

Review of the contribution of the Aiming for Excellence Programme to the raising of standards in Key Stage 3

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Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales



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Introduction

- 1 This summary paper, requested by the Welsh Assembly Government as part of Estyn's remit for 2006-2007, reviews the contribution of the Aiming for Excellence programme to raising standards at key stage 3. It looks at the implications, for policy makers and providers, of the key aspects of the programme and their importance as factors that drive improvement.
- 2 The purpose of this paper is to:
 - evaluate the impact of the key aspects of the Aiming for Excellence programme on pupils' learning experiences and on standards of achievement at key stage 3;
 - identify the key factors that have driven improvement;
 - identify areas for further work; and
 - make recommendations about how this work should be developed in the future.

Background

- 3 The Learning Country (2001) underlined strongly the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to take action to raise standards and enrich the learning experience of 11–14 year olds. Standards at key stage 2 had steadily risen in the period 1997-2001, driven to a large extent by local authority led strategies for literacy and numeracy and improved teaching in primary schools. However, attainment in the core subjects at key stage 3 for the same period had reached a plateau. A key priority for secondary schools was to build on the momentum achieved in primary schools to make sure that pupils learnt more effectively and made better progress at key stage 3.
- 4 In 2002, Estyn, working with the Welsh Assembly Government and the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC), published 'Aiming for Excellence in Key Stage 3'. This document was conceived as a practical tool to help schools and local education authorities (LEAs) take steps to:
- build on the good progress made at key stage 2;
 - develop pupils' skills effectively in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT);
 - improve pupils' learning; and
 - focus more effectively on the individual learning needs of pupils.

The framework for action from 'Aiming for Excellence in Key Stage 3' is reproduced in Appendix 1.

- 5 The Welsh Assembly Government developed the Aiming for Excellence programme between 2002-2006 by commissioning a series of guidance materials to support schools and LEAs from Estyn, ACCAC, the Basic Skills Agency and BBC Cymru on key aspects of teaching and learning and transition. There is a list of these publications in Appendix 2. The Welsh Assembly Government made funding available to schools and LEAs to support the programme through the Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) programme and the Better Schools Fund. It also provided additional in-service training days for primary and secondary schools to improve transition arrangements. The Aiming for Excellence work in schools was complemented by the National Basic Skills Strategy and funding for the Secondary School Training Initiative and Strategic Intervention Grants.
- 6 Since 2004, Estyn has provided a series of monitoring reports and advice relating to the Aiming for Excellence programme for the Welsh Assembly Government. These are:
- 'Moving On...Effective transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3', 2004;

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- 'Recommendations on the Implementation of transition provisions in the Education Act 2002', 2004;
- 'Moving On...Improving Learning', 2004;
- 'Changes in teaching and learning promoted by the Aiming for Excellence programme 2004-05', 2005; and
- 'Changes in teaching and learning promoted by the Aiming for Excellence programme 2005 – 2006', 2006.

7 The findings and recommendations of this paper draw on evidence from these reports and from Section 10 inspection reports for secondary schools inspected in 2004-2006. The findings of the earlier of these reports contributed to ACCAC's Review of the School Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements (2004) and to the Welsh Assembly Government's consultation on 'Transition from Primary to Secondary School' (2004). This report makes recommendations in respect of:

- revisions to the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, prior to the phasing in of new arrangements from 2008; and
- statutory transition plans that primary and secondary school governing bodies are required to put in place by September 2007.

Summary of main findings

- 8 The Aiming for Excellence programme has made a significant contribution to helping schools and LEAs raise standards in key stage 3. It is difficult to assess the specific impact of the programme because other initiatives and factors are also at work, but better teaching and learning have brought about significant improvements for pupils over the last four years.
- 9 Since 2002, there has been a steady improvement in the quality of most pupils' work. The statistical data to show this is given in Appendix 3.
- The percentage of pupils reaching the expected levels of attainment in the core subjects by the end of key stage 3 has improved steadily (Chart 1).
 - The standards that pupils achieve in the lessons inspected by Estyn have also improved over the same period (Chart 2).
 - Pupils' skills in literacy, use of number (numeracy) and information and communications technology (ICT) skills have improved (Charts 3).
 - Standards in the wider key skills are good in the majority of schools and have improved year-on-year. The attention that teachers have given to how pupils learn has improved pupils' skills of improving their own learning, their problem-solving skills and their ability to work with others (Charts 4).
- 10 Despite these significant improvements, there is still a lot to do to make learning good in all lessons. In about a third of schools inspected in 2004-2006, there was considerable variation in the progress that pupils made in learning in key stage 3. In these schools, although there were good features in the quality of provision, there were also shortcomings in one or more of the following areas: pupils' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills and in the use of assessment to help pupils improve their work. Overall, most schools are meeting the needs of pupils of average ability better than previously and pupils with special educational needs make above average progress. However, the progress of a narrow band of less-able pupils, particularly boys, is often impeded because they have poor literacy skills, particularly in writing. Pupils with very high ability, particularly boys, often do not do as well as they could.
- 11 Since 2002, almost all secondary schools have used the guidance published as part of Aiming for Excellence programme to improve the learning experiences of pupils. Many schools have introduced specific initiatives that focus on one or more of the following aspects of learning:
- learning skills;
 - thinking skills;
 - the key skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT; and
 - assessment.

