# WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT:

## Reading resilience during the pandemic

GL Assessment®

> **This new report... highlights some of the positive encounters that young people and children have benefited from during the period of lockdown."**

# Foreword

**Geoff Barton, ASCL General Secretary,**
**former headteacher and English teacher**

In March 2020, the education landscape changed overnight as schools closed to the majority of pupils and students for onsite provision as part of the first lockdown.

Over the last 13 months, teachers, leaders, and support staff have been steadfast in doing fantastic work up and down the country to ensure that the negative impacts on children and young people have been minimised. They have not only ensured that high quality teaching and learning can continue to take place but have also implemented an array of other activity including extensive health and safety procedures and policies.

We have seen incredible agility and resilience from everyone across the education sector throughout this period and a determination to continue ensuring that schools remain at the heart of communities as they build a future, post-Covid.

In the months ahead there will rightly be more conversations about the negative implications of the pandemic on young people and children including the long-term impacts of what is widely being described as lost learning. It is important that we acknowledge and work to address that, but we must not overlook the positives that we can take from this period as we look to build for the future.

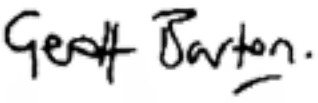
This new report from ASCL Preferred Supplier, GL Assessment, 'Words of encouragement: reading resilience during the pandemic', highlights some of the positive encounters that young people and children have benefited from during the period of lockdown.

The collection of experiences within the report from schools and Trusts provides much food for thought with analysis from the Autumn 2020 term offering insight into how reading ability, in particular, has been impacted.

The report also shares the experiences that teachers have had of managing learning during periods of disruption, adapting reading strategies and the challenges of identifying pupils and students that require additional support and leading appropriate interventions.

Due to the incredible efforts of all of those working in schools, families and the resilience of our children and young people, the report finds that reading skills have remain stable, although we all acknowledge the particular impact of the disruption on those children and young people with a lower reading ability.

I hope that teachers and leaders will find the experiences and analysis shared in this report valuable as we look to continue supporting our children and young people through the pandemic and beyond.



> **Literacy support and targeted intervention is still really important now that all students are back in school."**
>
> Dr Jessie Ricketts

## Introduction

It's tempting to deploy the most dramatic adjectives when describing the last 12 months. The severity of the pandemic was appalling, the dislocation to everyday life was extraordinary, the disruption to education was unprecedented. And it's hard to argue that any of those descriptions are exaggerated.

Yet schools carried on. Teaching continued. Learning continued. Despite three national lockdowns, cancelled exams and, according to the Children's Commissioner, 575 million school days lost in England in the first half of the year alone, teachers taught and children learnt. Thanks to the determination of school leaders and the adaptability of their colleagues, most children in the country received as near as normal an education as possible, delivered remotely to their home.

The question is, how well did children cope? How did lockdown affect their academic performance, their mental wellbeing and their social skills? In one sense, of course, it's too early to tell. Even though schools have largely resumed teaching as normal, social distancing and other health protocols continue to have an immense impact on teaching and learning. It will take time to draw any firm conclusions about the longer-term effects of this disruption.

On the other hand, schools are understandably eager to pinpoint what they can about their students now they are all back in school. As many of the teachers interviewed in this report explain, while schools have become increasingly adept at delivering lessons remotely, identifying problems remotely and putting in place the necessary interventions are other matters entirely. It's hard to support a struggling child at a distance and via a screen. As a result, many schools are keen to conduct assessments as soon as is practicable.

This report is a snapshot of the data we have gleaned from schools so far on students' reading ability based on our New Group Reading Test (NGRT). It also includes the experiences of teachers in a variety of schools and Trusts in England – how they managed during lockdown, what literacy strategies they think worked best, and how they will be supporting their students over the months ahead. Even though some children struggled, particularly those with lower reading ability, they report that overall, and despite their initial fears, children's reading skills remained stable – and some children even soared.

We hope that the report will help schools support their students and teachers over the next few months – and provide a counterpoint to some of the speculation that has surrounded education since the pandemic began. Because all the signs are that although learning has been disrupted and children are understandably pleased to be back in school, they are also resilient. The evidence of the data we have and the testimony of teachers on the ground suggest that students continued to make progress even if much of everyday life slowed down.

# Main findings

From the data available so far, there are reasons to think that the reading ability of students has held up remarkably well in comparison to previous years. The main score we use in NGRT is called the 'standard age score' (SAS). Student attainment is benchmarked to a norm group of performances from children of the same age who are representative of the student population.

In a typical year, without the impact of Covid-19, we would expect little variation from a mean score of 100 within a population. Any movement greater than 3 SAS points is deemed significant when considering such large datasets. As you can see from the table below, students' scores declined a little in primary schools – down 1.9 points last year compared to a rise of 0.5 in 2018-19.

| School type | 2018-2019 | 2019-2020 |
|---|---|---|
| England state primary | 0.5 | -1.9 |
| England state secondary | 0.6 | -0.5 |
| England independent | 0.2 | -2.1 |
| Northern Ireland schools | -0.1 | -3.7 |

Table 1: Average variation in NGRT mean SAS for the periods 2018-2019 and 2019-2020

Nonetheless, the overall picture is clear – children's reading ability does not appear to have been significantly affected by the disruption caused by the pandemic, regardless of type of school. Primary school children seem to have been affected a little more than secondary school students, but not significantly.

