National Low-Attainers Pilot: report on the second year
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About this report

The National Low-Attainers Pilot (LAP) has reached the halfway stage and this is therefore an interim report on the findings so far. All the schools have now taught their new curricula for one year. There have been a large number of successes, some occasional false starts, and many lessons learned. The schools are now entering a differently demanding phase of the pilot, where the pilot cohort will move on to be tracked in a new context; while their curricula, probably with some revisions, will be taken over by new entrants.

This booklet is intended to provide advice and information to schools contemplating similar initiatives. There are also some case studies and other associated materials which accompany this booklet and are available on the web. These can be downloaded in pdf format from the resources and publications area of the Key Stage 3 website www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3/.

The document is linked to three regional conferences to be held in the autumn, at which some of the pilot schools will give presentations of their work in progress. The various sections in this booklet are followed by prompts intended for schools that may be embarking on similar initiatives to use for staff discussion and planning.

Overview

Twenty schools, two from each of ten local authorities (LAs), are taking part in the pilot, which began in April 2004 and will run for four years. The LAs are paired for networking purposes. In recognition of the fact that schools cannot suddenly change the structure of their curricula, the first year of the pilot was used for preparation. All the schools have at least 25% of their current intake entering at level 3, and more than 50 such pupils in the current Year 7 group. The pilot is exploring ways of maximising the progress of level 3 pupils by enabling the schools to consider radical changes in their Key Stage 3 curricula in terms of both structure and content. The new models have particular regard to:

- progression in literacy, numeracy and learning skills;
innovative organisation and timetabling of the Key Stage 3 curriculum so that the needs of pupils who enter secondary school working at level 3 are better met;

more flexible and innovative curricula and teaching styles to secure the progress of the target group of pupils;

the use of interactive whiteboard technology to enhance teaching and learning strategies.

The schools have developed models that are the most appropriate for their profile of achievement and local context. At the outset of the pilot the schools were asked to provide the equivalent of five hours each of English and mathematics support for the target cohort. Some have done this by adding extra lessons and others have responded by a combination of more lessons and increased support across the curriculum.

There are also fifteen associate schools and an associate LA, who attend network meetings and take part in inter-school visiting.

Main findings from the first two years of the pilot

Progress

Schools are showing a greater awareness of the characteristics and needs of level 3 learners, and have started to implement innovative strategies for supporting them, including enhanced provision for literacy and numeracy.

Schools have planned to improve their practice in the crucial areas of the use of data for tracking progress and pupil grouping.

There is an increasing level of commitment from the schools, and particularly from senior managers.

In some schools the pilot is promoting more effective practice in transfer from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 including a much greater involvement of parents.

The pilot has encouraged many of the school strategy managers to move from a coordination role to a management and leadership role.

The interactive whiteboards are making a significant contribution to a wider range of teaching and learning strategies.

Much benefit has been derived from the opportunities to share practice at network meetings and during school visits.

The groups of teachers who have planned the new curricula have rediscovered the power of joint planning and control over the outcomes.

There has been valuable support from the LA partners.

Schools have begun to use Strategy materials more coherently to support low-attaining pupils.
Constraints

- The use of data to track and promote pupils’ progress is in need of development in some schools.
- In some schools there have been leadership capacity issues and insufficient integration of pilot action plans into the whole-school improvement plan.
- Generally low-attaining schools have been less likely to make good use of Strategy materials, partly because their challenges can prevent attendance at courses or subsequent internal dissemination.
- Some of the schools have recruitment and retention problems which affect plans for the discrete provision of five hours of English and mathematics.
- A few of the schools initially lacked the confidence to innovate – and the confidence to make mistakes.

Lessons from the first and second years

Innovative curriculum initiatives do not become embedded unless there is sufficient time for planning and development and commitment from staff, including senior managers.

The benefits of innovative and targeted curriculum changes cannot be fully realised unless there are equivalent developments in teaching and learning.

The intelligent use of data is an essential element in curriculum innovation – for determining the starting points, informing teaching and learning and monitoring progress.

Radical curriculum change needs to be coordinated by an effective senior manager, supported by a guiding team whose function is to develop the initiative and, eventually, inform and involve a wider range of staff.

Schools undertaking curriculum innovation, and in particular those in challenged circumstances, need to collaborate with schools undertaking similar initiatives in order not to feel isolated and to gain the confidence needed to take risks.

The resources of the Secondary National Strategy provide very effective support for curriculum innovation where a clear need for specific material has been identified by the guiding team.

Interactive whiteboards can play an important supporting role in the development of teaching and learning, when used creatively alongside other approaches.

Early indications from the provisional data on the 2006 progress tests in LAP schools are encouraging. The average conversion by schools from level 3 to level 4 in English is 31% with six schools achieving a conversion rate of greater than 40%. The average conversion from level 3 to level 4 in mathematics for LAP schools is 25% with six schools also achieving greater than 30%.
Characteristics of level 3 learners

Schools involved in the pilot are seeking to accelerate the progress of pupils who enter Year 7 with levels of attainment lower than would be expected nationally. For the vast majority of children in the pilot cohort, this means level 3 in English or mathematics or both. In designing a curriculum that better meets the needs of these pupils, the starting point for many schools has been an exploration of what they consider to be the characteristics of level 3 learners. This is because schools want to build on the strengths that the pupils already possess and develop strategies that will help the pupils overcome the barriers that have hindered their progress previously.

