

Eliminating unnecessary workload associated with data management

**Report of the Independent Teacher
Workload Review Group**

March 2016

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Foreword from Chair, Lauren Costello



Courage, tenacity, integrity and commitment take many forms in the educational landscape. As system leaders and practitioners we have never had a greater opportunity to effect change for the better across the whole system than we do right now in response to the Workload Challenge.

As a profession, we must continue to build on the work of the Commission on Assessment Without Levels, we must further develop and commit to ‘the presumption for partnership’ recommended in the 2015 National College for Teaching and Leadership fellowship commission. We must commit to being part of the solution through living out the principles recommended in the three reports by recognising that we are at the start of a longer journey, a deeper conversation and the first tentative steps of long term systemic change.

We must seize the opportunity to take greater control of capturing what we value about our schools. We must change the rhetoric around information relating to the judgement of school effectiveness. We must insist on broader professional pedagogical conversations where data is a component part, not a driver, and where trust is returned to practitioners and headteachers.

It was these universal principles that brought the many educational professionals around the table to debate, challenge and explore the issues and burdens that have built up around data management. I thank them unreservedly for the passion and commitment that they displayed during the timeframe of the group.

It was an honour to be part of such an important piece of work and we now hand our thinking over to all agents of change wherever you may be located within the system. We call on you to identify your part in delivering what could be a transformational change for current and future practitioners and protect what we hold dear about our profession, improving the life chances of our children because we are trusted to do what is best, not to collect meaningless data to prove it.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lauren Costello". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lauren Costello OBE
Managing Director, The White Horse Federation

Eliminating unnecessary workload associated with data management

As the workload challenge showed, all parts of the education system have a role to play in reducing the unnecessary tasks that take teachers and school leaders away from their core task: improving outcomes for children. There is no single reason behind excessive workload. Government must always introduce policies with thought and planning. The accountability system must encourage good practice rather than stimulate fads. School leaders must have the confidence to reject decisions that increase burdens for their staff for little dividend. Teachers themselves must be more active in using evidence to determine what works in the classroom. Two things are clear. Nobody intentionally sets out to create unnecessary workload, and everybody involved in education – from Government ministers to classroom teachers – has a role to play in reducing burdens. This report looks specifically at issues around data management, explaining what the problem is, how it has arisen, and how it can be addressed. It offers a way to make a positive difference.

Summary

1. When used well, data can have a profound and positive impact. They help teachers to teach, school leaders to focus on the right issues, Ofsted to do its job, and the Government to understand how the education system is performing in England.
2. Too often, however, the collection of data becomes an end in itself, divorced from the core purpose of improving outcomes for pupils, often just to 'be ready' in case data are needed, what we have called 'gold plating'. This increases the workload of teachers and school leaders for little discernible benefit.
3. All parts of the education system have been culpable in allowing the development of a culture of excessive data collection and all have a role to play in redressing the balance. We call on all parties in the education system to reduce the unnecessary burdens of data management by ensuring that every data collection has a clear **purpose**, and that the **process** is as efficient as possible.
4. Government, school leaders, and teachers, rather than starting with what is possible in collecting data, should challenge themselves on what data will be useful and for what purpose, **and then collect the minimum amount of data required to help them evaluate how they are doing**. Decisions about the identification, collection and management of data should be grounded in educational principles. In this way schools can have greater freedom to balance professional autonomy and agency against the demands of the accountability system.
5. We have looked at how data is collected, entered, analysed, interpreted, and presented throughout the system, from the individual teacher in the classroom, through to the national data systems overseen by the Department for Education (DfE). We believe there are common overarching principles that should apply to all:
 - a. Be streamlined: eliminate duplication – 'collect once, use many times'
 - b. Be ruthless: only collect what is needed to support outcomes for children. The amount of data collected should be proportionate to its usefulness. Always ask why the data is needed.
 - c. Be prepared to stop activity: do not assume that collection or analysis must continue just because it always has
 - d. Be aware of workload issues: consider not just how long it will take, but whether that time could be better spent on other tasks

What is the problem?

