



# DANGEROUS DIET:

HOW EXAM RATINGS ENDANGER A  
BROAD AND BALANCED CURRICULUM

# BROAD AND BALANCED?

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Stephen Tierney, CEO of  
Blessed Edward Bamber  
Multi Academy Trust

## The Key Stage 3 curriculum: teachers and parents have their say

Over the past few years there has been growing alarm among education commentators that our obsession with exam performance is having a harmful effect on the broader school curriculum. Up until now, however, there has been little attempt to gauge if teachers and parents share those concerns.

This report, based on a survey we commissioned last autumn, is an attempt to plug that gap in our knowledge. It makes for sobering reading.

By large majorities, both teachers and parents think that exam pressures are leading schools to narrow the curriculum as more and more time is taken up in exam prep. They also believe the problem has worsened over the past three years.

## How has our education system arrived at such a place?

It is hard to find anyone – teacher, employer, parent, politician or policymaker – who isn’t in favour of a broad and balanced curriculum. Education authorities, from Ofsted to the Department for Education, regularly insist that this is what schools should offer. Indeed, in answer to our survey of teachers and parents on the matter, the DfE reaffirmed that point: “All pupils,” it said, “should receive a broad and balanced curriculum, and Ofsted inspects schools on this basis.”<sup>1</sup>

Given this overwhelming consensus, it may seem surprising that there is so much concern that the curriculum being delivered in schools is not broad enough and is increasingly imbalanced. Yet experts, including Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector, are warning that this is exactly what is happening<sup>2</sup>. Curriculum content, they argue, is being squeezed as children are drilled to prepare for tests years before they need to. In some cases, this means that schools are starting to teach a GCSE syllabus as soon as pupils arrive in Year 7 rather than Year 10.

If there is general agreement that a broad and balanced curriculum is desirable, why are so many schools accused of offering the opposite? In a word, accountability: the way in which exams are used not only to measure a child’s attainment but also to assess their school’s performance.

“In England the accountability system wags everything else,” says Stephen Tierney, CEO of the Blessed Edward Bamber Multi Academy Trust. “The issue isn’t SATs or GCSEs per se; the greatest issue is what happens as a consequence of the exams with respect to Ofsted and a lesser extent the performance tables.”

“  
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Geoff Barton,  
General Secretary, ASCL

Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, is equally scathing about the consequences of an exam-driven curriculum. “The government’s obsession with exam rigour is in danger of turning secondary education into a long grind towards GCSEs as schools have to squeeze new content-heavy courses into packed timetables and jump through accountability hoops. We need to put GCSEs back in their place as the outcome of a broad and rich secondary education and not the wheel on which everything turns.”

Do teachers and parents share these concerns? In an attempt to find out, GL Assessment commissioned pollsters YouGov to ask them if they believed exam pressures were forcing schools to narrow the curriculum.

## Main findings

Over 900 teachers and 1,000 parents of children under 18 were polled in September and October of 2018<sup>3</sup>. The results were conclusive. Over **three-quarters of teachers (76%)** and **three-fifths of parents (60%)** agreed that schools were offering a more restricted curriculum from an earlier age over the past three years than they had been previously.

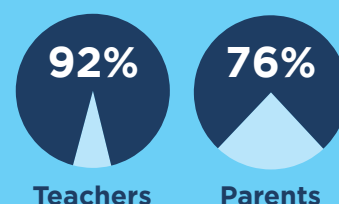
There was little doubt among respondents about what was to blame – **92% of teachers** and **76% of parents** cited the pressure placed on schools to deliver good exam results. **Two-thirds of teachers (65%)** said parents ought to be worried about children being moved onto a so-called ‘GCSE flight path’ too early, with **almost as many parents (61%)** agreeing.

Geoff Barton agreed that the constricting curriculum was a real problem: “It is vital to preserve the early years of secondary education as a time when children build the firm foundations and love of subjects upon which academic success and their life chances are built.”

Stephen Tierney, however, said the problem was even more pressing in primary schools. “The narrowing of the curriculum can be a bigger problem in primary schools, where it can become very focused on KS2 SATs – reading, writing and maths – with, in extreme cases, other subjects not covered until after the May exams.”

