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Review of the variability across schools in provisional GCSE outcomes 2013

November 2013

Why was this review undertaken?



Early data on GCSE results indicated that there had been some significant variability in Level 2 inclusive* outcomes with some schools reporting marked increases or decreases. This review seeks to discover and share some of the reasons behind the variability.

The speed and timing of the review, conducted during September 2013, enabled the views of the participating schools to be considered during the early part of a new academic year.

* The achievement of five GCSE equivalents at grade C to A* including mathematics and either English or Welsh First Language.

What does the initial data tell us?



The Statistical Release for 2012/13, published on 26 September 2013, provides the earliest results of external examinations taken by pupils aged 15 in all secondary schools in Wales. This showed that:

- 51.9 per cent of pupils achieved the Level 2 threshold including a GCSE grade A*–C in English or Welsh First Language and mathematics, slightly higher (0.9 percentage points) than in 2011/12
- 59.5 per cent of pupils achieved A*–C in mathematics, slightly higher (1.1 percentage points) than in 2011/12
- 63.8 per cent of pupils achieved A*–C in English/Welsh First Language, slightly higher (0.3 percentage points) than in 2011/12.

Early data suggests that there has been significant variation in outcomes within specific schools. Some schools have seen increases or decreases of up to 20 percentage points from 2011/2 results.

What is the scope of this review?



The review was carried out by expert practitioners and officials from the Welsh Government's Department for Education and Skills.

Semi-structured interviews were held with 36 schools across Wales and were based on their provisional results. We thank each school for their valuable contribution to the production of this report.

The review examined:

- what worked in the schools that experienced improvements in 2013
- what might have been the underlying reasons for any decreases or for flatlining
- recommendations for all partners across the schools system in Wales.

What was the structure of this review?



Semi-structured interviews were held with the schools' headteachers and/or senior leadership teams (SLT) in order to determine specifically the impact of:

- pupil tracking and interventions
- specific support for Year 11 pupils
- leadership and strategic planning for improvement
- awareness of changing specifications, national trends and grade boundaries
- support and intervention from local authorities and regional school improvement services.

Initial findings – pupil tracking



Each school visited had an IT-based system for pupil tracking in place. What became evident throughout the review was the level of variation in terms of the use made of the tracking systems and its impact on improving pupil outcomes.

Where schools made good progress they usually:

- had tracking systems that evolved year on year
- had consistency of approach across the whole staff
- used live data to inform teaching and learning
- provided rapid interventions and additional support for pupils in the light of recent tracking information
- used tracking systems to pull together a wide range of information about the pupil
- read-across all relevant data to target pupils appropriately
- adapted targets in the light of evidence of changing pupil performance
- ensured that all staff were aware of and take ownership of data
- took note of improvements being made in other schools and improved their own arrangements accordingly
- ensured that pupils took ownership of their own tracking information and that parents/carers were aware of the key messages.

Initial findings – pupil tracking



Where progress was slower it was often the case that:

- target setting was not carried out by all relevant staff
- data was not being used to set in place appropriate interventions
- schools were not always aware of the rapid, flexible and targeted use that could be made of tracking and its impact when carried out effectively
- tracking data was less ‘live’ and target setting was done on a more historical basis, with little scope for amending targets in the light of pupils making good or poor progress
- schools did not make effective use of reading across all tracking data to identify pupil needs and to deal with targeted pupils
- pupils did not take ownership of their tracking information.

Initial findings – interventions and support for pupils



In all of the schools visited, teachers and support staff had offered additional support to assist pupils with preparations for their Year 11 examinations.

The nature of the support varied but commonly included:

- support programmes, including mentoring by sixth formers, former pupils, support staff, SLT and the local business community
- widespread use of additional lessons in the evenings, weekends and during holiday time
- parental training sessions – ‘How to help your child with GCSEs’
- making online learning available for pupils to use in their own time
- the use of English and mathematics staff as registration tutors for Years 10 and 11, allowing additional inputs to be made each morning
- timely interventions with targeted groups of pupils.

Initial findings – interventions and support for pupils



Where interventions were most successful they were:

- targeted at specified pupils and in specific subjects
- implemented early in Key Stage 4 and in some cases Key Stage 3
- evaluated regularly and amended in the light of experience
- informed by tracking and progress with intervention information also fed back into the tracking system
- delivered by a significant number of staff
- designed to make the pupil less dependent on the teacher.

Initial findings – interventions and support for pupils



Where interventions were less beneficial they were often not:

- carried out systematically and therefore were haphazard and unfocused
- not flexible
- in competition for the same pupils at the same time across departments, showing a lack of whole-school planning
- implemented only during spring and summer of Year 11
- not monitored effectively
- less focused in terms of providing pupils with specific advice and guidance to improve their own performance.

Initial findings – general points from the survey



- Headteachers expressed their gratitude to staff for the additional teaching input and targeted interventions which they believe contributed to raising standards. However, they questioned the sustainability of this approach.
- Headteachers identified the need to adapt their school curricula so as to ensure that, in future, pupils reach Year 11 better equipped to face external examinations.
- The clear focus on literacy and numeracy as national priorities is generally warmly welcomed and headteachers believe that this should help significantly with raising standards in the medium to long term.
- In the context of improving the outcomes for all pupils, headteachers and their colleagues are aware that future improvements at Level 2, including English/Welsh and mathematics, will require whole-school commitment and effective leadership at all levels.