To help identify what is typical of those pupils who attain level 3 in their Key Stage 2 tests, a team of National Strategy regional advisers undertook some small-scale research in a range of schools nationally. The research involved meetings with over 250 pupils and discussions with many of their teachers. Questionnaires were also circulated to the core departments, the Year 7 pastoral heads and the schools’ SENCOs. Finally, a representative sample of pupils’ work and scripts from the tests was scrutinised.

The research concluded that, typically, level 3 learners could be described as:

- having a long history of catch-up;
- often disorganised, losing or not finishing work;
- skilled in avoidance and concealing their problems;
- not good at transferring or applying new skills;
- lacking self-help strategies and organisational skills;
- feeling that learning is something that is done to them.

However, it was apparent that they had a number of significant strengths. Very often they are:

- charming and often talkative;
- good communicators;
- often big-picture ‘holistic’ thinkers.

During the discussions with the regional advisers, the pupils and teachers identified some successful teaching strategies. Practical, visual, oral and kinaesthetic approaches were judged to be very useful as was the explanation, demonstration and exemplification of new skills. To assist the application of skills in new contexts, pupils appreciated assistance – in the form of scaffolding – that supported their first attempts. They also valued regular contact with learning mentors.

Prompts

- Do the above characteristics of level 3 match your school’s view? Involve your staff and pupils in drawing up your own list of strengths and barriers to progress.
Pupils with a long history of catch-up often have low self-esteem. What might you do to counter this starting early in Year 7?

What does your school do to help those pupils who have difficulties bringing in the right books and equipment? Do the strategies work or do they need amending for those in greatest need?

What arrangements could be made to help pupils who lose their work or often fail to complete an assignment?

To aid the effective transfer of skills from one subject area to another, the use of an agreed vocabulary can help. Would your school benefit from different subject staff agreeing a shared glossary of terms for those skills most commonly used across the curriculum?

When working with low-attaining pupils, teachers sometimes break the work down into small chunks. While this can be a successful method, often it can lead to pupils not seeing the big picture. What steps can you take to ensure that pupils have a sense of how things fit together?

Level 3 learners are often strong orally and enjoy talking. Which Year 7 schemes of work ensure that all pupils, irrespective of attainment, are provided with frequent, extended opportunities to talk and listen for a range of purposes?

Regulations: the scope for curriculum innovation

Many schools do not realise the substantial freedom they enjoy under the present legislation as regards Key Stage 3 curriculum planning. While they are all obliged to provide a balanced and broadly based curriculum, a school can currently decide:

- its priority subjects;
- any additional subjects and skills it wants to include;
- time allocated to each subject;
- lesson length;
- curriculum organisation and distribution across the key stage;
- number of teaching hours in the week;
- number of days in the timetable cycle;
- the ways of grouping its pupils;
- in collaboration with the LA, the number of terms in the school year.
At present, schools must teach the following programmes of study at Key Stage 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Programme of Study</th>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>mathematics</td>
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<td>ICT</td>
<td>design and technology</td>
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<td>geography</td>
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<td>art and design</td>
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<td>citizenship</td>
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They are also required to teach religious education, sex and relationships education, drug education and careers education. However:

- The programmes of study do not need to be taught in each year of Key Stage 3 – the only requirement is that they are completed by the end of the key stage.
- There are no constraints on how the subjects are distributed or timetabled across the key stage or how much time is allocated to each.
- If the physical education programme of study is not taught, pupils must still have some participation in sport activity.

Any pupil may take the National Curriculum tests and teacher assessments in any subject at the end of any year during the key stage. Under current regulations, early entry results are now banked and only contribute to achievement and attainment tables when all three core subject tests have been sat. There are certain stipulations, as follows:

- In the headteacher’s judgement, the pupil must have completed the relevant Key Stage 3 programme of study.
- The pupil is judged ready to move on to the Key Stage 4 programme of study.
- The pupil has reached at least the nationally expected standard of level 5/6.
- The National Curriculum tests and teacher assessments can only be taken once during the key stage by each pupil and early entry does not bring any special treatment.

The new proposals outlined in the 14–19 Implementation Plan, published in December 2005, will only increase this flexibility. At the time of writing the curriculum for 11–14-year-olds is being reformed for introduction in 2008. This is in order to create more space for schools to better support and stretch their pupils. While there is no intention to reduce the number of programmes of study, these are being reviewed to identify and remove unnecessary duplication in content. A key expectation is that schools will use the time released to provide, among other things, focused catch-up support in the basics for those who fell behind at primary school.

**Prompts**

- What steps could you take to ensure that all staff are familiar with the curriculum offered under the present legislation?
- How might you alter the subjects you offer, and time allocated to each, better to meet the needs of your pupils who join Year 7 with attainment levels in English and/or mathematics below that which is expected nationally?
Curriculum changes

The initial brief for this pilot referred to ‘radical’ innovation, and some schools have clearly achieved this. Some of the other schools have been less radical in their approach, but the twenty schools had very different starting points. For many, the changes which have been planned are very innovative when compared to their previous practice. Broadly, the curricula planned for the first year could be divided into the convergent and the divergent. The majority were convergent as they were intended just for the discrete level 3 cohort. Two schools produced divergent plans, which were for the whole of Year 7. However, several of the schools have decided that their discrete plans were sufficiently successful to be rolled out for the whole of the incoming Year 7.