Regardless of the type of school, teachers believe the problem is widespread. **Nine in ten of them (90%)** think too many schools are pressuring teachers to concentrate on an exam-driven syllabus to the exclusion of the wider curriculum. This is despite the fact that similar proportions believe that **teaching a more rounded curriculum from a younger age would better prepare children for later academic success (87%)** and for **life after school (91%)**. Parents echo those beliefs, with **76%** and **78%** respectively agreeing with those propositions.

The percentage that cited the pressure placed on schools to deliver good exam results as the reason for a more restricted curriculum.

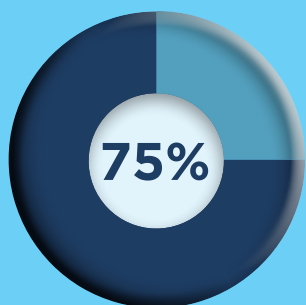


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# BROAD AND BALANCED?



**Over half of teachers (51%)** believed student wellbeing was the primary casualty of an exam-driven curriculum.



**75% of parents** believe that too much of a focus on exam results might negatively affect their children's wellbeing.

## Unwanted consequences

**Seven in ten (71%)** are concerned that teaching a more restricted curriculum has a negative impact on classroom behaviour, and almost **eight in ten (78%)** think it doesn't address children who develop at a later stage than their peers. Similar proportions say it is **bad for pupils who have minor learning difficulties (71%)**, those who have **switched off from school because of earlier experiences of exams (72%)**, those with **behavioural problems (61%)** or **children with latent but not obvious potential (55%)**.

Parents agree, with **three-quarters (75%)** believing that too much of a focus on exam results might negatively affect their children's wellbeing and **half (50%)** worrying that it would make school less enjoyable for their children than their own time at school.

Student wellbeing was a real concern for teachers, according to our survey. Over **half of them (51%)** believed it was the primary casualty of an exam-driven curriculum and it was the issue that concerned them most. A **fifth (21%)** cited the neglect of a child's individual learning needs as their most serious concern and **17%** the fact that too much time was spent on exam practice.

David Crossley, an Associate Director of Whole Education, said teachers were right to be worried about student wellbeing: "The best curriculum inspires, builds confidence and prepares our young people for life and work. If all students are asked to do is focus on examinations, as well as increasing stress and exacerbating fear of failing, it negates the real purpose of learning."

Hilary Fine, Head of Product at GL Assessment, said: "Understanding the whole child is the best way to improve academic performance and student wellbeing. Assessment shouldn't drive the curriculum or narrow it but rather provide helpful insight into the whole child and their progress."

This was particularly true, she pointed out, for disadvantaged students. "The most disadvantaged children are further disadvantaged if they are subjected to a narrow curriculum shorn of the rich, cultural capital better off children tend to accumulate outside of school. Their only exposure to education in the broadest sense is at school. Take it away and they become doubly disadvantaged – they're unlikely to access it elsewhere and academic performance is unlikely to improve."

Ms Fine also warned that constant tracking and onerous assessments risked adding to teachers' workload. "Assessment should be smart, reliable and easy to use. It shouldn't be a burden to teachers. So, digital, standardised assessment that is robust and allows teachers to compare their children nationally is ideal."

## Pressured teachers

Teachers, it seems, are feeling the pressure. According to our survey, over **four-fifths of them (82%)** said that if they had to teach an exam-driven curriculum they would find teaching less enjoyable. And **well over half (56%)** said they would support their school in efforts to make the curriculum more than just about the final exams.

David Crossley cautioned that it was vital for schools to give teachers the space to support their students' learning needs. "What is important is not whether schools offer a two- or three-year Key Stage 3, or even the pressures of linear examination, rather it is creating a climate where teachers have the confidence to focus on real, relevant and engaging experiences that lead to learning that lasts. If learning doesn't last it isn't learnt!"

## Conclusion

There seems little doubt that both teachers and parents share the views of many education experts that exam pressure is leading to an unacceptable narrowing of the curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3 but also in primary school in the run-up to Key Stage 2.