Initial findings – leadership and strategic planning for improvement



In schools making good progress, SLTs are involved in ensuring that the whole school is geared towards achieving improvements. This is being done through:

- a raised focus on effective learning and teaching
- clarity of line management – with clear accountability and focused performance management
- ensuring that senior leaders have a grasp of pupil progress across all subjects
- ensuring that governors are increasingly aware of progress made by pupils across the curriculum and certainly in core subjects
- a growing emphasis on closer working relationships between English, Welsh and mathematics departments
- SLT monitoring of pupils who might be able to achieve Level 2 including English/Welsh and mathematics
- schools commissioning outside support for English/Welsh and mathematics to aid with improving learning and teaching or with the moderation of work
- directing additional resources towards English/Welsh and mathematics to support the Level 2 inclusive outcomes.

Initial findings – English



- Schools generally welcomed the former Minister for Education and Skills' decision to address the difficulties with GCSE English Language in 2012 and subsequently to amend the specifications for future GCSE English assessment in Wales.
- Almost all English departments had amended their schemes very quickly to accommodate the changes in autumn 2012.
- A small number of teachers appeared to be unaware until quite late of the changes that were being introduced. This led to time wasting at the start of Year 11 with pupils completing assignments that subsequently became irrelevant.
- There is evidence of increased numbers of practice sessions being undertaken for controlled assessments.
- Teachers note that the growing focus on literacy in Key Stage 3 is starting to influence their teaching at Key Stage 4.
- Heads of English are generally of the view that in 2013 the 'bar was raised' in terms of what is required for a C grade.
- Increasingly, English staff are working with their primary school partners to ensure that pupils are better prepared for Key Stage 4.

Initial findings – mathematics



Examination issues

- A growing number of schools have entered pupils for examinations with more than one examination board.
- Some schools enter pupils for several early entry papers – with variable success.
- Schools believe that obtaining a mathematics grade C has become harder for pupils in recent years. They believe that the ‘bar is being raised’ and are asking for clarity as to whether this an ongoing expectation.
- Setting future targets is increasingly difficult if teachers are not confident about the level of work needed for a grade C at GCSE.
- Almost all schools are asking that GCSE Mathematics be placed at the beginning of the summer examination cycle. It is argued that the time gap between regular lessons and the examination is not helping to improve national performance in mathematics.

Initial findings – mathematics



Literacy and mathematics

- Heads of mathematics generally welcomed the increased expectations in terms of literacy and problem-solving content in the GCSE examinations.
- Schools following modular courses were less surprised by the increased literacy content of examination questions in the GCSE Mathematics paper.
- Successful mathematics departments were aware of the growing literacy content in the GCSE and had sought additional support from English and Welsh departments in school to support pupils with this requirement.
- There is evidence that some schools have migrated to other examination boards to avoid the increased literacy content of the WJEC mathematics examinations.

Initial findings – Welsh first language



- Teachers were generally confident in their preparation for the GCSE and in their target setting in Welsh first language. No surprises were noted in relation to the 2012/13 examination round and results in GCSE Welsh First Language continue to improve.
- Welsh first language teachers noted that they belong to an effective network of professional practice and find good support across schools in relation to new initiatives and changes in the subject. A significant amount of the materials used for teaching Welsh first language has been generated through collaborative working across schools.

Initial findings – impact of local authorities and regional school improvement services



- Headteachers felt that the regional services are providing increasing challenge in relation to overall standards but often lack the expertise to provide support for schools to make the necessary improvements.
- Schools reported that there are marked differences in levels of support from systems leaders within and across the regions. Some schools describe their systems leader as a ‘critical friend’, others feel that there had been little or no assistance in improving their Level 2+ outcomes from this source.
- Subject leaders and school leaders generally felt that the new arrangements have led to there being less support for classroom teachers and middle leaders. However there are examples where some local authorities had commissioned an experienced English practitioner to work with their heads of English to ensure that the new specification was known and fully addressed by all of their schools.
- WJEC has provided regional workshops regarding change to specifications which were well received by headteachers and their colleagues.

Recommendations



Schools should:

- seek to learn from each other to ensure that their tracking and interventions benefit from the best available practice – there is excellent practice and it needs to be shared
- evaluate their intervention strategies carefully, considering the impact of such interventions
- seek to develop their curricula to encourage pupils to be independent from an earlier age in order to reduce heavy levels of dependency in Year 11
- ensure that Welsh Government and examination board publications reach their staff in good time – teachers complain of information getting ‘lost in school’
- be encouraged to commission, alone or in groups, the additional support needed to ensure that staff and pupils receive appropriate guidance
- know what good looks like for all aspects of school improvement
- not encourage entry for pupils with several examination boards as this does not improve pupils’ skills.

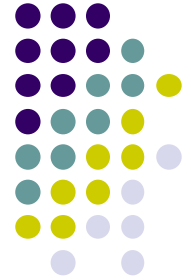
Recommendations



Local authorities and regional consortia should:

- ensure that work commissioned from school improvement services is quality controlled to ensure effective support for teachers and the best outcomes for pupils
- be able to identify the best practitioners for all aspects of school improvement in order to signpost headteachers to best practice examples
- provide expert facilitation of school to school support to ensure the creation of a sustainable self-improving school system in Wales
- establish a range of regional collaborations in order to create opportunities for tomorrow's leaders to excel in local settings and foster an embedded culture of collaborative system improvement across Wales.

Recommendations



Welsh Government, national bodies and examination boards should:

- consider the timing of GCSE Mathematics examinations – all schools agreed that the lateness of mathematics in the examinations cycle is at best unhelpful
- in the light of growing digitisation, seek a faster turnaround of data/results between consortia, schools, examination boards and Welsh Government so that lessons learned can be implemented early in each new academic year
- find a way of ensuring that all school-based staff receive the regular e-mailed updates that are issued by Welsh Government and others.

Further information



**For any enquiries about this review
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