12 Some of these initiatives are well established and they have already improved pupils' work. Others have been introduced more recently and their potential to raise standards is not yet fully realised. The initiatives that have made the most impact have benefited from high quality in-service training, often from leading experts, and involve all staff and subject departments. For example, pupils develop their key skills best where they are developed as an integral part of all learning. Many of these initiatives have reinvigorated teaching because teachers know more about the process of learning and plan more interesting and varied learning activities for pupils.

13 There are still barriers to overcome.

- Few schools take a whole-school approach to make sure that pupils of all abilities develop learning, thinking and key skills in all lessons.
- Very few schools have a framework to plan and monitor pupils' progress in developing these skills.
- Work to use assessment better to improve learning and help pupils know how to improve is at an early stage.
- Only a few schools systematically train all staff or target training and support where improvement is a priority.
- Most schools do not routinely evaluate the impact of changes in teaching and learning on pupils' work so that the benefits can be shared and have maximum impact.

The Welsh Assembly Government has recognised some of these shortcomings and the revised school curriculum and assessment arrangements will provide a structured approach to developing learning, thinking and key skills, and the use of assessment to improve learning.

14 The majority of schools and LEAs have begun to find ways to make learning more continuous between key stage 2 and key stage 3. More secondary teachers are aware of pupils' standards in the core subjects when they arrive in Year 7. A small number of schools have made significant changes to how they organise learning in Year 7 to provide a gradual transition to the more complex secondary school curriculum. In the best practice, teachers from the secondary schools and their feeder primary schools work together to plan units of work that span Years 6 and 7, after they have observed teaching and pupils' work in each other's lessons. They compare how they mark and assess pupils' work. This work has made assessment more consistent and helped secondary teachers to plan challenging work that builds on what pupils already know and can do. So far, this work occurs most in the core subjects and physical education.

- 15 Most schools have improved some aspects of transition but only a few schools have comprehensive plans that formalise transition arrangements, including:
- managing transition;
 - sharing information about pupils' achievements and learning needs;
 - teaching and assessment;
 - tracking pupils' progress;
 - curriculum organisation; and
 - professional development.
- 16 Most LEAs have provided some good quality in-service training to help schools improve learning at key stage 3 but few have the capacity to provide sustained support to secondary school departments. Some LEAs have provided schools with guidance on transition plans but most have elected to wait for the publication of the Welsh Assembly Government's documentation. A few LEAs have begun to help individual groups of primary and secondary schools to produce transition plans.

Recommendations

17 In order to sustain the impact of the Aiming for Excellence programme and make further improvements:

Schools should:

- R1 make initiatives to raise standards in key stage 3 part of a whole-school approach;
- R2 target support and training for teachers of pupils who are most at risk of not making progress, particularly boys and pupils with poor basic and key skills;
- R3 evaluate the impact of changes in teaching and learning on standards and share effective practice widely;
- R4 ensure that pupils continually develop key skills by:
- integrating key skill learning objectives in all subject schemes of work;
 - tackling weaknesses in pupils' numeracy, ICT and writing skills;
 - using assessment criteria more effectively in lessons and in oral and written feedback so that pupils know how well they are doing and what they should do to improve their work; and
 - monitoring pupils' progress in developing their key skills over time;
- R5 develop pupils' thinking skills and make thinking skills central to learning in all lessons, providing training for all teachers in the school where necessary; and
- R6 consolidate work to improve continuity in learning and pupils' progress between key stages 2 and 3 through arrangements that enable primary and secondary teachers to work together to:
- plan units of work that span key stages 2 and 3;
 - mark and assess pupils' work;
 - share information about pupils' achievements and learning needs; and
 - implement in full the requirements of transition plans.

Local Education Authorities should:

- R7 target human and financial resources, including advisory support and delegated Better School Fund monies to:
- address shortcomings in teaching, learning and assessment in schools where pupils are not making the expected progress at key stage 3;
 - support schools in improving standards in literacy skills, particularly the writing of less able pupils;
 - provide sustained support to individual groups of primary and secondary schools to help them prepare and implement transition plans; and
 - support schools in improving assessment, including the development of portfolios of moderated work.

The Welsh Assembly Government should:

- R8 provide guidance and support for local education authorities and schools to improve the standards in literacy skills, particularly of less able pupils, in the light of this report and further advice that Estyn will provide on early years reading and the factors that affect the difference in performance between boys and girls;
- R9 give a high profile to the development of learning and thinking skills in the revisions to the National Curriculum Orders and ensure that the revisions reflect the importance of the progressive development of key skills across the curriculum;
- R10 make provision for high-quality training:
- in assessment to improve learning in the classroom and the consistency of teachers' assessment in all subjects; and
 - to support schools to implement the proposed skills across the curriculum framework, including access to training from leading experts in learning and thinking skills;
- R11 monitor the quality of transition plans in line with the guidance provided for schools and LEAs and promote strongly the practice of joint working by primary and secondary schools on curriculum, teaching and assessment issues that relate to the 7 – 14 phase;
- R12 continue to provide funding for schools and LEAs for the purpose of:
- improving teaching at key stage 3 where it is weak; and
 - preparing and implementing transition plans; and
- R13 ask schools and LEAs for a full evaluation of the impact of their spending on these priorities.

Main findings

- 18 Each sub-section below focuses on a key aspect of the Aiming for Excellence programme.