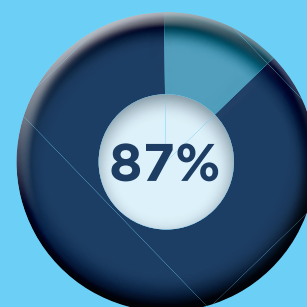
There are, too, widespread fears about the immediate and negative effects exam pressure is having on student wellbeing and behaviour, as well as the long-term implications of a narrower curriculum on later academic performance and career success. Yet there is also an acknowledgement among parents and teachers that schools are not to blame for this. The responsibility for that they lay firmly at the door of school accountability.

### Footnotes:

1. 'Schools force pupils to focus on GCSE curriculum from age of 11', The Times, 16 November 2018.
2. HMCI's Commentary: recent primary and secondary curriculum research, October 2017.
3. Research was commissioned by GL Assessment and carried out online by YouGov among a random sample of 911 UK teaching professionals between 21 September and 3 October 2018 and a random sample of 1,022 parents with children under 18 years old between 2 and 4 October 2018.



**Eight in ten (78%)** teachers think a restricted curriculum doesn't address children who develop at a later stage than their peers.



**87% of teachers** believe that teaching a more rounded curriculum from a younger age would better prepare children for later academic success.



# A CURRICULUM WORTH HAVING



By **David Crossley**,  
an Associate Director  
of Whole Education.  
David has worked with  
almost 100 members  
of secondary school  
leadership teams  
facilitating as part  
of the programme  
'Leading and Managing  
Curriculum Change'.

## It is not structure but curriculum delivery that matters most

Curriculum has quite rightly taken centre stage in Ofsted's current thinking. After all, the curriculum determines what our children and young people do while they are in school.

How a curriculum is delivered is at least as important as its content. An intended or unintended consequence of our system is that the focus on the high-stakes exams and outcomes has led to an undue focus on teaching to the test. The shift to end-of-course linear examinations and increased content has exacerbated this further.

While the focus on curriculum is welcome, the assumption that shortening KS3 and extending KS4 is a key part of the problem misses the point: it is not structure but how you deliver the curriculum that matters most. Thinking differently about a five-year secondary key stage provides the opportunity and, as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector has given us permission to rediscover the curriculum designer in us all, we should seize it.

Many schools have opted for a three-year KS4 faced with what they perceive as the time pressures of the two-year, in reality 18-month, GCSE model and a large number of linear examinations. This is understandable. But more of the same, practising test questions from Year 7, will never do more than marginally improve what we do now and it risks children becoming disaffected, disengaged and doing less well. As we know, there is an attainment

gap when disadvantaged children start school at the age of four that widens by 11 and gets much worse by the age of 16. More of the same simply won't reduce the gap or truly raise achievement. It really is time to begin to do something different.

Since its inception, Whole Education, the national schools' network, has argued for the notion of an entitlement to a 'whole education' that helps children and young people to develop a range of skills, qualities and knowledge they will need for life, learning and work and makes learning more relevant and engaging, with young people taking ownership of their own learning.

This is Whole Education's curriculum intent and one which many educators share. It has never been about what a school offers in terms of syllabus choice or timetable allocations. And it is not about simply adding subjects or opportunities. Rather it is about a mindset and an approach to how best to deliver this intent.

## The time is right

So, the time is right to begin to do something differently by:

- Building on what we do best
- Building on what we believe and why so many of us came into the job in the first place
- Building on what we know about our children and young people and how they best learn

What is important is not whether schools offer a two- or three-year KS3 or even the pressures of linear examination. Rather, it is creating a climate where teachers have the confidence to focus on real, relevant and engaging experiences that lead to learning that lasts. If learning doesn't last it isn't learnt!

As a consequence we might even get ahead of the game in achieving one of the OECD's 2030 goals 'to explore recognising student outcomes that are not yet measured but are critical in navigating in time and social space and shaping their own future.'



## **Working out how and where to begin can feel challenging. Key Stage 3 provides a good place to begin.**

This approach is more about evolution than revolution and is predicated on giving equality of importance to knowledge and skills and reflecting on how best to deliver both.