6. 56% of respondents to the DfE Workload Challenge survey said data management causes unnecessary workload. In response, we have developed recommendations to eliminate unnecessary workload in the recording, inputting, monitoring, and analysing of data, building on the work of the Commission for Assessment without Levels.

7. We identified two key reasons why data management becomes a burden rather than a benefit. Firstly, when the **purpose** of collecting data has not clearly identified how it will be used to improve outcomes. Secondly, when the **process** of collecting data is inefficient. For example, when it is duplicated or requires too much time to complete. In both cases, a flawed understanding of the **validity** of different types of data contributes to burdensome practice.

How has it developed?

8. Nobody sets out to create burdensome data management systems. Decisions about the purpose and process for data management – in Government, in Ofsted, at schools, and in classrooms – are made to respond to real and perceived demands, many of which are positive and necessary. Yet the unintended consequences of these decisions often cause unnecessary workload for teachers and school leaders.

9. The accountability system – at all levels – can be a driver of excessive data management demands. Some data demands are essential and necessary in order for any accountability system to work but these have not always been proportionate. In particular, the previous Ofsted approach of looking for evidence of pupil progress within single lessons created a pressure for that progress to be measured. The practices that developed in response to this challenge became increasingly led by systems, rather than for educational purpose based upon professional dialogue about what is important, by focusing undue attention on single lessons rather than teaching over a sequence of lessons.

10. Although the Ofsted framework has changed, there is evidence to suggest that workload pressures associated with inspection have not been eased. Moreover, many teachers and school leaders respond to the demands of the accountability system by trying to demonstrate competence and progress through injudicious and excessive use of data, without appropriate sense of its validity or purpose.

11. It is not enough for those in positions of authority in the accountability system – Ofsted, Government, Regional Schools Commissioners, Local Authorities, governors, school leaders – simply to say that data does not need to be used as before to demonstrate effectiveness. Instead, teachers and school leaders need to be given clear signals, including through the inspection process, that ‘gold plating’ i.e. collecting everything ‘just in case’ is not just unnecessary, it is damaging, as it takes teachers and

school leaders away from more productive tasks. They should take this report as such a signal.

12. The implementation of new policies can often have unintended consequences and place burdens on practice. A good example is the previous use of levels in assessment which, although initially intended as indicators of achievement at the end of a key stage, became overused and applied inappropriately with tracking being confused with assessment.

13. This describes the ‘false comfort’ that data can provide – a purportedly robust and numerical measure of pupil progress that can be tracked and used to draw a wide range of conclusions about pupil and teacher performance, and school policy, when in fact information collected in such a way is flawed. This approach is unclear on purpose, and demands burdensome processes.

14. The recent removal of ‘levels’ should be a positive step in terms of data management; schools should not feel any pressure to create elaborate tracking systems or ‘working at grade’ approaches. Yet there is anecdotal evidence that schools are introducing complicated systems which mimic levels. This is an attempt to overlay the old world onto the new, and it creates unnecessary data burdens that should be avoided.

15. The [Commission for Assessment without Levels](#) recognised these risks. It recommended further work to evaluate the value achieved by collecting assessment data, identifying how they can reduce the workload it generates, and understanding how they can develop effective, reliable and efficient approaches to collecting and reporting data on pupil attainment.

16. Government should ensure that national curriculum policy does not place ill-considered demands on schools in relation to tracking progress. Leaders should ensure that they have a curriculum that offers pupils a robust framework of teaching that builds in progression, challenge and depth of knowledge. Teachers should then make professional judgements of pupil attainment against key performance indicators – the big ideas that tell us whether a pupil understands and has grasped what they have been taught.

17. Focusing on key performance indicators reduces the burden of assessing every lesson objective. This also provides the basis of next steps: are pupils secure and can pupils move on, or do they need additional teaching?

18. Teachers need to know if pupils are on track to achieve end-of-year expectations, whether pupils are where they should be, but are best placed to make such judgements through their professional knowledge without recourse to elaborate assessment, data generating and recording systems. Government (including Regional Schools Commissioners), Ofsted, local authorities, and school leaders should support this approach.

