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**SSAT
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GCSE reform transition: problems and possible solutions

*Alex Galvin, Head of Curriculum, SSAT
& the Leading Edge Steering Group*

Some of the government's planned reforms to assessment and accountability arrangements have created significant concerns for schools. This article has been prepared by the headteachers of the Leading Edge Steering Group, to address some of those concerns.

Leading Edge is the national network for high performing schools. The network has existed since 2003 and was previously a high performing specialist school (HPSS) option. Since 2010, Leading Edge has operated as an independent network supported by SSAT. It is led by a steering group of 25 headteachers from within the programme and offers participating schools the opportunity to share practice, to establish links with similar schools across the country and to showcase their work within the wider SSAT network.

The Leading Edge schools are helping to develop excellent practice for the benefit of the system as a whole and are often at the forefront of innovation in both structural and policy reform as well as the school improvement agenda.

The Leading Edge network is now larger than it has ever been, with 312 member schools this year. If you are interested in joining this vibrant network, get in touch to find out more by emailing us at leading.edge@ssatuk.co.uk or visit our webpage: www.ssatuk.co.uk/leadingedge.

Alex Galvin

GCSE REFORM - SOME PROBLEMS OF TRANSITION

Introduction

It may be possible to argue the case that GCSE warranted reform. It is even possible to make a case for the direction of travel in which reform is moving. No reform, however, can be justified unless it clearly provides a better education for all – or at the very least ensures that improvement for some students is not at the expense of others.

The thrust of this paper is that the implementation of the reform programme significantly falls short of securing a coherent transition plan that meets the needs of students and is easily understood by employers, universities and parents.

The period of reform planning has been marked by:

- » A pace of change that consistently sets unrealistic timescales for the reforms, and a disregard for the consequent difficulties that schools would face in delivering new subject specifications and for the challenges that examination boards face in framing new specification and appropriate models of assessment.
- » A failure to recognise that in many subjects GCSE is not a two-year course but a five-year programme. Changes in subjects such as mathematics, English, sciences, and modern foreign languages have a profound impact on how children are taught in the early years of secondary school.

- » A fragmented approach, with reforms to the primary phases, key stage 3, key stage 4 and A-level working separately so that it is difficult to see how they match.
- » Constant volatility, such as the reform of GCSE, both content and assessment, the focus on EBacc, and then new performance measures. The narrow planning timescales have been further compromised by uncertainty arising from sudden announcements that have often been at odds with previous decisions. This has been a major factor in the very large increase in the number of schools that have adopted IGCSE.
- » A disregard for the problems that arise from a three-year transition period before all subjects have converted to new GCSE.
- » A failure to consider how the transition period integrates with accountability reform.

THE CONSEQUENCES THAT STEM FROM A FLAWED TRANSITION PLAN

1. Problems arising from a mixed provision of old and new GCSE

The assessment systems deployed by schools aim to provide coherent information about progress both within and across subjects. Any system will aim at providing coherent feedback on progress together with an indicator of potential performance at GCSE. From next year schools will be teaching both old and new GCSE, with their different ranges of grades. The reform timescales have provided no time for piloting new programmes, making it difficult for teachers to accurately assess performance relative to the new GCSE standards. Decisions about the second and third tranches of GCSE will operate to similar planning timescales. The combination of old and new GCSE will mean that:

- » There will be an extended period of uncertainty and confusion until 2019 when all examinations will be graded to the same 1-9 assessment scale.
- » Students will have a confusing process of one grading system for new GCSE and another for old GCSE. And some subjects will have greater challenge than others.
- » Where available, key stage 4 option subjects include a mix of new and old GCSE subjects; choice may be dictated either by the assumed status of one subject over another or a perception that one will lead to a better grade than the other.



- » It will be very difficult for students to make choices about post-16 pathways or the choice of subjects on A-level programmes, as deciding relative strengths will be far more difficult to determine.
- » Parents of transition year students will face the same difficulties in understanding a child's relative performance.