All schools have been encouraged to move beyond conventional curriculum thinking, with the proviso that any innovative building should sit on a secure foundation. Some of the schools were in a position to make the leap; others needed to take shorter steps. An issue in most schools was the lost practice of creative thinking about the Key Stage 3 curriculum. The statutory requirements of the National Curriculum have been in place long enough for few staff to have had recent experience of structuring an 11–14 curriculum to met the specific needs of the school and its learners. Consequently, many of the first attempts to produce innovative changes tended to consist of simply changing the position of the furniture, rather than seeing whether some of the walls needed removing, or even stepping outside the house to consider more radical rebuilding.

The case studies on the website provide examples of the types of innovative changes which schools have put in place. (A more detailed account of each school’s planned changes can be found in the publication National Low-Attainers Pilot – report on the first year (1936-2005DCL-EN), available in PDF format in the resources and publications area of the Key Stage 3 website www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3/) Each school’s approach has been individual – it was never the intention of the pilot to produce a definitive off-the-shelf model. However, there are a number of common factors which link the approaches of the pilot schools, and these are discussed below.

A planning group

Many of the schools have found that the opportunity to plan a new and innovative curriculum has energised staff and created a sense of excitement about curriculum and teaching and learning possibilities which had not previously been seen. The teachers themselves have commented on the positive learning experience of collaborating with colleagues from other curriculum areas. There have been management implications for making time available, but the return has been a committed group of teachers whose enthusiasm has directly affected the quality of their teaching.

Case studies of how two Liverpool schools embarked on planning their new curricula can be found on the website.
English and mathematics

The level 3 learners who form the cohort for this pilot will inevitably have some difficulties with aspects of English and mathematics. The original brief for the pilot stipulated that the schools should provide five hours each of these subjects, rather than the usual three hours. Not all the schools have managed this – the main constraint being the issue of staffing. However, as the pilot has progressed, thinking has shifted a little in this area. There is no question of the need to provide extra support in these two subjects, but simply adding two hours’ teaching may not be the best solution for all schools, particularly if there are problems with the existing provision. There is also a clear need to provide literacy and numeracy support across the curriculum. Broadly, the extra provision provided by the pilot schools falls into three strategies: providing five hours for each subject, providing the equivalent by the provision of cross-curricular literacy and numeracy, and giving extra support by the use of withdrawal groups.

A case study of how a London school linked the pilot with support for cross-curricular literacy can be found on the website.

Differentiated provision

The research into the specific needs of pupils who enter secondary school at level 3 was an important starting point for the pilot schools. All schools have some degree of differentiation in their curriculum provision, but in many it is mainly based simply on the differing abilities of pupils, rather than on a more detailed understanding of the factors that have produced those differences. The freedom to construct a new curriculum – and as the section on regulations above makes clear, all schools have more freedom than they often realise – has enabled the schools to be much more specific in the support and challenge they provide. Increasingly, this is not just applying to the pilot’s target cohort, but has prompted schools to reconsider the more detailed needs of all pupils. In other words, it is promoting movement towards a more personalised education for pupils.

Fewer teachers

An important strategy which is common to many of the plans, and is also a feature of the existing practice of many of the associate schools, is the reduction of the number of teachers for pupils in Year 7. While many pupils manage, or even thrive on, the jump from one teacher to ten or eleven after a gap of six weeks, it may be the case that schools have overestimated the ability of all pupils to handle this change. Schools that have already reduced the number of teachers have found that attendance and levels of behaviour improve as a result. Across the pilot schools there are a variety of plans to use fewer teachers, including form tutors teaching 50% of the timetable, mathematics and science taught by the form tutor with the rest of the curriculum taught by three teachers, and in several schools, the provision of combined humanities. The continuing professional development (CPD) implications of such moves should not be overlooked.
Opening Minds

The curriculum model that has had the most influence on the schools has been the RSA’s Opening Minds, and contact details for this scheme appear in the resources list at the end of this document. Opening Minds provides a structure for approaching curriculum planning through competencies rather than subjects, and is usually taught in six cross-curricular modules. It had been successfully introduced in a few schools before the pilot started, and several pilot schools have found it very successful. The initial stages are time-consuming as a group of teachers has to write the content, but the advantages of that process have been mentioned above. The scheme, which is flexible and does not normally incorporate all subjects, supports the need of level 3 learners in a variety of ways. It provides links between subjects, it can be taught by a reduced number of teachers and it follows on more naturally from the curriculum pupils have experienced in their primary schools. (There is gathering evidence both within and outside the pilot that the scheme can potentially meet the identified needs of all learners.) Typically, it will be taught for half the week with English and mathematics remaining outside. There are particular issues of assessment for schools adopting this scheme.

Case studies of how a Bristol school and a Nottingham school developed competency-based curricula can be found on the website.