### **Step 1 Establish and agree key principles.**

Agree a set of principles and goals that underpin your curriculum – your intent. Then, give yourself and your colleagues the permission to use these principles to design a curriculum that delivers in conventional ways but puts equal value on wider ways too.

### **Step 2 Emphasise the ‘how’ of curriculum design.**

Make real, relevant and engaging learning a greater priority; through this, seek to achieve more learning that lasts.

### **Step 3 Build on what is good.**

Progress to asking colleagues to demonstrate examples of how far their offer delivers those principles now and what they could do to enhance them. Share and evaluate emerging best practice.

### **Step 4 Plan a way forward.**

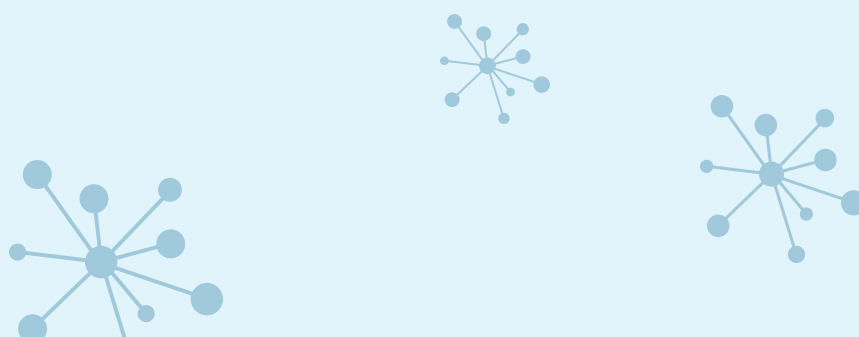
It is often better to start small with a pilot or a number of pilots, learn from them and scale up. This can begin in your classroom, with a team or curriculum area rather than across the whole school at once. Decide where you want to be in three years’ time and reflect that taking a step at a time may result in you achieving more.

### **Step 5 Focus on the individual.**

Know every individual student and discover their potential. This gives real purpose to school and schooling beyond simply passing exams.

### **Step 6 Focus equally on the impact of both conventional and wider ways.**

Find ways of measuring what you value and of demonstrating how individuals are making progress. As well as making greater use of student self-assessment, make better use of existing assessments. For example, the learning skills information in the *Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT)* can really help teachers understand a learner, and the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS)* measure, which focuses on attitudes, shows how qualitative information can be easily used and analysed.



# STAYING ON COURSE AT KS3



By **Kieran Scanlon**,  
*Principal of Sir Robert Woodard Academy, part of the Woodard Academies Trust*

The Sir Robert Woodard Academy has been on a remarkable journey. We are a 20-minute drive west of Brighton, nestled between the South Downs and the sea, serving the communities of Shoreham, Lancing and Sompting. We are home to the southern hub for the institute of research in schools, home to the Sussex Bears Basketball Academy and we have specialisms in maths and the performing arts.

The school has gone from a position of being significantly undersubscribed to becoming the school of first choice in the area. We are significantly oversubscribed in Year 7 and the trend looks set to continue. Parents are choosing to send their children here because they buy into our philosophy that the whole child really is the whole point. They know we offer outstanding pastoral care and tailor our curriculum in a way that gives every child the chance to succeed.



## Starting on the right note

As a leadership team we believe that school improvement starts in Year 7. We want our students to have the best possible start and we want to build on their prior learning. We know our parents want their children to engage with a wide range of subjects, to feel a step up in terms of challenge and, most importantly, experience a positive start to their secondary education.

A key element of our philosophy of assessment at KS3 is to benchmark our Year 7s on entry, so we understand their starting points and can ensure they stay on course. We want to assess their progress in a way that doesn't limit teacher creativity or introduce another set of high-stakes assessment. We are also part of a MAT, so we need to assess in a way that allows us to make comparative judgements against other schools in the Trust from time to time.

Thankfully, I work with some like-minded individuals at the Woodard Academies Trust, and the CEO of the MAT supported us by investing in the KS3 Assessment Package from GL Assessment – a package of tried and trusted assessments that identify students' potential achievement, measure their attainment and progress in core subjects, and uncover any barriers to learning they may have. As the assessments are pre-created and automatically marked, we don't need to worry about adding to teacher workload, and we don't release the tests in advance so students don't worry about preparing.