2. Curriculum and staffing

The curriculum of a school is not planned on a year-by-year basis, but as a five-year programme subdivided into years. The rushed timescales and frequent policy changes of reform mean that schools have not been able to make appropriate adjustments. Students in the early years of new specifications are likely to be disadvantaged.

Ofqual will claim that its policy of managing comparable outcomes will avoid the problem. Experience of managing comparable outcomes has been mixed. In 2012, when facing relatively smaller changes in English language, the system failed. This summer Ofqual claimed that the process had worked well (despite volatility for individual schools) as there were fewer year 10 entries in mathematics and English. In reaching its conclusion Ofqual ignored the very significant increase in students that had

switched to IGCSE (i.e. the GCSE cohort was not a like-for-like comparison with previous years). The following factors will impact on student experience and achievement:

- » Mathematics and probably English will need increased teaching time (not necessarily restricted to years 10 and 11). Changes to post-16 education, such as mandatory mathematics for those without a level 2 qualification, and the possible advent of core mathematics, are creating a demand for additional mathematics teachers which cannot be met within the implementation timescales.
- » Groups such as RSA have expressed concern that new GCSE mathematics has added content at the expense of depth. The Science Community Representing Education (SCORE) has similarly stated that the science specifications have been written for those progressing to science A-level, but this is not the majority route. NFER fears that so-called greater challenge in science and mathematics will be at the expense of engagement and could reduce post-16 STEM uptake. If there had been adequate time to prepare, teachers have consistently shown they can ensure that reforms are not at the expense of engagement.

3. Universities

The three-year mix of new and old GCSE will make it very difficult for universities to objectively judge the profile and potential of applicants – more so as AS take-up will be greatly reduced in state schools. Students with mixed GCSE are likely to suffer long-term disadvantage in terms of the currency of their qualifications.

4. Employers

There is always a challenge for employers in understanding any major qualification reform, but never before have they had the challenge of distinguishing between individual students with concurrent GCSE qualifications that are expressed in different currencies.

5. Examination boards

Evidence has shown that boards struggle to cope with minor changes and that marking does not inspire confidence. Given that all the boards have expressed concern about the speed of developments, it is

difficult to have confidence that the transition will operate smoothly.

There is also concern that many students will have the negative experience of having to follow a one-size-fits-all testing regime which places a priority on uniformity above that of securing valid and reliable assessment evidence with a proportionate increase in the time required for examinations. The problem of significantly increased examination time is particularly acute for SEN students.

Boards already struggle to find sufficient examiners. A single season of linear examinations at both key stage 4 and key stage 5 will only exacerbate the problem and increase the likelihood of errors in a system that is already struggling to retain the confidence of educationalists.

6. Accountability reform

The principles of Progress 8 are generally supported. The fact remains though that the rushed timetable of reform erodes the effectiveness of the new accountability measures in the following ways:

- » The number of old and new GCSEs taken will vary from student to student. The value that can be added on the 9-1 scale is not comparable to the A*-G scale of old GCSE or equivalent qualifications, and the relative standards may be different.
- » The same problem will work through to the baseline measure used for judging value added at key stage 5.
- » Schools determine their programmes to meet the needs of individual students. Some schools have traditionally entered able students in year 10 for some (or even all) GCSE subjects, and particularly mathematics. The current rule is that only first entry counts. A student taking mathematics or English a year early in 2016 will be taking legacy GCSEs which will not be counted in the 2017 performance tables. This decision is illogical, for the comparative performance of students with similar prior attainment is likely to be constant whether the examination was taken in 2016 or 2017.
- » While the principles of Progress 8 are sound, there are methodological flaws. There will be no genuine pilot period during which the model can be evaluated. The official measurement of



prior attainment of students is fine-tuned for the prior attainment baseline, determined by their key stage 2 test mark. In contrast, GCSE is a detuned score with achievement rounded down to a grade threshold. A student may achieve a GCSE English mark at the very top end of GCSE level 4 but that achievement is rounded down as though the student has attained the lowest mark needed to achieve the grade. The model means that students with prior attainment that places them close to the lower end of the target grade have more chance of losing value. In contrast those with prior attainment that places them high on the target grade scale have more chance of adding and considerably less chance of losing value.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The options for a new government elected in May 2015 are narrower than those open to the government at this point in time. Ideally it would be better now to delay reforms by a year to tackle all the issues above and to allow time for schools to both adjust provision, and to provide adequate CPD. By the next summer it

will be too late to delay the introduction of new GCSE English and mathematics. The following could reduce the confusion that any new administration will have to manage:

- » as an interim measure, either retain A*-G for all subjects until all subjects are following new GCSE specifications or use equivalent outcomes to award 9-1 grades in all subjects
- » commit to an early review of assessment so that the time involved in sitting examinations is proportionate to the requirement of securing valid and reliable outcomes
- » there is a case for considering dividing GCSE into part one (taken at the end of year 10) and part two taken at the end of year 11
- » remove the prescription that penalises early entry of legacy GCSEs in English and maths in the 2017 performance tables
- » continue to express GCSE performance as a grade but use the standardised mark achieved in each subject to calculate value added measures.



First headship, first inspection: leading a school to an 'outstanding' Ofsted report

*Kat Pugh, Headteacher,
The St Marylebone CE School, Westminster*

'Education is not the filling of a bucket but the lighting of a fire.' There is a lot of talk of buckets in secondary education at the moment. This is because one of the new performance measures, the Progress 8 measure, is described in terms of qualifications which fill (or do not fill) the eight required buckets. In all our discussions about Progress 8 at St Marylebone, I am reminded of these words, attributed variously to W.B Yeats, Socrates or Plutarch (depending on which scholar you follow).

This chimes very much with the approach we take to education at St Marylebone – and, given the opportunity, the approach we took to Ofsted. The thoughts I share here represent only one view, one particular context and experience; what works for us is not the only recipe nor is right for all schools. But, in discussion of first headship 'Ofsted readiness', my purpose is to illuminate – to even be incendiary – rather than simply fill buckets.

To put the experience in context: The St Marylebone CE School is a high-performing, non-selective, inclusive and comprehensive secondary school, serving pupils of Christian faith, any other faith and no faith at all. We serve a very diverse, multi-faith and multi-cultural inner London community, with 47% of our cohort on free school meals and 49% with

English as an additional language. Our performing arts specialist status is at the heart of the school's energy and aspiration, placing great emphasis on what the arts contribute to the development of young people – not as leading stage stars, but as curious, confident, skilled, spiritually aware and socially attuned, independent thinkers and citizens. As one of the first schools to become a National Teaching School, we take a leading role in developing and sharing best practice and shaping the teachers and education leaders of today and tomorrow. As one former HMI recently remarked: 'At St Marylebone, possibility is everything.'

Our last full inspection, in which we sustained an 'outstanding' judgement, was in 2007. At the time, I was a head of years 8 and 9 and a teacher of English. Since then, Ofsted has made a number of low-profile visits resulting in good practice case studies in areas such as employer engagement and assessment for learning. We had, in the meantime, become a National Teaching School, an 'Outstanding' converter academy and opened an affiliate special free school (more on this below). By 2014, Ofsted was due, even for a school with a strong record of excellent results. Following the retirement of our former headteacher, Elizabeth Phillips OBE, who'd served for twenty years, effecting extraordinary transformation and influence across London education, I became headteacher in January 2014. Ofsted called on 1 April 2014. It was not an April Fool. 



In September 2013, The St Marylebone CE Bridge School opened. At a formal ceremony, a group of GCSE music scholars accompanied a group of year 7 pupils with special educational needs, singing in harmony, conducted by an Oxford-trained music teacher. Three of these year 7s had never sung before that month. Two had never performed in front of an audience. One had been, until two weeks before, a selective mute. The speaker of the house, Sir John Bercow, spoke of his own experiences of special educational needs and heralded the opening of the first specialised provision in Westminster for secondary-age pupils with special educational needs in speech, language and communication.