The flexible timetabler

The curricula being developed within this pilot can cause problems for timetablers, who are happier with the traditional symmetrical system of two equal populations. Curriculum innovation can break down this pattern in various ways. The target cohort might be taught discretely for all the week, or for some of the week. They may study fewer subjects and the subjects themselves may be arranged differently. For example, the headteacher of one of the associate schools has usefully challenged the thinking of the pilot schools by asking such questions as: Where is the research that proves that ‘drip feeding’ each subject each week is the best way of promoting learning? One of the pilot schools has responded by planning an expressive arts carousel with the subjects taught sequentially in blocks during the year. The pilot experience is that these are not insoluble problems for timetablers, but there needs to be a will, support from senior management and an input of experience from other schools gained from networking.

Pupil grouping

The planned curricula contain a variety of pupil groupings. Two schools decided, during their planning year, to apply the new curriculum to the whole of Year 7, since their emerging plans seemed to offer a better learning path for all pupils. In the second year, some other schools have decided to adopt this approach. Other schools are treating the LAP cohort as a discrete group with their own accommodation and teachers. Other schools have decided to challenge those at level 3a by teaching them with level 4c pupils and teaching the rest of the level 3s separately. Whatever the grouping arrangements, schools have recognised the need to prevent the target level 3 pupils from becoming detached from their peers, and also to ensure that they are not ’cocooned’. The new curricula are intended to provide both support and challenge.
Learning skills

The earlier section on the typical characteristics of level 3 learners refers to their need for more developed learning skills and this has been recognised in the curriculum planning within the pilot. At one level, there is a need to support their organisational skills, and the provision of fewer teachers with more contact makes a contribution here. However, there is also a need to support a more sophisticated range of learning skills and to ensure that these skills are used across the curriculum. The teaching of skills, such as the ability to work both independently and in groups, to do research and to make revisions, can be effectively planned as a thread through a curriculum with an Opening Minds structure. The National Strategy’s Learning Challenge publication (Ref: 0393/2003) has proved a useful resource in this respect.

Secondary National Strategy resources

A successful outcome of the pilot has been not just the increased use of Strategy materials, but also a more focused and targeted use. The materials in the Resources list at the end of this document have been presented and discussed at the regional or national network meetings which take place each half term, and between them the pilot and associate schools have made use of them all. The English and mathematics material on moving pupils from level 3 to 5 have proved central to developing strategies in these vital areas. The learning and thinking skills resources have enabled schools to support the development of competencies for level 3 learners. The Getting Involved and I Can Explain DVDs have proved successful at meetings for parents, and one school has provided training for parents in The Reading Challenge so that they can support their children at home.

Prompts

- To what extent do your staff have the opportunity and time to work together on curriculum planning?
- Does your current Key Stage 3 curriculum provide an effective response to the specific needs of various groups of pupils?
- Have you recent evidence – interviews with pupils for example – of how your Year 7 entrants cope with the transfer to secondary school?
- Does your Key Stage 3 curriculum provide effective support for the literacy and numeracy needs of your pupils?
- Are your plans to provide a more flexible and responsive curriculum at Key Stage 3 being constrained by perceived timetabling problems?
- Does your Key Stage 3 curriculum provide specific teaching of essential learning skills?
- Are you making effective use of the range of Secondary National Strategy materials to resource your curriculum?
Teaching and learning

It was always the intention within the pilot that developments in teaching and learning should proceed alongside the planning for curriculum change. There is clearly little point in investing time and resources in planning an innovative curriculum if the range of teaching and learning strategies remains the same. The developments, in practice, are not necessarily unique to the pilot. What is needed is, in one sense, no different from the aspirations of schools generally – lively, well-planned interactive teaching which takes account of the pupils’ needs and supports their progress.

However, some of the more radical curriculum innovations, particularly those using Opening Minds approaches, inevitably encourage a wider teaching and learning repertoire. Teachers are often teaching some of their lessons outside their own subject discipline and there is a different balance between process and content. The emphasis on the teaching of learning skills encourages the use of interactive approaches and provides a clear focus on effective and flexible learning in the classroom. Part of the joint planning time will be used to discuss teaching and learning approaches and there is more likely to be peer observation and support as the new courses are developed.

The teaching and learning of English and mathematics has been the most important focus of the pilot. However, this is not an area which has required radical and innovative teaching and learning approaches. Clearly what has been needed has been the adoption of the best practice which has been advocated by the Secondary National Strategy. In the most successful pilot schools the approaches have included:

- the early use of Key Stage 2 data to identify the gaps in the English and mathematics competencies of individual pupils;
- teaching and learning strategies which address the specific learning needs of the pupils, and build on prior attainment;
- careful tracking of progress, and assessment at regular intervals, including the use of ‘mock’ progress tests;
- the effective use of curricular targets;
- an understanding of progression in English and mathematics, and the implications for schemes of work;
the effective use of teaching assistants to provide support in this area;

- extensive use of speaking and listening activities, including pairs and group work.

The active involvement of heads of English and mathematics have proved important in this area of teaching and learning. The focused use of LA consultants has also been very successful. In addition to the existing Strategy resources, the Renewing Intervention initiative, described in the Resources section at the end of this document, will provide additional guidance and support.