Improving teaching and learning

- 19 A key recommendation in 'Aiming for Excellence in Key Stage 3' was that primary and secondary schools should maintain and further improve the effectiveness of pupils' learning. Since 2002, many schools and LEAs have used the Aiming for Excellence publications in their efforts to make improvements at key stage 3. Almost all secondary schools have introduced specific initiatives to improve how pupils learn and some LEAs have supported schools well with in-service training and support in classrooms. Some secondary teachers have also improved their teaching methods as a result of observing how pupils learn in primary classrooms.
- 20 Most of the improvement initiatives focus on one or more of the following aspects of learning:
- learning skills;
 - thinking skills;
 - the key skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT; and
 - assessment.

Some of these initiatives are well established and have already improved the quality of pupils' work. Others are more recent and their potential to raise standards is not yet fully realised.

- 21 Many of these initiatives have stimulated teachers to think more systematically about aspects of learning. As a result of their involvement in these initiatives, teachers are more aware of the need to plan interesting and varied learning activities. Evidence from recent surveys and school inspection reports shows a marked improvement in pupils' enjoyment and participation in lessons where learning is varied and challenging. In these lessons pupils behave well and are keen to learn.
- 22 The quality of teaching has improved a lot since 2002. Two-thirds of lessons in the schools we inspected in 2004-2006 had many of the following good features:
- challenging tasks;
 - a good pace and range of activities;
 - skilful questioning by the teacher;
 - developing key skills as part of learning subject knowledge;

- opportunities for pupils to extend their understanding by working together on practical activities and to solve problems; and
- opportunities for pupils to work independently and develop investigative skills through projects often involving ICT.

23 Very few schools have consistently good teaching in key stage 3. In about a third of lessons, although there are good features in the quality of teaching, some of the following shortcomings still exist;

- a narrow range of teaching methods and resources;
- tasks that are not matched to pupils' abilities;
- lack of challenge, particularly for more able pupils;
- tasks that do not allow pupils to work things out for themselves;
- a lack of pace and variety, often because of an over-reliance on textbooks or worksheets; and
- poor classroom management of low level disruption.

24 Initiatives to improve teaching and learning have had the most impact in schools where they are part of a whole-school programme that involves all staff over a period of time. In some schools, however, involvement in initiatives is restricted to a few subjects and the benefits are not shared sufficiently widely for maximum impact. Many schools have piloted initiatives with staff or departments who are most receptive to change. Few schools have targeted such initiatives where improvement is often most needed to engage the interest of reluctant or disruptive learners and to change their attitude to learning.

25 Most schools do not routinely or systematically evaluate the impact of changes in teaching methods on standards or the quality of pupils' work in a way that would help them use the findings to make further improvements and spread good practice more widely.

Learning skills

26 In its document, 'Excellent Schools' (2002), Estyn said that schools needed to give attention to developing the learning skills of pupils as well as delivering formal instruction. Responses to the Review of the School Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements (2004) also showed a strong consensus that, although the National Curriculum has brought about many improvements, there was a need to have a better balance between subject knowledge and developing skills. There was too much emphasis on what is taught and not enough emphasis on how pupils learn.

27 In the last few years, the majority of secondary schools have looked for ways to help pupils understand how they learn as well as what they learn, particularly in key stage 3. Many schools use the term 'Learning to Learn' to describe this process.

- 28 A very significant factor to the success of many 'Learning to Learn' initiatives has been the contribution of leading experts who have shared recent research findings on the process of learning and the importance of different learning styles.
- 29 These styles include:
- visual learning, where learners understand and convey information best when it is presented in the form of diagrams, pictures, charts, demonstrations and writing;
 - auditory learning, where pupils learn through listening to explanations and through debate and discussion; and
 - kinaesthetic learning, where pupils learn through practical activities such as experiments, construction, role play or simulations.
- 30 Teachers who have benefited from this training use a wider range of methods and resources that take into account that pupils do not all learn in the same way. They make sure that pupils can learn in the way that suits them best. In particular, these teachers explain the learning process clearly so that pupils develop learning skills that they can use in a range of situations.
- 31 The attention that schools have given to how pupils learn has improved pupils' problem-solving skills and their ability to work with others. Standards in these wider key skills have improved year-on-year and are a good feature in many secondary schools inspected in 2005-2006. Pupils develop these skills best where they work in pairs and groups to carry out research tasks and investigations.
- 32 Pupils who understand how to learn are more confident about what they are doing and remain on task for longer. There is less disruption in the classroom because they do not become bored.
- 33 'Learning to learn' initiatives and good quality training have enthused teachers and pupils about learning and reinvigorated teaching in many schools at key stage 3. However, there is a lot to do to make learning consistently good in all lessons. Only a few schools target training for teachers of underachieving or disruptive pupils, for example. In about a third of schools inspected in 2004-2006, there was considerable variation across subjects and lessons in the progress that pupils made in learning at key stage 3.

Thinking skills

- 34 There is very clear evidence that pupils in primary schools benefit from programmes that teach them how to think, such as 'Let's Think', 'Activating Children's Thinking Skills' (ACTS) and 'Philosophy for Learning'.¹ Until fairly recently, work to develop thinking skills at key stage 3 mainly took place in science, mathematics and

¹ See 'Changes in teaching and learning promoted by the Aiming for Excellence programme 2005-2006', Estyn, 2006

geography.² In 2004-2006 a few more schools taught pupils to develop their thinking skills in a wider range of lessons and activities than in previous years.