The school is an affiliate to St Marylebone; it is its own trust and company, with its own governing body – but it is born out of the same zeal, vision and sense of possibility which fuels our 'outstanding' mainstream secondary. It is a special free school – one of the first in the country. Now in its second year of operation, with 12 pupils in each year, The St Marylebone CE Bridge School (SMBS) is in its own (temporary) premises with a flourishing team of educators and specialists. It is doing what we set out to do: supply a gap in local provision for pupils with these needs, so that they do not get lost in mainstream nor limited by a special school experience which does not recognise their individuality. Getting this far has taken stamina and resilience worthy of a 'learning character' article in itself.

Now let's rewind the clock: one of the questions I was asked in interview for this post was, 'How would you ensure that the school is Ofsted-ready?' I replied (with my heart in my mouth) that I would not run the school according to Ofsted criteria. We lead schools, in my view at least, motivated by a love of learning and by a vision of what is possible for all young people. We don't think, dream and aspire under headings and criteria. Indeed, the best Ofsted inspectors understand this. As the former HMI and education consultant Frank Knowles says, 'Write about the school, not about the criteria.'

As such, at St Marylebone, we don't pursue ways to tick boxes. We pursue excellence. This whole school ethos, summarised as 'a love of learning' and 'the pursuit of excellence' has been tangible here for a long time. However, with a new head, a new Ofsted framework, a lot of new or trainee staff (the usual inner-London turnover), we set about making sure that it was really felt and understood by everyone – and that it was, demonstrably, having the impact desired. Furthermore, we wanted to ensure that we had not only the structures in place to support this, but the energy, zeal and fire to deliver and articulate it.

There were a number of activities, both implicit and explicit, undertaken by the leadership team, to make this happen. In no particular order:

We centred our entire, year-long Teaching and Learning programme on three questions:

- » What does excellent teaching and learning look and sound like in our school/department?
- » Where do we know we can see this today?
- » How can we see this more frequently, more widely, tomorrow?

These questions underpinned Inset for the senior leadership team and then our heads of learning, who then took the same questions back to department meetings. Discussions were informed by data about quality of teaching, student attainment and progress and appraisal objectives – but the real value in this was the active investment in talking about teaching, evaluating and honing our experiences and deciding how, creatively, to capture the best practice.

We championed our Aspiration and Challenge programme

This programme is, in one sense, our answer to gifted and talented, and in another sense, our answer to a whole-school upward trajectory. Aspiration and Challenge is the 'yes and' factor, providing stretch and challenge in lessons, weekly Bright Ideas speaker seminars, targeted Careers Ideas talks from visiting professionals, a Scholars' programme which nurtures talent and leadership, a High Achievers programme which engages high-achievers and ought-to-be high achievers in the 'yes and'; the next step, the exciting sixth dimension beyond the school timetable. Importantly, Aspiration and Challenge is for everyone; its branding is radiant and high profile: its message is 'yes and you too'.

We challenged opinion with fact

We produced a (rather large) spreadsheet which recorded all relevant evaluative information about all teachers. Data was drawn from external reviews, appraisal data, results and lesson observation records. Importantly, for this purpose, it was all colour coded. While our deputy head held the colour-coded copy (i.e. the teachers' scores), the executive senior leadership team (a team of four) were quizzed on what we would expect to see in each teacher's lesson in terms of the quality of teaching, achievement and behaviour for learning. Done privately as it was, and over two or three meetings, it required us to challenge our opinions and become much more rigorously

informed about the strengths of our teachers – using facts to substantiate opinion. Department-specific equivalents of this were produced to support heads of learning. No information was collated nor shared that did not contribute to a firmer understanding of the quality of our teaching.

Talking teaching

The school has for a couple years now run a series of drop-in sessions called Coach-Couch. The name evolved from the nature of the sessions themselves: teachers attended voluntarily after school in a relaxed and conversational, non-judgemental forum. Usually this resulted in a group of 10 to 20 people. Ahead of the session, a theme-difficulty would be suggested, usually framed as a question, such as, 'How can I make sure all pupils are actively learning in class discussion?', or 'How do I decipher complicated texts for my year 10 EAL learners, without disempowering them?' – in other words, questions which continue to have relevance no matter the stage of one's teaching career.

