and professional development is central to building this understanding.
21. Another of the schools we work with in Wales, Porth County Community School, is a good example of a school that uses informed and purposeful assessment to target and shape their interventions to ensure that they are impactful. Porth uses GL Assessment’s *Complete Digital Solution* package alongside teacher-led assessment to implement a banding system in year 7. This allows the school to target the majority of its interventions at the lower ability classes, where they aim to improve the pupils’ confidence and competency. Accurate banding, informed by reliable tests, gives teachers the

best chance of deploying the right strategies at the earliest opportunity, ensuring that teachers are using their time as efficiently and positively as possible.

22. Secondly, teachers should only assess as often as necessary. A guiding principle of assessment should be to “assess once, use the data often.” Assessment data is only as good as the use it is put to, and it is essential that teachers only use assessments when they deliver a demonstrable benefit.
23. Finally, where possible and where appropriate, teachers should make use of digital assessments. Assessments that provide automatic marking and reporting can vastly simplify the task for teachers, ensuring that their focus is on how the data is used, rather than how it is collected, collated and managed.
24. The assessments in the CDS package used by Gwyrosydd include digital marking and reporting, meaning that teachers are not overburdened by data management or marking. Jonathan Atter explains:
25. *“Having the tests available on demand and moving away from paper-based testing means that we can manage the impact of assessment on pupils and staff but still get the robust standardised data we need to establish and track progress.”*

Conclusion

26. The most important change brought about by the Donaldson Review is the shift of emphasis from assessment for accountability to assessment that focuses on pupils’ learning and development. For this transition to be successful, schools should make better use of formative assessment to build a more complete picture of a child’s ability and evaluate their pupils in a wider context through the use of standardised assessment. Throughout the whole transition, schools should be wary of an adverse impact on teacher workload and guard against the generation of spurious data.
27. When the Welsh Government publishes further details on the specifics of the new assessment framework, the Committee should closely review those plans to ensure that they are deliverable and meet the expectations set out in Professor Donaldson’s *Successful Futures* report. The availability to teachers of reliable, objective information on their pupils will be the foundation of a stronger Welsh education system and it is essential that any new assessments support and encourage better teaching, rather than recreating a top-down accountability system.
28. Participating in the Pioneer School programme has been a useful learning experience for both GL Assessment and Gwyrosydd Primary School and it has given us a better understanding of how the recommendations above can be best put into practice. Jonathan Atter outlines his understanding of the Donaldson Review changes:
29. *“I’m pretty certain that we need to establish an approach to assessment that is about ‘assessing for progress’. Out goes a discussion that might say 80% of pupils at age X are at level Y, and in comes a discussion that looks at individual children and says ‘this is where this child was at when they joined us. This is what we have done as a school, these are the experiences the child has had, and this is where this child is now’.*
30. *“We might look at a portfolio of that child’s work, and provide a profile of the child based on teacher assessment and the kind of formative assessments we can get from GL Assessment. From looking at the progression of a number of children, we can piece together a story for how the school is performing in progressing all children.”*

31. GL Assessment is actively engaging with schools in Wales to seek ways in which our expertise can assist in raising the quality of assessment among teachers. We therefore welcome the Children, Young People and Education Committee's scrutiny of the implementation of the Donaldson Review recommendations and we look forward to take the opportunity to assist you with your future work on the topic.