19. Schools should take confidence from recent changes to the school inspection framework in which Ofsted states:

*Ofsted **does not** expect performance and pupil-tracking data to be presented in a particular format. Such data should be provided to inspectors in the format that the school would ordinarily use to track and monitor the progress of pupils in that school.*

The principles of effective data management

20. The same issues that can lead to burdensome practice also govern effective practice. Above all else, any person or organisation involved in the production and use of data should start by having clear answers to three questions:

- a. **Am I clear on the purpose?** Why is this data being collected, and how will it help improve the quality of provision?
- b. **Is this the most efficient process?** Have the workload implications been properly considered and is there a less burdensome way to collect, enter, analyse, interpret, and present the information?
- c. **Is the data valid?** Does the data actually provide a reliable and defensible measure of educational attainment?

21. To help answer these questions, there are a number of different things useful to consider:

Purpose	Process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does our data management system align with our values and ethos? • Are we focusing on the right things for our school? • What do we want to measure and why? • What are our key issues? • How does the data help us progress as a school? • What are we expecting to find, and how would it enable us to change practice? • What will we do with the data and when? • What would happen – what could we not decide - without it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does this, or similar data, already exist? • Can we use an existing process? • Are we getting the right data, to the right people, at the right time to make the right decisions? • Can we provide assurance of the accuracy of our measurement – is the data valid? • Can we stop collecting any data? • What is the opportunity cost (time that could be spent on another task)? • What training is required? • What can we learn from others? • Over what time period will we collect it? When will we stop

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will it be accurate, and what other sources should we use to give a rounded picture of our pupils? • Will the way we present our data make sense to those people who need to use it? 	<p>collecting it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we collect data to avoid the need for reinterpretation or excessive work to present information?
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22. These should be considered by governors, leaders and teachers to challenge themselves and their current practice. Doing this will support schools in ensuring that data collection is meaningful, will lead to improvements in teaching, and support effective leadership and management. External bodies responsible for collecting data such as central Government, local authorities, and multi-academy trusts will also benefit from asking the same questions to be sure that the purpose is clear and the process is manageable.

23. Although every school will come to different conclusions about how best to respond to the questions we outline above, there are a number of areas worth noting.

Formative assessment

24. We agree with the purposes and principles of assessment in the [Commission on Assessment Without Levels report](#) and endorse that ‘there is no intrinsic value in recording formative assessment; what matters is that it is acted on.’ This means that formative assessment data should be used for the teacher’s own planning purposes and to inform professional dialogue. We felt, though, that the recommendation to teachers and leaders to ‘consider carefully’ the possible extra value by additional recording and ‘whether it is worth the additional workload it generates’ did not go far enough and thought that formative assessment data should not routinely be collected at school level, because of the additional burden it creates.

Collection cycles

25. Burdens increase when there is uncertainty particularly about the timing of collection and any potential change. We suggest that every school should make use of the common practice of creating an assessment and data collection calendar, updated annually. This ensures that all staff are clear about what is required, by when, and for what purpose, thereby helping them to plan more effectively and manage their workload. Government too should consider collection cycles, including ensuring that schools are given good time to prepare for any new demands.

Standardised tests

26. Standardised tasks and test items can be a useful tool in supplementing teacher judgement and assessment. They can reduce teacher workload by helping to avoid the production of data systems seeking to convert subtle teacher judgements into simplistic numerical information. This is not saying that only tests provide accurate information, but rather that they can offer an additional perspective on a child's performance, as part of a rounded understanding of a pupil's progress and attainment. Used well, as part of an overall assessment scheme (particularly when accessing resources of an established quality) they can offer a quicker and less burdensome way for a teacher to check progress, to feed into a wider professional conversation.

Whole school data

27. Schools can check they are making best use of the information they hold and that they have the most efficient process to collect, analyse, and present valid data. Local authorities, Ofsted, and Government, including Regional Schools Commissioners, may be guilty of asking for information in ways that do not align with school practice, creating additional burdens. These organisations should ensure they understand what is available before asking for often subtly different information.

Management information systems

28. Electronic systems offer the prospect of quicker and simpler collection and almost real-time analysis and presentation. We encourage all schools to take advantage of technology, particularly where systems and software packages reduce workload. However, there is a significant caveat: the use of technology – of management information systems – should be considered in terms of improving the process of data management once the purpose has been clearly identified. The curriculum should inform how pupil learning should be recorded, progress tracked and what assessment is needed, not data processes defining the curriculum and learning: the tail should not wag the dog.

