

Crunched by Numbers

Introduction and background

Teacher workload continues to be a major problem within the education system. According to the Department for Education, one of its key causes is the recording, monitoring, inputting and analysing of data. This 2-part report from GL Assessment explores the issue. The first part is a survey which was carried out by YouGov to ascertain how much time teachers spend dealing with data and what their attitudes are. There were 800 respondents to the survey from both the primary and secondary sectors. The second part of the report looks at how one school in challenging circumstances rethought its data policy in order to reduce teacher workload.

Key points

Survey findings

- Thirty-two per cent of teachers say that tackling data issues would have the most significant impact on their workload. This is second only to marking (38%).
- Thirty per cent of teachers said that they spend more time recording, analysing and monitoring data than they do on preparing lessons.
- When asked whether they thought that their school takes workload seriously as an issue, 32 per cent agreed that the school does take it seriously, but 38 per cent did not feel that this was the case.
- Seventy-five per cent of teachers reported that their school expects them to co-ordinate and oversee assessments. A majority of teachers (68%) thought that schools could do more to make assessments less time-consuming for teachers.
- Respondents reported that they spend an average of 6 hours and 48 minutes testing and assessing students every week. Across a 39-week school year, that comes to 265 hours.
- Most teachers (68%) are required to submit data once a term. A further 20 per cent have to submit data once a month and 3 per cent have to submit it once a week. This goes against the DfE guidance that 'schools 'should not have more than 2-3 data collection points a year'.
- In spite of Ofsted's warnings about over-reliance on non-standardised internal assessments, 54 per cent of secondary school teachers and 32 per cent of primary teachers reported that their schools write their own progress tracking assessments.
- Despite the demands which bad data practices can make on their time, teachers are not 'anti-data'. Sixty-one per cent of teachers and 70 per cent of senior leaders agreed that data can help them to do their jobs more effectively. Only 18 per cent disagreed.
- Sixty-one per cent of teachers said that their school shares assessment reports with parents; twenty per cent said their school did not do so. However, fifty-seven per cent of respondents felt that parents do not really understand how their school reports on pupils' progress.

View from a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)

- The Sir Robert Woodard Academy, on which this report focusses, is one of 6 schools within the Woodward Academies Trust. The majority of schools in the Trust were in special measures at the time of the academy take-over. GL Assessment spoke to Maria Roberts who is the Trust's Director of School Improvement about the factors which have led to improvement at the Academy.
- Staff recruitment and retention have been a key priority. Young teachers know that they will be supported and that their workloads will be manageable.
- The school has been ruthless in eliminating any data systems which do not yield good or useful information. For Maria, this means doing 'sensible assessments, less frequently, which means in turn that we have more teaching time'. Maria also highlights some of the pitfalls of over-frequent assessment: 'Children who weren't learning well would get another affirmation six weeks later that they weren't learning well – and then often nothing would happen'. The Trust now collects data 3 times a year rather than 6.
- Maria describes a 'nimble' approach, whereby assessment information can be quickly gathered and acted upon before attainment gaps become wider. She highlights the need to take action at Key Stage 3, since by Key Stage 4 it is too late.
- The standardised testing which has been introduced shows clear evidence of progress in literacy, maths and science. It also enables comparison of schools within the Trust and nationally.
- Data on behaviour and attitudes can be just as illuminating as progress data, particularly when the attitudinal PASS data is linked to academic outcomes.

