Our Approach to Assessment Without Levels : Presentation Notes

The presentation should be followed by a discussion:

Q. How does the AWL solution which your school has chosen avoid the potential pitfalls?

2. What are the 10 pitfalls that we can observe by looking at examples of school's approaches to AWL?

By looking at examples of approaches to AWL at KS3 we can identify a range of potential pitfalls.
There will be a natural reluctance to change something that has only just been embedded, but it will be important for an SLT to steer the development of KS3 to avoid such pitfalls.

1. Recreating Levels using other words to describe them
2. Trying to assess Attainment Targets before all the component parts have been taught
3. Seeking to boil down a large range of learning attributes into just one number
4. Using a 'Working At' approach where pupils effectively start from a 'fail' grade
5. Using a high level of granularity in grading that is unlikely to be supported by evidence
6. An assumption that progress advances neatly, like climbing the steps of a ladder
7. A view that a pupil is 'on target' if they attain their predicted grade – even if that grade is unacceptably low
8. A lack of detail in showing how the teaching will cover all of the Subject Content statements
9. A lack of clarity about what pupils should learn after being taught each unit of work
10. Not taking the opportunity to implement a 'Mastery' approach to learning

1. Recreating Levels using other words to describe them

If a school has simply swapped Levels for some other number or symbol, then the number or symbol will need to have a definition if it is to have any meaning. We no longer have Attainment Targets which had definitions of pupil competences at each Level. Instead we have Subject Content Statements - which are also the Attainment Targets.
The solution to AWL isn't about finding a number of symbol that can sum up what pupils have learnt. We should ditch Levels and instead think of a way to summarise what pupils are learning.

2. Trying to assess Attainment Targets before all the component parts have been taught

There are many individual components which make up an Attainment Target. Each of these need to be taught before we can assess the statement as a whole. We can't begin to use Attainment Targets until late in a teaching programme. Instead, we should aim to record what pupils are learning. It will only be when the component parts have been learnt that we will be able to assess the whole Attainment Target.

3. Seeking to boil down a large range of learning attributes into just one number

There are potentially thousands of individual competences that need to be learnt to be proficient in a subject.
It is because it is not practical to list all these competences that we look for a single number to sum them up.
But, diverse attributes, learnt to different extents, don't lend themselves to being put into one box.
If we express many learning attributes as one number we lose the more important thing - which is a description of what pupils have learnt.
Using Key Performance Indicators gives us the problem of how we can package thousands of dissimilar attributes.
Using one number to summarise them takes us back to the problems of Levels.
But if we define one or two **Learning Objectives** for each unit of work taught, we will have a smaller number of manageable statements against which we can decide the extend to which they have been learnt.

4. Using a 'Working At' approach where pupils effectively start from a 'fail' grade

We might want to call a GCSE number grade 1 a 'Silver' band, or some other phrase but pupils will soon realise that it means they are effectively working at a fail grade. A 'Working At' approach is not helpful or necessary at the start of key stage 3.
But, a 'Working Towards' approach will provide an early sighting on a likely grade attainable should pupils continue to study the subject at key stage 4. Using 4 Mastery categories means that we are forecasting future attainment only to the nearest two grades with each judgement we make. However, the system can collect these judgements and refine this forecast as we build up evidence.

5. Using a high level of granularity in grading that is unlikely to be supported by evidence

When the desire to represent pupil attainment at a point in time using a single number is conflated with the desire to show progression, people start to think that a single number can be divided up into smaller parts, so that we can add a bit to it for each lesson to show progress.
So we see schools trying to condense what they think a pupil in year 7 has learnt into a GCSE fine grade like 4+.
Would we genuinely have the evidence to support such a precise assessment when we are not even using GCSE grade criteria? No. It is a foolish idea to use one number - and then try to make it even more precise by dividing it up.

Instead, we should concentrate on recording how well pupils are mastering what they are taught and broadly equate that to what CGSE grade that is likely to lead to. Estimates of future attainment will become more accurate towards the end of KS3 when we have accumulated more evidence of what pupils have learnt.

6. An assumption that progress advances neatly, like climbing the steps of a ladder

It is doubtful that what happens in the brain when learning takes place has this sort of order to it.
Progress is not going to be much like climbing the rungs of a ladder. It is far more messy than this.
It is better to draw dotted lines to show the path towards an indicative grade. Their journey may meander on the way there but evidence of previous pupils' learning journeys will help us to refine our estimates of their future attainment.

7. A view that a pupil is 'on target' if they attain their predicted grade – even if that grade is unacceptably low

Some schemes are based on Flight Paths towards pupils FFT estimated grade. If they are 'at' or 'above' this path they will be 'above target'. If they are below it they will be below target'.
These means that the school will be happy for low prior attaining pupils to get low grades.
A Mastery approach is recommended by the Commission for AWL.
A Mastery approach is not a one-chance-to-learn approach. Instead it will ensure that the majority of pupils are tracking toward the higher grades.

8. A lack of detail in showing how the teaching will cover all of the Subject Content statements

If a school just reports numbers they wont have any information about what pupils are learning.
How will we know if a teacher has prepared the teaching to cover all the component areas of learning?
School inspections focus on the quality of the curriculum and how well it is taught. An assessment approach that doesn't provide evidence of this will not put the school in a strong position.
We need to focus more on the planning and what pupils are learning - i.e. summaries of Formative Assessment.