- 35 Understanding their own thinking process (metacognition) helps pupils to think more deeply about subjects because they learn how to reason, ask critical and searching questions, and think creatively. It also develops their stamina to try to solve difficult problems for which there is no obvious answer. Pupils often think most creatively when they work as part of teams, often in situations that require them to work to tight deadlines that reflect real life.
- 36 Almost without exception, teachers that develop thinking skills best have benefited from very high quality training from leading experts. This training has helped them understand the thinking process and to plan lessons that stimulate thinking. In the lessons taught by these teachers that HMI observed, learning was consistently good and pupils' thinking was outstanding.
- 37 Although we saw lessons that developed thinking very well indeed, very few schools systematically train all staff to teach thinking skills or make thinking skills central to learning in all subjects or with pupils of all abilities.

Key skills: Literacy, numeracy and information and communications technology (ICT)

- 38 'Aiming for Excellence at Key Stage 3' identified the need for secondary schools and LEAs to develop strategies to raise standards of literacy, numeracy and ICT in all subjects at key stage 3, building on the strategies to improve standards in these skills at key stage 2.
- 39 Most secondary schools now have policies for developing literacy, numeracy and ICT across the curriculum. The majority of LEAs have provided training for schools in these key skills. Most schools have key skills co-ordinators who can help subject departments to use schemes of work to map opportunities to develop key skills in lessons. More teachers are aware of the level of pupils' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills when they arrive in Year 7.
- 40 Seminars provided by the Basic Skills Agency for key stage 3 subject teachers have been very helpful in explaining how key and basic skills can be developed in subjects, particularly the foundation subjects. Training in higher order reading skills and in the use of writing frames has been particularly effective. More teachers are aware of the specific reading and writing skills pupils need to do well in their subject.
- 41 Overall, pupils' key skills steadily improved at key stage 3 between 1999 and 2004. In 2005-2006, standards of pupils' key skills rose, after reaching a plateau in 2004-2005 (see Appendix 3 Charts 3). The number of schools where standards in key skills are very good has also increased. There is a very big improvement in pupils' writing. About half the secondary schools we inspected in 2005-2006 develop

² The main thinking skill programmes in these subjects are Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education, Cognitive Acceleration in Mathematics Education and Thinking through Geography.

pupils' key skills well. In the other half, the main weaknesses are in ICT, use of number and the writing of less able pupils, usually boys.

- 42 A few schools have made exceptional progress in improving teachers' and pupils' ICT skills by using ICT as an integral part of all lessons. Staff use innovative multimedia materials, including electronic whiteboards, and there is ready access to computers in classrooms. Overall, however, the majority of pupils in secondary schools do not have the same ease of access to computers in the classroom that they had in primary schools or that they have at home.
- 43 The schools that use accredited qualifications in communication, application of number and ICT at key stage 3, usually teach literacy, numeracy and ICT skills well in all lessons. The specifications for the key skills qualifications provide a useful structure for teaching key skills.
- 44 There is still much to do despite improvements. The impact of training is often restricted to departments involved in particular initiatives. Despite pockets of very good practice in developing pupils' key skills, good practice is not consistently in place across all departments in many secondary schools. Pupils with poor basic skills, who do not have individual education plans, often miss out on the additional help they need, particularly to improve their writing. The majority of these pupils are boys.
- 45 Few key skills co-ordinators in schools have sufficient time to work alongside subject teachers in the classroom to demonstrate how writing or number skills can be taught in the foundation subjects. Many LEAs have provided good quality training in key skills but few have the capacity to provide sustained support to secondary subject departments. More often, the expertise of advisers with literacy and numeracy expertise is targetted on English, Welsh, or mathematics departments in order to improve attainment in these subjects and the core subject indicator at key stage 3. Literacy and numeracy strategies in secondary schools are better than they were but, in all but a few schools, they have not had the same impact on standards as they have had in primary schools.
- 46 Few schools have a framework to plan and monitor pupils' progress in developing key skills through the key stage.
- 47 Good key skills are essential to raise standards. The schools that develop key skills best make sure they teach these skills as part of learning in all subjects. More schools need to do this.

Assessment

- 48 Overall the quality of assessment, reporting and recording has improved over the last five years. Almost all schools set targets for pupils that they use at the end of key stage 3 to see if pupils are doing as well as expected. Most schools are also using assessment data better to track progress during the key stage. A few schools are using this data particularly well to identify and help pupils in years 7 and 8 whose progress does not match expectations.

- 49 Of the schools that have improved assessment, most have a whole-school approach that all staff understand and follow consistently.
- 50 A few schools are beginning to use assessment information better to improve how pupils learn as well as to track pupils' overall progress. In the most effective lessons, teachers use criteria as part of their teaching and to explain to pupils on how well they are doing. In the best practice, pupils:
- are aware of what they are trying to learn and what successful outcomes look like;
 - understand their learning goals and use criteria to assess how well they are doing and what they need to learn next;
 - use criteria to help each other see how well they are doing and to suggest ways to improve; and
 - pay more attention to what they need to learn next rather than to the mark they have had for their work.
- 51 Some teachers have put together portfolios of work they have marked together to demonstrate how to use criteria. This practice has helped all the teachers in the school to assess in the same way. This highly effective practice is not widespread enough.
- 52 In almost half the schools inspected in 2005-2006, assessment is not used rigorously enough to improve learning at key stage 3. The most common shortcomings are that:
- pupils do not fully understand how teachers assess their work and what they need to do to improve;
 - teachers do not use assessment enough to plan and improve learning; and
 - oral and written feedback on pupils' work do not focus on what pupils should learn next.