The sessions were aimed at teachers no longer on a training programme, since already our many NQTs, School Directs or Teach First teachers had a very full calendar of CPD events. The idea was to inspire self-generated dialogue and collaboration, in a non-judgemental, cross-departmental and wholly voluntary forum. As a result, teachers were encouraged that their passion for teaching and pedagogy was valued and nurtured. This has now evolved into a family of teacher-led focus groups which enable conversation and collaboration linked to individuals' CPD and school improvement priorities.

One-to-ones and department lunches

As a new head, I met each of the senior leadership team, all heads of department and curriculum leaders, one-to-one, to hear their outlook on their area of responsibility, challenges ahead and how they felt they would like to contribute further to the school's vision and ethos. This was a really valuable experience in listening; it enriched my sense of how others articulate and view the school, its strengths and challenges. Moreover, the people talking to me had a rare rehearsal in articulating their educational vision and identifying their professional challenges – in the context of our whole-school aims. ➤



We also began holding weekly department lunches in my office. It is very unusual for teams to have the time to sit and enjoy lunch together – and enables me to hear their news and views while establishing a firmer insight into the group dynamics.

All these opportunities for dialogue were an active investment by us as leaders in teachers' ideas and experiences: a further demonstration of our love of learning. By default, this also prepared us for Ofsted: just like pupils practising for the French oral exams or an essay paper. It meant we knew ourselves, our staff, our students and our school better.

Finally, since the call from Ofsted was likely, there were a number of practical, systematic and structural things we did in advance with a view to not having to do them between the midday notice of inspection and 8am the next morning. These included:

- » collating and categorising essential paperwork
- » drafting a 3.30pm message to pupils to inform and inspire them about the inspection
- » planning our staff briefing

- » producing a one-page 'golden rules' guidance sheet for teachers about what they did and did not need to do
- » deciding who our joint observation team would be
- » demystifying Ofsted for non-teaching staff: what would we require on-demand from the data team? For what should the site keepers be extra vigilant? How can reception be best supported and resourced? How confident is HR about presenting the single central record?

It was (and still is) so important to know that everyone was (is) pulling in the same direction. How would this be apparent? For me, the answer is not that 'they all agree' or 'they all have uniform answers'. Common purpose comes about through active engagement in questions of what that purpose is. The result of all this activity was, gladly, the outcome we felt we deserved: 'outstanding' in all categories and a report which really sings the spirit of the school. Not every school is at the same stage of development. But, since Ofsted is a reality for all of us, I think one maxim holds true: 'You can't beat the ocean, but you can learn to surf.'

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Building character through a resilience curriculum

*Andy Percival, Deputy Headteacher,
The Rodillian Academy*

I am sure we have all heard the cries; those chilling cries that crush our spirits as teachers: ‘I don’t get it!’ ‘I am rubbish at maths’ and the old favourite, ‘I can’t do it’, issued when they have actually only committed two seconds of their life to trying to master whatever challenge you have just put in front of them. Like many others, we have been working hard at The Rodillian Academy to combat these detrimental mindsets through innovative curriculum design.

We now place the development of character, resilience and growth mindset at the centre of our ethos and way of working; this development is the foundation of everything we do, and has significantly contributed to the transformation of the school itself from 19% five A*-C including English and maths in 2007, to 76% in 2014.

Where did it come from?

The resilience curriculum evolved from an already successful learning to learn curriculum which explored the ‘6 Rs’ of responsibility, reasoning, respect, reflection, resourcefulness and resilience. Two years ago, we decided to refine the focus to solely look at resilience, as the pivotal part of the year 7 curriculum. Much has been written on the desirability of this trait: sticking at it especially when things get difficult, coupled with that positive attitude to studies, essential

for success in school and life. If we could develop this at the early stages of our students’ secondary school life, imagine what they could achieve?

Who delivers it?