View from a headteacher

- When Kieran Scanlon joined the school, it had been drifting in and out of special measures and staff morale was low. Staff were working hard, but he feels that there was an

- over-directive approach which had led to paralysis and had prevented staff from working creatively and autonomously.
- Kieran feels that schools judged as Requires Improvement often tend to focus on measures for rapid progress which is not sustainable; it exhausts staff and is ineffective.
- The first step on the path to recovery for the Academy was to go back to essentials and ask teachers to discuss why they taught, i.e. to look at the moral purpose of the job, their self-belief and at what they liked about their subjects. The 'why' questions were particularly pertinent when it came to assessment.
- The next step was to clearly define assessment, breaking it down into its different forms – evaluative, formative, summative and ipsative (based on a comparison between a learner's current and previous performance). There needed to be clarity about what assessment was and what it was being used for.
- Light-touch summative assessments were made the responsibility of the school's curriculum directors and ownership of all other types of assessment was handed back to the classroom teacher.
- Getting ahead is considered crucial. The school is now in a position where in every year group and across every subject teacher know what the assessment looks like for a whole year.
- The school maintains a focus on pupils who have been 'red flagged'. These are pupils for whom there is a discrepancy between the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4) data and the Progress Test Series data. Flagging these pupils is helpful to teachers who may see up to 500 pupils a week.
- Kieran uses the GL Assessment's digital tests which he finds 'quick and tidy'. Comparisons can be made across all years and across multiple subjects. The tests are benchmarked to national standards, which is also helpful. However, he cautions that embedding change takes time; one year to change the assessment process (and make sure that everyone was on board) and another 2 years to change the schemes of work.
- Kieran is convinced that thought-through assessment has been key to reducing teacher workload and to the upward trajectory of the school along with a sharp increase in pupil numbers.

View from a teacher

- Phil Daniell is the Curriculum Director for maths at the school. He echoes the headteacher's view that staff have to be clear about the value of assessment and the reasons for it – otherwise they resent the time spent on it.
- Phil describes how centralising assessment has made a big difference to teachers' workloads. It has avoided the need for chains of communication and a lot of going to and fro. It also avoids asking staff to create their own end-of-year assessments which is too much to expect of them.
- In spite of the school reducing the number of data drops to once a term, Phil feels that there is now more, not less, useful data available. He describes the streamlining process, saying 'there is actually more data available for us now, but teachers' workload is much less because the admin is done by the data team, it's all done in advance and what is provided to teachers is relevant and pertinent'.
- Pupil reports now concentrate on the core aspects of a child's development; another change which has reduced teachers' workload.
- Like the headteacher, Phil is convinced that more effective data has been central to reducing teacher workload and

putting the school on a path to recovery. He feels that pupils and staff are happy and that 'lessons are great'.

Headteacher's tips for using assessment to reduce teacher workload

- Be clear about what assessment is for and ensure that staff understand the different forms of assessment.
- Be empowering – teachers work best when they are allowed to be creative professionals. If all your assessment does is tick external accountability boxes, don't be surprised if your colleagues don't buy into it.
- Do not over-assess. Advice from the DfE and Ofsted suggests that one data point per term is generally sufficient.
- Plan in advance – get a year ahead if possible so that the information gathered can be more effectively managed. Assess at the end of the academic year for the next, alert colleagues and parents well in advance, manage assessments carefully between subjects.
- Share data with colleagues – it is important for them to have access to live data so that it can inform their practice.
- Data should also be shared with parents, although too much can be confusing – try to aim for a happy medium.
- Explain to students why you are assessing them and what you are looking for.
- Be ambitious – do not use data solely for exams, but rather to build up a complete picture of a child – their social interactions, behaviours, and extra-curricular activities over the course of their school career.
- Be honest – putting good assessment in place takes time and there are limitations. The best data is no substitute for professional judgements. It is designed to complement teacher judgement, not replace it.

Top tips for reducing workload (non-assessment)

- Cut the working day – Kieran sliced 20 minutes off the end of the day which now finishes at 3pm.
- Invest in teacher health – the school now has a full-time wellbeing lead for teachers and offers regular health checks to staff.
- Use inset days judiciously – at the school, they are now spread throughout the year and no longer feature many outside consultants.
- Share best practice – lesson plans are worked on collaboratively and peer observations are encouraged.
- Harness parent power – most parents want to help but don't know how to. But if schools communicate clearly and explain what is needed, parents can play a part in targeted interventions.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/workload/>