Transition

- 53 Almost all schools and LEAs have plans and programmes to improve educational transition between primary and secondary schools. The most useful plans identify the different aspects of transition, how improvements will be made and the respective roles and responsibilities for leading and managing the transition process.

- 54 The majority of schools and LEAs have begun to find ways to make learning more continuous between key stage 2 and key stage 3. This work has been in one or more of the following areas:
- curriculum planning;
 - teaching methods; and
 - assessment and tracking pupils' progress.
- 55 Learning is more continuous where primary and secondary teachers have planned units of work together, after they have observed teaching and pupils' work in each other's lessons.
- 56 In many schools, one or two subject departments have planned units of work that span Years 6 and 7 to try to make sure that work in key stage 3 builds on what pupils have learnt in Year 6. They have helped pupils make better progress when they change schools because secondary teachers know more about what pupils learnt in primary schools and can plan the next stages of learning more precisely.
- 57 A few schools have made quite big changes to how they organise teaching in Year 7 to help pupils adjust to the more complex secondary school curriculum. In these schools, form tutors teach at least one subject, as well as the tutor periods and personal and social education, with their form. The tutor is also the mentor for pupils in the form. The form tutor has a good range of information about pupils' achievements and reviews pupils' progress with them regularly. This means that pupils receive the support they need quickly, if they do not make the progress that teachers expect.
- 58 Most primary schools transfer a good range of assessment information and more schools are now aware of the requirement and procedures for using the Common Transfer File. Secondary schools use assessment information better and most have good systems to track pupils' progress through key stage 3, using information from Year 6 as a baseline.
- 59 Teachers from a few secondary schools and their feeder primary schools compare how they mark and assess pupils' work. As a result, assessment is more consistent and the secondary teachers are able to plan challenging work that builds on what pupils already know and can do. Most of this work happens in the core subjects and only a little in other subjects. It is particularly good in physical education where teachers have worked together as part of the Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) initiative.
- 60 Most schools have improved some aspects of transition but only a few schools have comprehensive plans that formalise transition arrangements, including:
- managing transition;
 - sharing information about pupils' achievements and learning needs;

- teaching and assessment;
- tracking pupils' progress;
- curriculum organisation; and
- professional development.

Some LEAs have provided schools with guidance on transition plans but few LEAs have begun to help individual groups of primary and secondary schools to produce them.

- 61 Where schools do not have effective transition arrangements, secondary teachers do not know enough about pupils' prior learning and standards, especially in the foundation subjects and religious education, to plan learning appropriate to their pupils' needs. In these schools, pupils often do not make the progress that they ought to make in Year 7 because teaching is not pitched at the right level. Able pupils spend too much time doing work that does not challenge them, whilst others have difficulties understanding the work they do. The introduction of statutory transition plans specifically addresses these issues
- 62 A key area for improvement is joint working by primary and secondary teachers to improve continuity of learning across the 7 – 14 phase as a whole. Too many initiatives, for example, developing learning and thinking skills, are being put into place in key stage 3 without the involvement of teachers in feeder primary schools. Similarly there should be joint planning by primary schools and the receiving secondary school of how they teach key skills across the 7 – 14 phase.

Impact of the Aiming for Excellence programme

- 63 It is difficult to assess the specific impact of the Aiming for Excellence programme because other initiatives and factors are also at work, but better teaching and learning have brought about significant improvements for pupils over the last four years. They include improvements in pupils':
- behaviour, self-esteem and confidence³; and
 - learning and key skills.
- 64 Evidence from inspections shows that standards of achievement have improved at key stage 3 since 1999 and that there has been a marked increase in the amount of good work (Appendix 3 Chart 2).
- 65 Evidence from inspections also shows that pupils with special educational needs make above average progress. This is because special educational needs co-ordinators and teachers are usually very well aware of the individual needs of these pupils and plan the next stages of learning accordingly. Overall, many schools are meeting the needs of pupils of average ability better than previously. This is because they have identified these pupils as a group at risk of making slower progress than others and are challenging them to do better. Although standards of pupils' key skills overall have improved significantly, the progress of a narrow band of less-able pupils, particularly boys, is often impeded because they have poor literacy skills, particularly in writing. A significant number of inspection reports express concern about the lack of challenge for able pupils, often boys, in key stage 3.
- 66 There are a small number of schools where standards in key stage 3 are not in line with expectations. In these schools, there are significant weaknesses in teaching, learning and assessment. In over half of these schools, boys achieve particularly poorly. Pupils, particularly boys, have poor key skills, particularly in speaking, listening, writing and working with others.
- 67 Since 2002, there has been a steady improvement in standards of attainment at key stage 3, following a period of little change in 1999-2002 (Appendix 3 Chart 1). There is still some way to go if schools are to reach the Welsh Assembly Government target for 2004-2007 for between 80-85% of pupils to reach at least Level 5 (the expected level) in all the core subjects, although they have now passed the 2002 target that between 70-80% of pupils to reach at least Level 5 in Welsh, mathematics and science.
- 68 With very few exceptions, girls continue to do better than boys in all end-of key stage national curriculum assessments. The gap is widest in English and Welsh. Almost all boys read better than they write. In a few schools there is no difference in the standards achieved by boys and girls. The common features across these schools are very good teaching and assessment and high expectations for all pupils, irrespective of gender.