9. A lack of clarity about what pupils should learn after being taught each unit of work

Attainment Targets in the new National Curriculum no longer describe, for each Level, what pupils should understand, know and be able to do. Rather than report numbers we should report what pupils have learnt.
Using a Mastery approach makes it easy to place pupils' learning into one of four mastery categories for each unit of work taught

10. Not taking the opportunity to implement a 'Mastery' approach to learning

Mastery is not a hectic rush through a sea of content with pupils falling off at each stage.
Mastery is not a one-chance-to-learn approach. Key areas will be visited more than once.

Q. So what targets should we set when using a Mastery approach?
A. We should be setting and expecting targets of the highest grades for all pupils who have the potential to succeed.

3. A Mastery approach provides the basis for estimating future grades

If a pupil was **mastering** every unit of work taught them, this would imply that they are 'Working Towards' the higher GCSE number grades in the subject, were they to continue to study the subject at KS4. If they were **Secure** in every unit of work, this would imply that they were working towards a GCSE number grade 5 or above. Similarly, if they showed an **Emerging** mastery of the units of work, it would imply they were currently working towards the lower pair of GCSE number grades.

A mixture of mastery grades will provide the basis for the application to estimate the likely future GCSE number grade and express this as a current 'Working Towards' grade.

This understand of how mastery grading can indicate future attainment, provides the basis for quantifying pupils learning at KS3. By recording these 'Working Towards' grades, we have the basis for plotting a flight path of progress through key stage 3.

4. From Component Learning to Holistic Learning

Assessment in year 9 should provide increasing opportunities to demonstrate learning across the whole attainment target, i.e. we will move from **component learning** to **holistic learning**. This is an important principle of assessment at KS3.
In key stage 4, GCSE Assessment Objectives will govern the approach to assessment. We will move from 'Working Towards' at KS3 to 'Working At' at KS4.

A range of evidence at KS3 will indicate future attainment - including Prior Attainment, Attainment 8, and 'Working Towards' estimates

5. The Characteristics of a good AWL solution

These will be some of the characteristics of a good AWL solution.
In summary, we should not try to find an alternative to levels. We should consider how we can easily capture what pupils are learning. We should then look for a system that does the number crunching for us.

6. The Concept

Place the focus of assessment on Formative Assessment, i.e. the informal gathering of information about how pupils are responding to the teaching. Teachers have always done it this way. i.e. from time to time make a note in a register about how well each pupil is responding to the teaching. Supplement this information with homework grades and test scores.
The stages in developing a solution to AWL at KS3 will be to plan the teaching, deliver the teaching, summarise how pupils are responding to the teaching , record the outcomes to their learning, let the system use this data to predict future grades and produce evidence of pupil attainment :
Plan > Teach > Learn > Outcomes > Predictions > Attainment

7. Curriculum Design and Assessment at KS3

The focus for developments at KS3 should be in designing a curriculum that meets the requirements of the National Curriculum. This will usually be preceded by analysing the subject content statements into the components that will need to be taught, and developing a scheme of work which will progressively teach these components.
We will then use a mastery approach to record how pupils are mastering what they are taught. Towards the end of key stage 3 we will examine the holistic learning, i.e. how the components of learning have built into an understanding of the broader subject skills and knowledge described by the Attainment Targets.
The system should then use this evidence to predict future grades, were the subject to be continued into KS4, and produce reports.

8. An IT solution

We can systematise these stages by recognising the 6 stages, in this case as 6 layers of information.
Called, a multi-layer curriculum design and assessment matrix, it ensures that all essential information about the analysis, design, planning, teaching, learning and outcomes to KS3 are recorded.

9-13. Slides showing the information held in each layer

14. The Flight Path

This will be produced by the system itself from the information entered about component and holistic learning

We will need to look at a range of evidence of pupils' progress in order to manage their learning from year 7 to the end of year 11. It is OK to have a number of dotted lines on a graph. Each of them add to our knowledge of where a pupil is moving towards and how the are doing on the way.
It is NOT disjointed to have 'Working Towards' at KS3 and 'Working At' at KS4, even if one might instinctively feel that one approach throughout would be better.

This graph shows the evidence available which all point towards a likely number grade at GCSE.
The green line is the 'Tracking Towards' approach which will tend to be a horizontal line pointing towards an expected GCSE number grade corresponding to the mastery category or band along which the pupil has travelled.

The orange and purple lines show the baseline and the Attainment 8 estimates. The yellow dot shows four levels of progress (legacy) and the blue dotted line is a best fit through the Working at blue dots which are based on the use of GCSE Grade Criteria.
This looks complex but it is easy to see how a range of evidence is providing us with a commentary, and allows us to consider the range of evidence which contributes to a picture of pupils' progress.

The most important thing is that this graph is generated by the computer.
All a teacher has to do is judge whether each Learning Objective has been Mastered or not.

15. The mastery report

Pupils acquisition of Learning Objectives can be reported as a diagnostic mastery report.

16. The summary report on pupils' progress

The system can create a report of pupil's mastery across their subjects.

17. The End-of-key-stage 3 Certificate

If a pupil does not continue to study a subject after year 9, there ought to be some kind of celebration of what they have achieved at KS3. This a one way to mark the end to this important stage of education.

18. Criteria for a suitable approach to assessment at KS3

The approach that a school adopts to assessment at KS3 might be guided by these criteria.

Discussion in groups:

Q. How does the AWL solution which your school has chosen avoid the potential pitfalls?