

Executive Summary

Response rate

1254 schools completed questionnaire responses. This is 56.2% of Catholic schools nationally. Of these, 999 were Primary schools. This is 55.7% of Catholic Primary schools nationally. And 246 were Secondary schools. This is 56.3% of Catholic Secondary schools nationally.

Agree/Disagree responses

In the simple agree/disagree questions, most Primary and Secondary schools agreed that levels were a broadly positive development which have improved the quality of learning in RE and the ability of schools to provide feedback to pupils, parents and leaders about progress in RE.

Within this broadly positive picture, it is worth noting that in all but one of the questions, Primary Schools are more positive than Secondary schools.

The agree/disagree questions did mean it was difficult to express ambivalence (there was not an option to neither agree nor disagree) and were not enough by themselves to gauge exactly what agreement with the statements implied. Furthermore, these questions did not give schools the opportunity to express the ways in which they would like to see developments in the way in which RE is assessed.

A significant minority – somewhere between a quarter and a third on each question – expressed the view that levels were not improving the quality of RE and were not facilitating feedback to pupils, parents and governors. Within this group the reasons for disagreement are not possible to discern from the simple agree/disagree questions alone.

Narrative responses

The opportunity to give narrative responses was well taken up by schools and gave some insights into the ways in which the levels were either not serving the needs of schools, or ways in which schools would like to see them further developed. It is also worth noting, that even amongst those schools that had agreed with the positive impact of levels, that development would be welcomed in many cases.

The kinds of comments that were made repeatedly were:

- The use of driver words and level descriptors was more important than the summative, numerical levels which many stated were not widely understood and were not helpful in helping pupils take

Levels of Attainment in Religious Education - Report on the School Levels Questionnaire Summer Term 2016

the next steps in learning.

- However, even these descriptors were viewed by many as lacking clarity with others pointing out that their “breadth” made it difficult to use them as a progress measuring tool. There were many requests to further refine the level descriptors to make them more useful in both giving feedback to students about next steps in learning and in facilitating a school’s ability to measure progress.
- Many schools reported that reporting in levels was not widely understood by parents or even school governors.
- Assessing using levels is increasingly out of step with the way in which assessment now functions in the rest of the curriculum.
- Many schools, both Primary and Secondary, report a move away from levels to reporting using either age related expectations or GCSE criteria.
- It was clear that those schools which were most positive about levels came from dioceses which had provided a great deal of CPD advice and support in the use of levels. However, equally clear was that each of these dioceses had developed supplementary tools to support schools, which were at variance with each other.
- Thus, many schools also reported an unhappiness with the lack of national consistency in the application and use of Levels.
- Alongside this, it was clear that there was also a lack of consistency in the use of levels between the Primary and Secondary phases and that the achievement of pupils rarely made it across the phase divide. Primary schools reported that Secondary schools did not value what they had achieved and that pupils regressed at KS3, while Secondary schools reported that they could not trust “inflated” Primary levels as a benchmark at the beginning of year 7. Finally, emerging from this also is an overarching question about the purpose of assessment. Some of the most thoughtful comments pointed out that we now have an opportunity to learn from the best understandings of assessment in the secular curriculum. This understanding is empirically grounded and argues strongly that the primary purpose of assessment is to improve learning through informing teaching and that recording and reporting is a necessary, but very much secondary purpose. In whatever steps we take next, we need to focus on the use of levels as a tool for improving learning before we consider the ways in which they can be used to facilitate recording and reporting. It is finally worth noting that the narrative responses revealed a continued confusion about the purpose of RE in Catholic schools.

Recommendations:

1. The Levels working party should explore alternative models of assessment, learning from the best of the research that underpinned the move away from Levels in the rest of the curriculum
2. The new models should capitalise on the use of the driver words and skills employed by current Levels of Attainment, which is universally regarded as its best feature.
3. Greater consistency should be achieved between the assessment of RE and the assessment of other NC subjects.
4. The Church should reflect upon the purpose of RE and the best ways to secure these purposes through curriculum and assessment design.