³ See 'Changes in teaching and learning promoted by the Aiming for Excellence programme 2005-2006', Estyn, 2006

Appendix 1

A Framework for Action, 'Aiming for Excellence at Key Stage 3', 2002

To achieve a more seamless and successful transition between key stage 2 and key stage 3 and to raise standards at key stage 3:

- primary and secondary schools should work together so that teaching and learning in Year 7 and beyond build more effectively on pupils' prior attainment, teaching and learning;
- primary schools and LEAs should continue the initiatives, training and support outlined in their key stage 2 literacy and numeracy strategies;
- secondary schools and LEAs should work together to develop strategies to raise standards of literacy and numeracy at key stage 3, building on the progress being made at key stage 2;
- secondary schools should:
 - accelerate the rate of progress made by pupils;
 - remove the variation within and between schools in the standards pupils achieve in different classes;
 - close the gap between the performance of boys and girls;
 - help pupils of average and below-average ability to achieve more;
 - give more challenging work to more able and gifted pupils; and
 - enrich the school experience for pupils who find school unrewarding.
- primary and secondary schools should:
 - implement coherent policies to improve pupils' skills in literacy and numeracy across the curriculum;
 - raise standards in ICT and increase the use of ICT as a learning tool;
 - improve planning to develop the wider key skills, including problem solving and creative skills;
 - maintain and further develop initiatives to improve the effectiveness of pupils' learning, including the development of thinking skills; and
 - find ways to extend and vary learning opportunities, including out-of-school hours activities, to motivate pupils to learn, particularly those who find school unrewarding.

Appendix 2

Materials published as part of the Aiming for Excellence programme

'Aiming for Excellence in Key Stage 3', October 2002, reprinted and reissued October 2004

'Raising Standards in Literacy and Numeracy', March 2003

'Moving On...Effective transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3', January 2004

'Raising standards in ICT', April 2004

'Moving On...Improving Learning', November 2004

'Bridging the Gap', November 2004

'Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3', November 2004

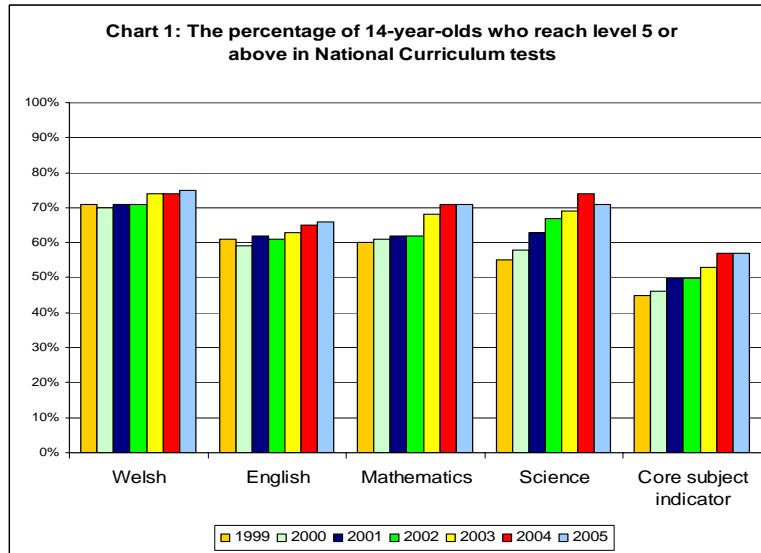
'Transition from Primary to Secondary School', consultation document, November 2004

'Thinking and Learning Skills', to be published in the Spring Term 2007

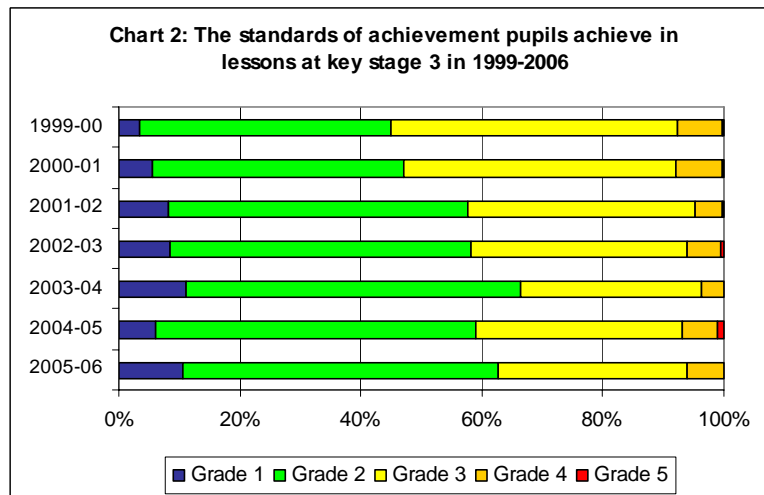
Appendix 3

Statistical evidence

- 1 The chart below shows the percentage of 14-year-olds who reached level 5 or above in the National Curriculum tests in 1999-2005



- 2 The chart below shows the standards pupils achieved in lessons at key stage 3 in the schools Estyn inspected in 1999–2006