School- DfE-School data and timing

29. The DfE needs information to ensure that it is discharging its responsibilities to support an efficient and effective education system, but the amount and frequency of data required by the DfE is unduly onerous. Key data such as that related to funding, student achievement, school performance and financial management are essential to enable proper oversight and direction of schools across England. However, the DfE too often starts from what an individual policy might need information on, rather than taking a rounded look at the burdens on the system. The DfE should review its processes to ensure consistency and coherence across its data requirements.

30. Data needs to be in the right place at the right time to make effective decisions. Too often, data inaccuracies lead to delays in processes which mean by the time schools get information back it is too late for the decisions that are required. This leads to the duplication of data collections and increased burdens. A good example is that action plans for the year are decided in September but RAISEOnline results get loaded through the autumn and winter.

31. By collecting the information accurately to common standards at the point of data entry, data matching and processing is simplified, timescales are reduced and delays by data processors can also be reduced.

The Challenge

32. The principles offered in this report are intended to redress a balance: to ensure that only data that is necessary is collected, that the processes used are efficient, and that the power of data is given its proper place in making professional judgements throughout the system and, in doing so, reduce the burdens on teachers.

Look at examples of school practice and how some schools have addressed the challenge of reducing teacher workload

<https://teaching.blog.gov.uk>

Recommendations

For EVERYBODY involved in data management:

- Collect data that are purposeful, valid, and reliable. Use the principles in this report to decide what to collect and how to collect it.
- Be prepared to stop collecting data if the burden of collection outweighs their use.
- Do not reward 'gold plating'. Excessive data collection and processing takes teachers, school leaders, and officials away from more productive tasks.
- Use data in the format available. Do not ask for or duplicate collection of data collected elsewhere – 'collect once, use many times.'
- Take measures to understand the cumulative impact on workload of new initiatives and guidance before rolling them out and make proportionate and pragmatic demands.

For the DfE:

- Ensure that officials, Regional Schools Commissioners, and system leaders supported by Government (e.g. NLEs) commit to the principles in this report.
- Implement the common data standards developed by the Information Standards Board and modern data transport options under Data Exchange as quickly as possible.
- Bring forward the release of both validated and unvalidated data to as early as possible in the cycle so it is available when decisions are taken to prevent unnecessary duplication by schools.
- Reduce the number of different log-ins schools need to use simply to access and share information with DfE.
- Consider including data management skills in national qualifications for school leaders.
- Support the MIS market to develop and diversify, to respond better to school needs.

Ofsted:

- Continue to communicate the clarification paragraphs in the inspection framework through updates and other relevant channels.
- Continue to monitor inspection reports to ensure no particular methods of marking are praised as exemplars and ensure training of inspectors emphasises the commitment in the framework.
- Monitor the impact of the revised inspection Framework on the practice of schools.

LAs, MATs and School Leaders:

- Use software which adheres to common definitions and standards.
- Conduct a regular audit of in-school data management procedures to ensure they remain robust, valid and effective, and manageable for staff.
- Do not routinely collect formative assessment data.
- Summative data should be collected only as frequently as essential to ensure appropriate action can be taken in between collections. Unless there are issues of performance to address and monitor, summative data should not normally be collected more than three times a year per pupil.
- Review assessment which leads to data generation and consider a range of approaches (including standardised tasks/test items).
- Make data accessible to all stakeholders in an appropriate form.
- Do not collect data outside of agreed data collection points. Take a strategic view of the assessment demands throughout the school year and implement an assessment and data management calendar.

Governing Boards:

- Do not request data in any other format than that which the school regularly and routinely presents.
- Keep data requirements under review and challenge selves and leaders to collect the least amount of data possible.

ITT providers:

- Ensure strategic use of data to inform teaching and learning, and understanding of assessment is part of any initial training.

Teachers:

- Record data accurately and ensure it is correct first time.
- If you do not understand why data is being collected, ask. Suggest alternative sources of data or processes if you think better ones exist.

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