The use of interactive whiteboards, described elsewhere in this report, has also been a significant factor in encouraging new developments in this area. A further support for the development of teaching and learning has come from the increased use of Secondary National Strategy resources, and a list of appropriate publications appears at the end of this document.

One common theme in many of the schools’ plans has been the enhanced role for teaching assistants (TAs). In some cases they support literacy and numeracy, in others they have a role in assisting with the tracking of pupil progress and the monitoring of curricular targets. A frequent pattern is the use of dedicated TAs for the pilot cohort. In one school, the TA team teaches the course and is properly involved in the planning. One school is recruiting TAs with primary experience to assist with the level 3 pupils.

Curriculum innovations of the sort being produced within the pilot provide opportunities for widening the teaching and learning experience beyond the classroom and for bringing the outside world into the classroom. A few of the schools have made links with Creative Partnerships (see Resources) with the intention of widening strategies for teaching and learning. This initiative is intended to support literacy skills and raise the confidence and self-esteem of the pupils. The use of drama techniques has proved effective in promoting more engaging and interactive teaching. An encouraging sign in schools where the developments in teaching and learning have been most successful has been the evident fun and enjoyment which has accompanied the serious business of learning. This has been very evident in an unexpected feature of the pilot – the number of schools that have produced DVDs of their LAP pupils and the work they are doing.

**Prompts**

- Are developments in teaching and learning keeping pace with curriculum innovations in your school?
- Do some teachers feel that the need to teach subject content is preventing them from reflecting on the processes of learning?
- Are TAs being used effectively as partners in the teaching and learning process?
- To what extent is there focused use of appropriate Secondary National Strategy materials?
- Is learning at Key Stage 3 largely confined to the classroom?
- Is enjoyment an evident factor in learning in your school?
- How effectively does the teaching and learning in Key Stage 3 support the individual English and mathematics needs of your pupils?
Interactive whiteboards

At the beginning of the pilot, ICTIS provided the funding for five interactive whiteboards, projectors and laptops for each pilot school. Promethean was chosen to provide the equipment and the company has proved to be an excellent partner in this initiative with a genuine interest in the pedagogy of interactive whiteboards. The schools have been provided with free training and software and each was given a class Activote set. Few of the pilot schools had much previous experience in this area and hardly any of the teachers teaching the pilot cohort had ever used interactive whiteboards. The training, free to the schools, has been very well received with excellent evaluations. Some schools have extended their training contracts and many have been so impressed with the potential of this technology that they have invested in a large number of extra boards.

There is considerable evidence that in many schools the boards have had a very positive effect on the interactive nature of teaching and learning. Teachers have become excited about their possibilities and there is gathering momentum in this area. This year, schools have had more opportunity to share their experiences and to continue the development of the use of the boards, so that they become an effective part of the teaching repertoire in all the schools. The majority of Year 7 entrants have had extensive exposure to whiteboard technology, so the technology provides a familiar element to their learning.

There are dangers in the use of the boards and the continued training for schools is partly intended to deal with these. The technology is seductive and can be overused. When used unthinkingly the boards do little more than a conventional whiteboard. They can keep the teacher at the front of the class for too long, although the increasing use of technologies that enable the teacher to operate the board from anywhere in the room is helping in this respect. They can encourage an overuse of PowerPoint presentations. However, evidence from the pilot schools clearly shows that the exciting possibilities of interactive whiteboard technology outweigh these potential disadvantages.

Some examples of good practice from schools this year include:

- the allocation of a dedicated TA to the pilot, who is becoming proficient in the use of interactive whiteboards;
- Year 7 students working towards an equivalent to a level 1 interactive whiteboard qualification with the regional Promethean adviser;
- the use of interactive whiteboards proving particularly effective in addressing some issues related to boys’ underachievement;
- the imaginative use of interactive whiteboards in supporting teachers in the processes of lesson planning;
- the advanced use of interactive whiteboards for the pilot cohort in one school which is close to having all English and mathematics lessons on file to be delivered through interactive whiteboards.
Prompts

- Do teachers in your school have opportunities to share the material they have developed for interactive whiteboards?
- Are interactive whiteboards being used inappropriately, for example where conventional methods of presentation would have done just as well?
- Do pupils have opportunities to create presentations for the interactive whiteboards?
- Does your school have a structured training programme for the development of the use of interactive whiteboards as a support for teaching and learning?

A case study of how a Doncaster school developed the use of interactive whiteboards can be found on the website.

Assessment and tracking

One of the encouraging aspects of the second year of the pilot is how the best schools have developed their use of data more effectively to assess and evaluate the progress of the pupils that make up the pilot cohort. It is widely accepted that the intelligent use of data is a common characteristic of successful schools. The need to track more frequently how their pupils are progressing has prompted pilot schools to refine their data systems and procedures. The pilot has also encouraged the schools to use available Key Stage 2 data to provide a more detailed profile of their level 3 entrants than they previously had.

Although a small number of pilot schools continue to experience significant difficulties in obtaining Key Stage 2 data, most now are able to collate the information they require in good time. Some schools gather provisional teacher assessments early in the summer term which they use to inform their initial planning. These assessments are then confirmed later in the term and augmented by the end of key stage test results when they are known. Where schools have had no difficulty in accessing essential data, it is often because the links with their partner primary schools have been strengthened by involvement in the pilot. In those schools where the transfer of data is most effective, invariably it has been facilitated by the LA.