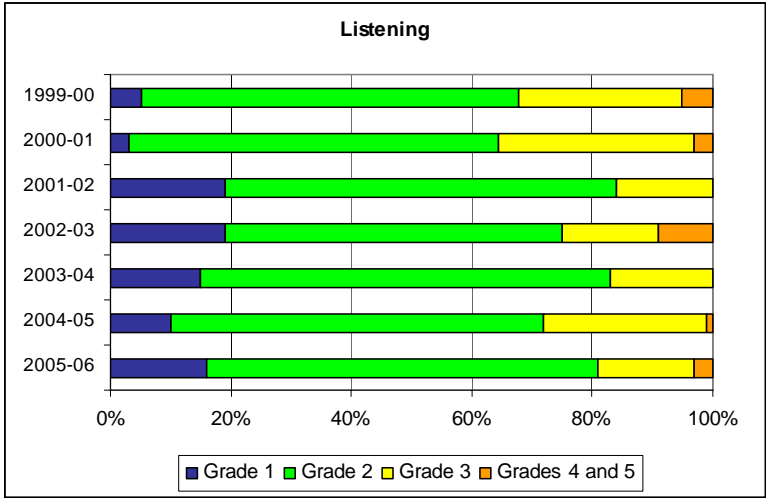
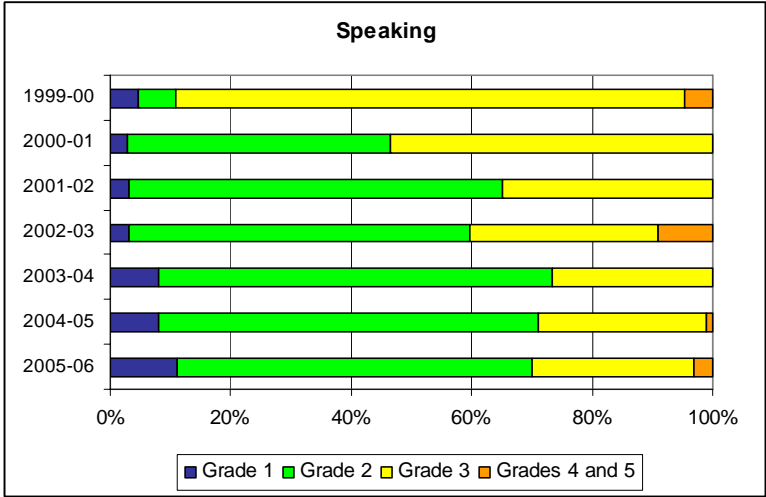
Note: Percentages for 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 do not include grades for short inspections because Estyn does not inspect individual subjects in short inspections. Estyn carries out short inspections of schools where standards of achievement in the most recent inspection and benchmarked performance are good.

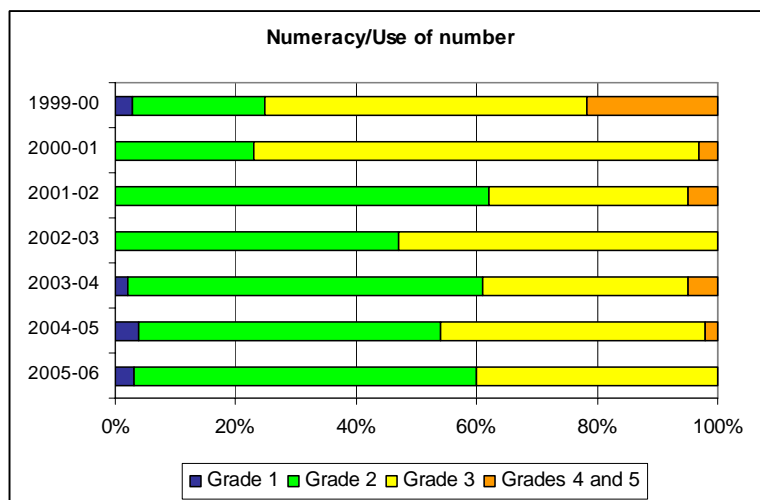
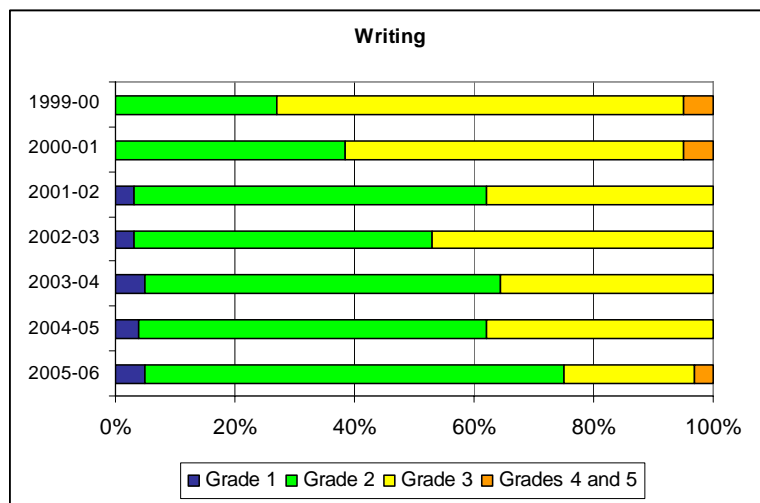
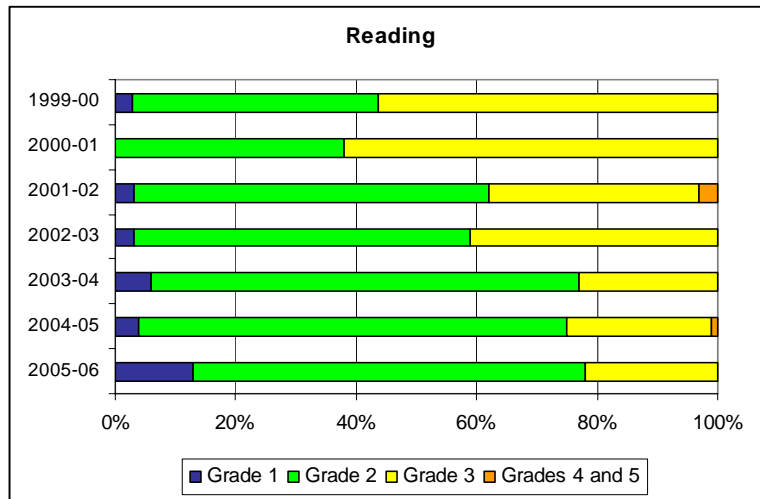
Between 1999–2004, Estyn used the terms ‘very good’, ‘good’, ‘satisfactory’, ‘unsatisfactory’ or ‘poor’ to represent inspection judgements. With the introduction of the Common Inspection Framework in September 2004, Estyn adopted the five-point scale to represent inspection judgements as follows:

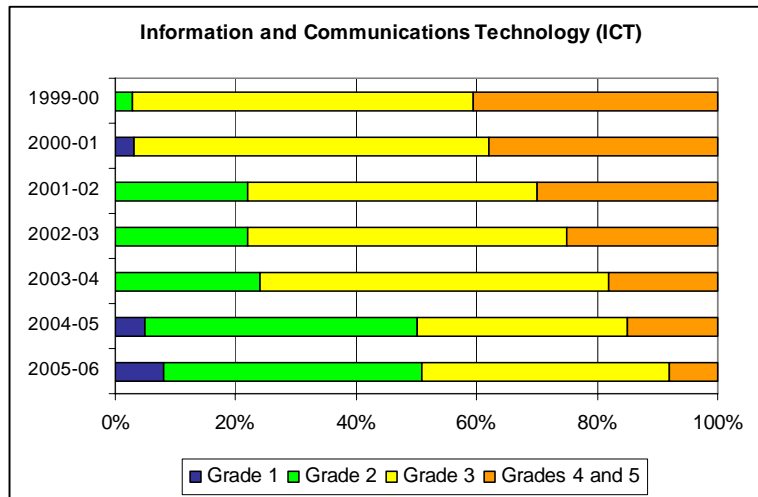
- Grade 1 good with outstanding features
- Grade 2 good features and no important shortcomings
- Grade 3 good features outweigh shortcomings
- Grade 4 some good features, but shortcomings in important areas
- Grade 5 many shortcomings

For the purposes of illustrating trends from 1999 to 2006, these charts use the five point scale.

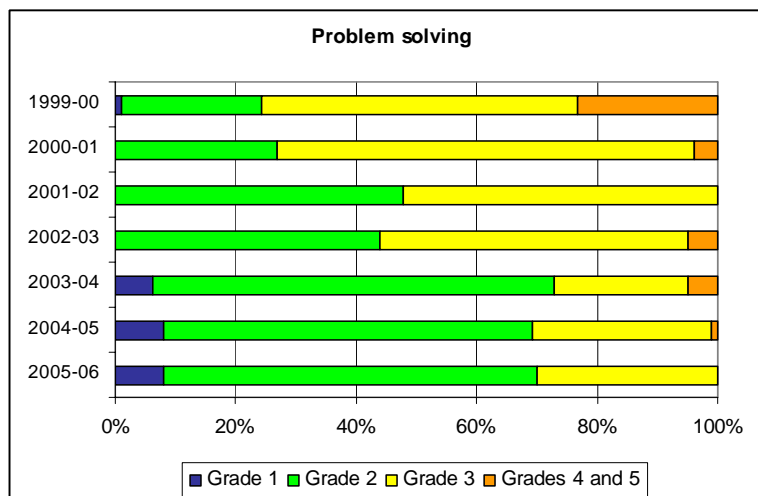
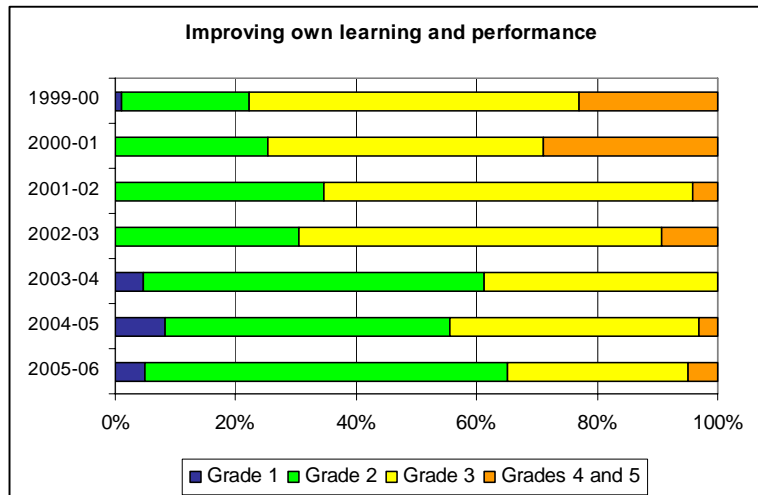
3 These charts show the standards pupils achieved in key skills in literacy, numeracy and information communications technology (ICT) in the secondary schools Estyn inspected in 1999-2006.







4 These charts show the standards pupils achieved in the wider key skills of improving own learning, problem solving and working with others in the secondary schools Estyn inspected in 1999-2006.



Working with others