By working in this way, we are confident that we can articulate, with evidence, how well our students are doing, relative to their starting points at KS3. We can ensure that our students are on the right pathway, ensure they are in the right classes and make relative judgements against class teacher summative data. As a Trust, we can identify strengths and weaknesses within our group of schools and make considered judgements about where to add additional resource or share expertise.



## Evaluating progress

As our assessments are in place, we can talk to parents with confidence about how much progress their children are making relative to their starting points. We can evaluate our performance as a school and articulate to multiple stakeholders about how well students are doing in KS3. The workload behind creating an evaluative set of data like this has been taken away from teachers, so classroom assessment is much more tailored to curriculum and more formative in purpose and nature than it has been in the past. This is a key benefit.

In an era where schools are being asked to do more with less, we're keenly aware of managing workload for our teachers. We are committed to continuing to reduce the frequency of evaluative assessment and we will do this by continuously improving the quality of our assessment and our response to what the data is telling us. Investing in GL Assessment for KS3 has been invaluable on this journey.

**“As our assessments are in place, we can talk to parents with confidence about how much progress their children are making relative to their starting points.”**

### Sir Woodard Academy's approach to assessment

- Benchmark Year 7s on entry, so teachers can understand their starting points and ensure they stay on course.
- Use GL Assessment's Key Stage 3 Assessment Package to identify students' potential achievement, measure their attainment and progress in core subjects, and uncover any barriers to learning they may have.
- Take care to avoid additional and unnecessary workload. Assessments that are pre-created and automatically marked addresses this.
- In this way, articulate, with evidence, how well students are doing, relative to their starting points at KS3.
- Use data at a Trust level to identify strengths and weaknesses across the group of schools and make considered judgements about where to add additional resource or share expertise.

# LESS IS MORE: WHAT DOES GOOD ASSESSMENT LOOK LIKE AT KEY STAGE 3?



**Tim Munro**, Senior Leader, Curriculum and Assessment, Wilmslow High School in Cheshire

Did you know that young people only get 950 days of secondary education? It's a statistic that helps our school stay focused on what really matters for our students and make certain that every day counts. It's also a point that has helped us take a strong stance against Key Stage 3 being all about GCSE preparation, which can so often result in a 'bare-bones' school curriculum being offered.

There is growing concern about the pressure schools are under to focus on exam-driven syllabuses, but we won't be narrowing our own curriculum. Of course, like any school, we want our students to do well in exams, but in our view a 'GCSE flight path' is not the only way to achieve this. Our approach is to concentrate on a knowledge-led programme of study, which prepares students for exam success but also equips them with the type of learning that will serve them well way beyond the school gates.

## Quality assured

As a mixed ability school with a high proportion of SEN students, a broad and balanced curriculum allows all children to benefit from academic, creative, practical, sporting and character-building activities. Each subject focuses on the 'big ideas' that help our students to really engage with their learning. We believe that pedagogical content knowledge – the integration of subject expertise and skilled teaching – is a must for dealing with misconceptions when learning a subject, so we prioritise teachers teaching within their specialism.

The assessment approach we use has been carefully conceived to support our aims. Our motto is to assess less but well; so, while teachers record regular formative judgements in their mark books, we only record summative judgements centrally when our students join the school and then twice a year. All Key Stage 3 assessment scores are standardised too, which allows us to compare students' progress across subjects and over time. We've found this a very reliable and transparent way of monitoring progress. It also enables us to identify quickly and confidently any student making less than expected progress and individualise interventions earlier.