Key Stage 2 data, together with other relevant information, has allowed schools to generate initial pupil-level Key Stage 3 targets and interim end-of-year milestones. These are then used to gauge progress, frequently making use of sublevels. In the best schools, as well as sharing ownership of these numerical targets, pupils have been given clear curricular targets. These often stem directly from a thorough analysis of the test papers, sometimes using the Pupil Achievement Tracker. In turn, the identification of strengths and areas for development at class and pupil level has proved a very useful aid to curriculum planning and identifying where modified or additional support is required.
Many schools have increased the frequency with which they assess their pupils’ performance, in some cases to a number of times termly. In the most effective schools, these assessments are built into an assessment calendar that is shared with the pupils. These frequent assessments ensure that potential underperformance is identified early so that appropriate intervention can be triggered with minimal delay. In the best schools different intervention packages have been developed, customised to the needs of the pupils. These range from the subject-specific to more generic resources such as *The Learning Challenge*.

While a small number of the pilot schools had previously made use of the progress tests, involvement in the programme required all schools to do so this year. The importance placed on the tests within the pilot prompted many schools to raise their profile of them generally. Some developed a progress test preparation programme which sought to ensure that pupils were well placed to do themselves justice. The best preparation programmes echoed what schools do in the run-up to end of Key Stage 3 tests and Key Stage 4 and 16-plus examinations and often involved parents.

The drive to improve their assessment and tracking arrangements has necessitated schools investing resources into key professional development activities. A common need was ensuring that teachers were secure in their judgements on levels. As well as increasing the accuracy of assessments, it also increased teachers’ awareness of progression in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills in the subjects they teach and how these can be expressed in levels and sublevels. Not only has this improved curriculum planning, but it has also meant that teachers are better placed to advise pupils on what they need to do to progress from one level to the next.

**Prompts**

- Have you recently reviewed your transfer arrangements, in particular the information and data you collect from your partner primary schools? What is lacking and might be collected in a more effective way within a more useful timescale?
- Does prior attainment data inform the setting of end of key stage targets and milestones and are these shared widely with all staff, pupils and parents?
- How are curricular targets used with Year 7 pupils? How are they arrived at, communicated to pupils and monitored?
- What is the whole-school policy on the frequency of assessments to track performance and what happens when underperformance is identified?
- Do you know how staff feel about present performance data systems? Is it easy to enter data and access what they need or does it need adjusting?
- Do staff feel secure in assessing levels? What steps need to be taken to ensure that all judgements are robust?

**Management and staffing issues**

The progress of the pilot has raised a number of staffing issues related to leadership, coordination, deployment of staff, management and communication. Schools planning radical curriculum changes might consider the following findings from the pilot.
The commitment and support of senior leaders, especially the headteacher, is essential if the initiative is to be effective.

In the most successful models, a senior leader has been given the responsibility for coordinating the pilot and ensuring that the senior leadership team is kept informed of its progress.

While in all schools there is the named coordinator, the function is most effectively shared by members of a guiding team – the initiative must not be seen as the preserve of one member of staff.

The coordinator needs sufficient time to develop the initiative.

The guiding team often consists of staff who directly teach the pilot cohort and others who have strategic responsibility for key aspects, such as subject and pastoral leaders.

Those teams who fulfil their steering role most effectively very often have regular time in the school’s meeting schedule for discussion and decision making.

The planning time needs to include an articulation of the rationale for developing an alternative curriculum and explicit statements about the benefits that pupils will derive from the project.

In schools nationally, the priority for allocation of staff is typically examination classes in Key Stage 4 and, where applicable, at 16-plus, followed by Year 9 preparing for end of key stage tests. Some pilot schools have maintained this approach, but others have been more flexible, employing a less rigid model. Not surprisingly, the most effective teaching and learning has been seen in those pilot schools that have had the confidence to make use of their strongest practitioners in Year 7. Where this has happened, it invariably reflects the high profile the pilot enjoys within the school, in particular with the headteacher, and a belief in the importance of laying strong foundations in the early years. In many schools there has also been very effective use of TAs to support the initiative; there is fuller reference to this in the teaching and learning section of this document.

There are lessons to be learned from the pilot to date on the importance of communication. A number of schools have suffered from not bringing on board, during the early stages, key subject and/or pastoral leaders such as the Head of English or the Head of Year 7. Occasionally, this has resulted in some difficult discussions regarding who is responsible for the standards achieved by the pupils involved in the pilot. Steps have had to be taken to remedy the situation to prevent the work of the pilot becoming isolated. Conversely, schools where a communication strategy was agreed from the beginning, which ensured that key staff had the opportunity to contribute from the outset and all members were kept informed of the progress of the pilot, are those where the understanding of the pilot’s significance is widely shared.

Prompts

- In developing an alternative curriculum to meet the needs of pupils with levels of attainment lower than would be expected nationally, what exactly are your reasons for the exercise and what is it that you expect the pupils to get from it?

- How will you reflect the curriculum development in the school self-evaluation form (SEF)?
Who in the senior team is best placed to lead such a development and who else should make up the guiding group?