Using the same data, we can see that in 2018-19, 43.6% of primary schools registered a drop in students' SAS scores and 56.6% a rise. Last year during the pandemic the proportion that saw a drop in their overall scores increased to 78.3% while the number who witnessed a rise correspondingly fell to 21.7%. In secondary schools the decline was less severe. In 2018-19, 46.9% had registered a fall in mean SAS scores and 53.1% a rise. Those proportions were almost exactly reversed a year later during the pandemic – with 53.4% witnessing a fall in scores and 46.6% a rise.

| School type | 2018-2019 | | 2019-2020 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Schools with fall in mean SAS | Schools with Increase in mean SAS | Schools with fall in mean SAS | Schools with Increase in mean SAS |
| England state primary | 43.4% | 56.6% | 78.3% | 21.7% |
| England state secondary | 46.9% | 53.1% | 53.4% | 46.6% |
| England independent | 44.1% | 55.9% | 74.7% | 25.3% |
| Northern Ireland | 59.5% | 40.5% | 59.0% | 41.0% |

Table 2: Percentage of schools with increased or decreased SAS for the periods 2018-2019 and 2019-2020

Dr Jessie Ricketts, Director of the Language and Reading Acquisition (LARA) Lab at Royal Holloway University, believes that schools should see this level of stability as a positive of the last year. "The pandemic and school closures will have impacted children in so many ways. However, these data seem to provide some good news.

"In terms of the reading skills that the NGRT assesses, primary and secondary children don't seem to have fallen significantly behind. I suspect this reflects all of the good practice in teaching reading that is going on in so many schools and the efforts that schools have made to maintain what they could in such difficult circumstances. However, there are aspects of language and literacy that the NGRT doesn't capture that may have been negatively affected by the pandemic, things like oracy and writing. Also, there will be some children who were struggling with reading at the start of the pandemic and these children may have fallen further behind.

"Literacy support and targeted intervention is still really important now that all students are back in school. My work with schools has shown that teachers, particularly those in Key Stages 2 and 3, feel that they would benefit from more CPD on language and literacy development, how language and literacy can be assessed, and universal and targeted strategies for supporting pupils."

## What are the implications?

Reports from individual schools and Trusts across the country appear to back up the broader picture. All of the teachers and school leaders interviewed in this report say that the reading ability of the majority of their students met – and sometimes exceeded – expectations. Many said they had expected the worst after so many school days were lost to the pandemic, but that they have been pleasantly surprised at how resilient their students' reading abilities were.

This was particularly the case for schools with large numbers of Pupil Premium students. Nationally there was a small decline compared to non-FSM according to our data. In the schools covered in this report, most FSM children seemed to do well – and while overall the gap with non-FSM didn't narrow, it didn't widen significantly either.

Does this mean that schools can assume that reading ability was largely unaffected during lockdown? No, because although overall scores haven't declined significantly, we did see increased variability of school SAS scores, which suggests wider fluctuations in individual student performance. Teachers at Wickersley School and Sports College in Rotherham, for instance, report that while the better-than-expected scores at the top of the ability range kept the school's overall reading performance high, they masked to some extent the difficulties students experienced at the lower end of the ability range. It was a similar situation with all the schools in this report.

Nor should it be assumed that all the components of reading have been absorbed equally well. If decoding and reading recall appear strong, can the same be said of inference and comprehension?

By the third lockdown, all the teachers interviewed said their schools had vastly improved the quality of online instruction. Even so, they accepted that teaching remotely was not the same as interrogating remotely. As one teacher in Blackpool said: "Interventions need to be a bit more in-person and personalised, and that's been difficult to do through a screen."

Her remarks underscore the importance of schools conducting assessments as soon as is practicable and benchmarking them against the baseline. That should give a more detailed insight into reading behaviours and enable teachers to decide which child needs what support.

## Attitudes to school and learning

What of other indicators of student performance and wellbeing? Preliminary data for our Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) measure indicate that teachers can be cautiously optimistic here too. Initial assessments show that attitudes to school remained in line with levels pre-pandemic, in 2018. In some cases, there were even slight increases, in particular around students' feeling about school and attitudes to attendance. As St Mary's Catholic Academy in Blackpool reports, its PASS data is "a sea of greens. The students want to be in school and with their teachers. Again, things we were worried about we need not have been."

However, while locked-down students may be keen to get back into the classroom, the PASS data does indicate some areas of concern, particularly in attitudes to their own abilities as learners. As students return to the classroom, teachers would be well advised to look at the first of these indicators – perceived learning capability – in particular. Any increase in a student's negative attitudes in this area could develop into longer term confidence issues, and impair reading ability, if not investigated and addressed at the earliest opportunity.