The resilience curriculum is delivered by a carefully selected group of staff including subject leaders, directors of learning and senior teachers, who have all engaged in joint planning and review sessions throughout the last two years to ensure that we maintain a purposeful curriculum that builds resilient learners with transferable skills to support all curriculum areas. Students are taught by the same teacher all five lessons, which enables strong relationships to be formed and provides a safe learning environment whereby students feel more confident in taking risks.

How do we begin?

The resilience curriculum is first launched in year 6 at the prospective parents’ evening, where it is explained, by the headteacher in his keynote address, that the development of character and resilience are central to our ethos and our way of working. Parents/carers understand that it is our belief that the development of these skills is fundamental to success within educational settings as well as throughout life. This programme is then reinforced as part of the transition programme. Students join The Rodillian Academy for two weeks before the summer holidays for the transition programme which is centred, unsurprisingly, on resilience. Students are given a challenge to complete over the summer; preparing a presentation about a mistake they have made in ►



the past, which is then delivered to the rest of their class within the first week of year 7.

What does the year look like?

The areas of resilience we promote in our students are: academic, physical, emotional, cultural and spiritual, endurance, behavioural and cognitive. The curriculum revolves around four individual schemes of work. The first scheme of work is called *The big question*. Throughout this scheme of work we focus on building positive relationships between students, with staff and with parents/carers. We introduce the concept of resilience through teaching Carol Dweck's mindsets. Students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses through class presentations and are set individual targets. We take the entire year group on a compulsory three-day camping trip in their third week at the academy where they have an intensive introduction to resilience skills and challenges, including water sports, survival challenges, and of course, the challenge of being away from home. They have to put up their own tents, cook their own meals alongside these other activities. A challenge for the staff and students alike!

The second scheme of work develops their

abilities to look beyond themselves and consider the work of others. *In their shoes* looks at how others show resilience and have overcome barriers with a particular focus on key figures in history. Inspirational figures such as Nelson Mandela are explored together with more current issues such as the terror attacks in Paris.

We move onto *Operation new planet*; problem-solving tasks, working in small teams. Students use their resilience to plan the move to a brand new planet while having opportunities to reflect on their own lifestyles and ways in which they may improve the way we treat our planet.

The final scheme of work is aptly called *The big reflection* and provides students with opportunities to evaluate the impact of their progress in resilience this year and set targets for next year. Throughout the course staff and students also develop practical skills which require resilience such as learning how to play the ukulele and juggle; powerful tasks where staff and students learn alongside each other. How does the teacher respond when the class are getting better than they are? Staff modelling responses to failure - resilience in action - has been an inspirational addition to this process.



Do we assess?

We monitor progress in resilience using the bronze, silver and gold set of criteria, which gives broad categories of progress in resilience. The results of the resilience curriculum monitoring are communicated with all staff so that they have an understanding of the resilient capabilities of students in their classes, allowing this information to inform their planning in lessons. As this becomes an embedded part of the culture of the school, we are now seeing an increase in subject staff talking to resilience teachers to understand how individual students work so that they can better support them in their lessons.

The future

So what next? We are looking to extend our transition programme to work with key feeder schools to develop core values, mindset, literacy and numeracy at KS1 and KS2. We recognise that we will need to provide a robust CPD programme building a whole-school culture of growth mindset, to support staff across the schools and the key stages and also a programme to support our parents so that they can better support their child throughout their education. This programme will need to educate parents; parents who may not

have had positive experiences within education themselves. We are looking to develop opportunities for cross-phase sharing of good practice so that teachers can better understand the learning journey and character development that a child experiences throughout their time in education. As part of this cross-phase sharing we are looking to develop opportunities for students to lead the learning, an opportunity for year 7 resilience students to teach key stage 1 and 2 the character and resilience skills that will support their learning.

Our goal

Ultimately we desire resilient learners who have the right mindset that will support them as they prepare for linear exams at the end of key stage 4, key stage 5 and beyond into the world of work. Hearing our year 7 cheering the rugby team on recently, when they were losing in a match, with the war cry of 'be resilient', gives us hope that this is not as ambitious as it first seems. And yes - they came back and won!

Rodillian will be presenting their work at SSAT's national Mind the Gap Conference on character education this spring.

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