What resources are to be at the disposal of the guiding team?

What priorities influence your present deployment of teachers and TAs and will these priorities need changing to accommodate the demands of the alternative curriculum?

How might existing whole-school management policies and procedures need to flex in response to the emerging needs of the alternative provision?

What strategies will you employ to ensure that the pivotal staff members are involved from the outset and others are kept informed of progress?

Networks

Networking has been an important activity within the pilot, and has broadly taken two forms: half-termly regional meetings arranged by the Secondary National Strategy team, and inter-school and LA visits arranged by the schools and LAs themselves. It was recognised that meeting the challenge of improving the outcomes for level 3 learners could be more effectively achieved by schools working together. Staff working in new and unfamiliar areas have welcomed the opportunity to talk to staff in other schools embarking on a similar initiative.

Research shows that effective networks have specific shared goals and target-specific groups, and this holds true for networks in the pilot. Participation rates in the centrally organised regional networks have been high and the feedback indicates that staff have increasingly found the networks to be an essential part of the pilot. For these networks to fulfil this early promise and continue to flourish, senior managers must be convinced that the benefits of raised attainment and achievement outweigh the costs on teachers’ time and school resources. So far this has certainly been found to be the case.

The pilot schools have benefited from being part of a national initiative where networks have been made available to them. This facility will not be immediately available to other schools that decide to embark on a similar initiative. However, LAs could fulfil the same function. Within the pilot, the next stage in development is for the networks to further decentralise their organisation and nature – LAs will play a useful role here. Several
of them now hold regular twilight meetings for the pilot schools in their areas. With frequent input and support from subject consultants and advisers, LAs maintain the momentum and reflect evolving pilot developments. These twilight meetings have been found to be particularly cost effective as there is limited impact on teaching time.

In addition, often as a result of informal conversation and discussions at regional events, some schools have taken up the offer of school-to-school visits. Such visits can be time-consuming, and there are cost implications. However, the payback has been huge, as teachers have been able to see fellow colleagues demonstrating new approaches and curriculum models in action.

Prompts

- How effective are your current networks in supporting the progress of your school improvement plan?
- Do your staff have the opportunity to make focused visits to other schools engaged in similar initiatives?

Partners: primary schools and parents

Transfer to secondary school represents a cultural change for parents as well as for their children. A common factor of curriculum changes in the pilot has been the recognition that many parents miss the closer relationship with the school that they had in the primary phase and feel less able to support their children’s education. It was also clear that curriculum changes at Key Stage 3 would be less effective if they were not informed by knowledge of the experiences of the pupils in the latter years of their primary education.

A number of schools already had some effective transfer practice, but following productive sessions at the various network meetings, useful developments took place. The schools held briefings for their partnership primary headteachers to explain and consult on the new curriculum. There has been much more cross-phase visiting, in some cases by teachers who had not been in a primary school since they were there as a pupil. Some teachers from the pilot schools have done some teaching in one of their partnership schools. Bridging units have been used, mainly in English and mathematics, but including one based on the local history of the area. The issue of more effective cross-phase transfer strategies is still in need of further development. The potential of primary and secondary teachers looking directly at pupils’ work, curricular targets and curriculum continuity has not been sufficiently exploited. There also needs to be more visiting of the secondary schools by the primary teachers as the predominant mode is the other way round. (One useful suggestion from a primary school was that after a few weeks the Year 6 teachers should go to the secondary schools and track pupils through a day of the experiences of the new curriculum to provide feedback for the secondary school.) Other examples of good practice have included:

- TAs from two of the main feeder primary schools regularly visiting the school and acting as TAs to the Year 7 pilot cohort for several hours each week;
- the creation of a transition team to develop further strategies to improve Key Stage 3 transition;
- Easter and summer schools for pupils who will transfer at level 3;
- Year 6 students to attend LAP induction day;
- presentations at Year 6 parents’ evenings;
- hosting a teaching and learning meeting for Year 6 teachers of LAP pupils.

Last year, the main issue still causing problems to the schools was the transfer of data, and this remains a concern. Schools continue to liaise with the LA to see if the transfer of pupil data and other information can be improved. LA advisers confirmed that steps were being taken to improve the quality of cross-phase activities for 2006. One school has decided not to circulate blank CD-ROMs to primary schools this year but will be using teachers and TAs to gather information on potential Year 7 pupils.

The pilot has encouraged many of the schools to consider strategies for a closer contact with parents. The schools have arranged special meetings to explain the new curricula to parents and to advise them on ways in which they can support their children. There has been positive reaction to this – two parents can be seen talking about their experiences on the pilot DVD produced last year (0002-2006DVD-EN).

In one of the pilot schools, parents are invited to come to the school each Friday afternoon to look at the work produced during the week. Several schools have made DVDs of their pilot cohorts and copies have been distributed to parents.