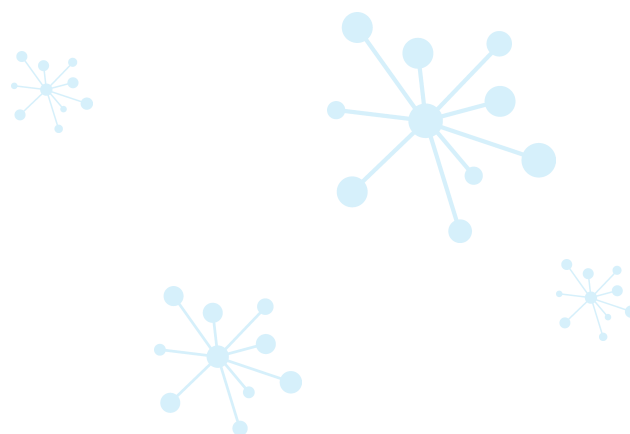
## Meaningful data

Our whole school culture revolves around striving for your own personal best; so, when we baseline Year 7s on entry using transition tests, CAT4 and Key Stage 2 scores, we see this as a first benchmark. From then on, we veer away from target grades and instead use the *Progress Test Series* in May to measure how effectively we have taught the children and spot any knowledge gaps. We want students to beat their previous best score. We are able to design and enhance our curriculum as needed across cohorts; a range of literacy lessons

focusing on comma splicing and apostrophe use in Year 8, for example, or reading comprehension booklets to help students develop inference skills in Year 9.

The biggest impact of assessing in this way, however, has been informing our grouping policy. We had long suspected that mixed ability sets helped boost the often-hidden middle achievers without disadvantaging the high attainers, but with the *Progress Test Series* we have robust data to prove it.

Our whole assessment emphasis is on high quality, meaningful data – information that supports our aims without creating work for teachers. Focusing on formative assessments gives us on-going feedback about students’ knowledge that we can act on to keep them progressing, while a pared-back approach to more formal assessment ensures we concentrate on the information that matters. Now we know which students are learning well, as well as who needs more support and in which subject areas. These are the insights that will ensure our students’ success at GCSE and beyond.



### Why Wilmslow High School has chosen a less-is-more approach to assessment:

- Supports a knowledge-led curriculum by providing benchmarks and on-going feedback to help children progress
- Helps track progress accurately and systematically across Key Stage 3, using standardised scores
- Informs the grouping process for each year group
- Enables students who are making less than expected progress to be confidently identified, and for early, individualised interventions to be provided
- Enhances curriculum delivery based on patterns of underperformance for different cohorts
- Assists class teachers in engaging more closely with data, to spot individual areas of need and anomalies within their student group

# HELPING STUDENTS ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL THROUGHOUT KS3



**Hilary Fine,**  
Head of Product,  
GL Assessment

Good assessment is intrinsic to broad and balanced learning because it helps schools evaluate their curriculum, measure student progress and identify the children who need more support or greater challenge.

As this report has demonstrated, both teachers and parents share the views of many education experts that our obsession with exam performance is leading to an unacceptable narrowing of the curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3. Our contributors have explained what schools can do to implement a balanced curriculum, informed and supported by robust assessment, and what teachers can do to engage parents and disadvantaged children.

Working in partnership with schools for almost 40 years, we have developed a suite of assessments that supports better outcomes for students. Our tests are designed to help you to enable every child to realise their full potential by taking a 'whole pupil view', which takes into account their ability to achieve, their current attainment, and which identify any barriers to learning they may have. We work with expert partners, including King's College London and the University of York, to ensure that our assessments are rigorous, academically sound and in line with current best practice. Our assessments are also widely used by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to measure the impact of their intervention research.

Our KS3 Assessment Package is a powerful combination of our *Cognitive Abilities Test*® (CAT4), *Progress Test Series*® (covering English, maths and science), *New Group Reading Test*® (NGRT), *New Group Spelling Test*® (NGST) and our *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School*® (PASS) attitudinal measure. Together they can identify your students' potential achievement, measure their attainment and progress in core subjects, and uncover any barriers to learning they may have so you can plan appropriate interventions. It is specifically designed to support you through the crucial KS3 years and for GCSE decision-making.

For further information please visit [gl-assessment.co.uk/KS3](https://gl-assessment.co.uk/KS3).

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To contact your local area consultant to organise a school visit or to discuss our KS3 Assessment Package in more detail, visit [gl-assessment.co.uk/consultants](https://gl-assessment.co.uk/consultants), or to discuss your specific requirements call **0330 123 5375**.