**Prompts**

- How much curricular contact do your Key Stage 3 teachers have with teachers in the partnership primary schools?
- Do you have a programme of cross-phase visits?
- Have you considered the possibility of cross-phase curricular targets?
- How do you encourage parents to:
  - provide information about the learning history and needs of their children;
  - play an active role in working with you to provide a responsive curriculum;
  - understand the ways in which their children are being taught, and how they can support them;
  - help their children make a successful transfer from primary school;
  - encourage their children to take advantage of out-of-hours provision, for example homework clubs;

**The move into Year 8**

In its first teaching year the curriculum contained a variety of pupil groupings. Two schools decided to apply their new curricula to the whole of Year 7, since their emerging plans seemed to offer a better learning path for all pupils. Other schools were treating the pilot cohort as a discrete group with their own accommodation and teachers. Two other schools began the pilot in Year 8.

The situation becomes increasingly complex as the pilot progresses into Year 8, with some schools choosing to maintain the cohort as a discrete group and others
planning an amended structure in Year 8, with the more successful pupils returning to mainstream. In most cases, schools are working hard to maintain some of the early principles for level 3 learners – those of fewer teachers and less movement around the school. While planning provision for the cohort as it moves up a year, the schools are also evaluating and revising the innovative Year 7 approach in preparation for the new cohort. Additionally, there is a gathering sense of the need to plan for Year 9 and beyond, with the LAP experience contributing to an understanding that there may be pathways through Key Stage 3 as well as beyond.

The move into Year 8, however, raises other issues regarding the leadership and management of an expanding project. A more permanent and clearly defined leadership role is being identified in some schools, often being filled by the school strategy manager or a key LAP teacher. The role may include aspects of Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 transition: data and assessment, coordination of schemes of work, managing colleagues and overseeing their CPD needs. Lessons learned and data accrued need to be managed for the benefit of the cohort as they move through the school, as well as for subsequent level 3 learners. For the first time in some schools, the move from Year 7 to 8 is being viewed as a transition point.

The schools that have been in the best position to manage this transition from Year 7 into Year 8 are those that have viewed the initiative as an important part of their development plan, which has implications for curriculum development and teaching and learning in other parts of the school. If this has not happened, and there is insufficient planning for progression, there is a danger that the excitement of the innovations in Year 7 will be dissipated by a contrasting experience in Year 8.

Some examples of good practice from schools include:

- ensuring that, as well as providing attainment data on those pilot pupils returning to the mainstream when they join Year 8, the teachers are informed of the teaching and learning methods that proved to be particularly successful;
- recognising a need systematically to establish the attainment of each pupil in each subject area by the end of the school year, especially in those subject areas that are to be taught discretely in Year 8, so that progress can be maintained and the traditional Year 8 dip avoided;
- planning that all staff members who are inheriting the pilot cohort will be briefed on individual pupils’ strengths and areas for development – in terms of what the pupils know, understand and can do;
- ensuring that teachers exploit and extend next year the gains made by the present Year 7 in the areas of independence and personal and social skills;
- coordinators requiring subject leaders to record how exactly Year 8 provision will build on the successes of Year 7 and how it will be different;
- recognising that the pilot would benefit from formal meeting time being built into the meeting cycle, allowing all key staff to attend;
- planning to allow the present coordinator to be shadowed in order to build capacity.

A case study of how a London school used the pilot to support Year 8 pupils can be found on the website.
Resources

Extensive and very helpful information on the RSA’s Opening Minds curriculum is available on their website: www.rsa.org.uk/newcurriculum/.

Information on Creative Partnerships can be found at www.creative-partnerships.com.

The following Secondary National Strategy materials have been used by the pilot schools:

- The Reading Challenge (Ref: 0293-2003)
- The Writing Challenge (Ref: 0314-2003)
- The Mathematics Challenge (Ref: 0200-2003)
- The Learning Challenge (Ref: 0393-2003)
- How to get more pupils from level 3 to level 5 in English part 1 (Ref: 0264-2004)
- How to get more pupils from level 3 to level 5 in English part 2 (Ref: 0003-2005)
- How to get more pupils from level 3 to level 5 in Mathematics part 1 (Ref: 0290-2004)
- How to get more pupils from level 3 to level 5 in Mathematics part 2 (Ref: 0741-2004)
- Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools (Ref: 0423-2004G)
- A Condensed Key Stage 3: Designing a flexible curriculum (Ref: 0798-2004)
- A Condensed Key Stage 3: Designing a flexible curriculum 2006 update (Ref: 0258-2006DCL-EN)
- Leading in Learning: developing thinking skills at Key Stage 3 (Ref: 0036-2005)
- Assessment for Learning (Ref: 0043-2004G)
- Curriculum continuity – effective transfer from primary to secondary schools (Ref: 0116-2004)
- Getting Involved (Ref: 0275-2004 G DVD)
- I Can Explain (Ref: 1402-2005 G DVD)
- Designing the KS3 curriculum (Ref: 0003-2002)
- National Low-Attainers Pilot – Experiences from the first year (DVD) (Ref: 0002-2006DVD-EN)

At the time of writing this document the Secondary National Strategy was training English and mathematics consultants in renewed approaches to intervention. These proposals will build on the existing good practice in schools. They will provide additional personalised approaches to identifying the gaps in pupils’ learning, and the strategies for dealing with them. Schools will be encouraged to establish intervention teams, and new resources are being developed, including progression maps for English and mathematics. The Low-Attainers Pilot will make extensive use of these renewed strategies and materials.