> **Despite the many disruptions and challenges schools have had to face this past academic year, teachers and students appear to have coped remarkably well."**

## Conclusion

Despite the many disruptions and challenges schools have had to face this past academic year, teachers and students appear to have coped remarkably well, especially when it comes to instilling literacy.

Fears were also expressed during the pandemic that any negative impact on student literacy would have a knock-on effect on the wider curriculum. Last year we published a report - Read All About It - that highlighted the strong correlation between reading ability and eventual exam success in a range of subjects.

As reading generally appears to have been minimally impacted, there is no reason to suppose that access to the wider curriculum has been curtailed. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that many schools have noticed an increase in students' text-based skills during the pandemic, probably because most teaching and learning depended on text-based assignments rather than multi-modal delivery.

However, this relatively positive overall picture should not lead us to conclude that the pandemic has had no impact on children's reading. Some students have undoubtedly suffered, and their reading ability has been impaired. Nor is it always obvious who has been worst affected or how – if recall has proved resilient, is the same true of comprehension, for instance?

Teachers have told us that the pandemic and measures taken to alleviate its worst effects have often made it impossible to investigate what specific support individual children need or to put in place the necessary interventions. Where baseline NGRT data is available, benchmarking students' progress as they return to the classroom is proving helpful. But many schools are now keen to assess their students as soon as is practicable to enable them to pinpoint exactly what children have learnt during lockdown, what has failed to stick and what teachers need to address any gaps in their learning.

**Footnotes**

We looked at NGRT test scores sat in three time windows: 1 May 2018 to 31 July 2018, 1 May 2019 to 31 July 2019, and 1 September 2020 to 31 October 2020. Schools that sat tests in two consecutive windows were analysed: the first cohort comparison between 2018 and 2019, the second cohort comparison between 2019 and 2020 windows. For the purposes of this analysis, schools were matched within each cohort to ensure comparability.

The number of tests taken in each cohort is as follows:

| **Cohort 1** | | **Cohort 1** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2018 | 2019 | 2019 | 2020 |
| 138,092 | 145,343 | 139,742 | 159,583 |

## On the same page: a whole-town approach to reading

**Blackpool's schools had a useful weapon in their armoury when the pandemic hit – an established community-wide literacy project. Karen Lewis, Heather Smith, Paul O'Neill, Becci Jones and Bernadette Kaye describe how local collaboration has boosted their students' reading ability**

The pandemic has confronted every school in the country with unprecedented challenges. Most have been able to count on the help and advice of a Trust or local authority. But schools in Blackpool had another pillar of support – the community literacy project championed and project-managed by charity Right to Succeed and launched two and a half years ago to address the low reading abilities of many 11 to 14-year-olds in one of the most deprived towns in the country.

The project, co-funded by the DfE Opportunity Areas programme alongside significant ongoing contributions from Trusts and foundations, rests heavily on the advantages implicit in a place-based approach to improvement. By combining the insights gleaned from data, investing heavily in staff CPD, sharing best practice locally, and providing a consistency of implementation that hasn't always been available in previous initiatives, the programme aims to harness the efforts of a community of schools to address a challenge that all face..

## Coping with lockdown

No one could have predicted the consequences of a global pandemic and the consequent scale and duration of serial lockdowns when the initiative was first launched. So how have the project's partner schools fared? Did their strategic approach to reading stand them in good stead and how, if it all, has it changed their approach to literacy?

A crucial plank of the literacy strategy is that books are read to students for half an hour every morning, explains Bernadette Kaye, Assistant Headteacher at South Shore, one of the secondary schools in the project. "Once the first lockdown began, we moved quite quickly to recorded sessions where an adult read a book with comprehension exercises at the end of each session. They seemed to work quite well – and they've been a continuous provision during lockdown.

"We've also tried to mobilise interventions over Microsoft Teams – with live reading sessions. We've been less successful over our interventions for stanine 1 and 2 children. Probably because of the nature of the interventions – they need to be a bit more in-person and personalised, and that's been difficult to do through a screen. Universal interventions work quite well, but targeted ones we find more difficult."

## Intervention variability

It's a similar story at St Mary's Catholic Academy, says its Assistant Headteacher and KS3 Literacy Lead, Becci Jones: "We've put in place audio book resources and tried to weave together some of the other things we do normally – such as Bedrock, the vocabulary intervention – to try to keep things ticking along during that 30 minutes daily. But like Bernie we have struggled to mobilise other types of intervention we would normally do. For lower ability reading students we have tried to use the Meeting function in Google Classroom to connect those students with the learning support team.

"We did work with staff just before we went into the last lockdown about reading from screen to try to think about how much text to share with different groups of students, so remote learning this lockdown has been far better than it was in the first lockdown. But engagement remains a concern for us."

Karen Lewis, the Lead for English and Literacy at Educational Diversity, the town's pupil referral unit, agrees that the situation has improved markedly since the first lockdown: "We now ensure access to four to five hours of live lessons in English, maths, science and PSHE weekly on top of the lessons we put out using Google Classroom. We also found we couldn't deliver all the interventions we wanted to remotely, so we try to work with the most vulnerable in school. So we have a mix of everything going on face-to-face teaching, live lessons and the remote learning platform." All of which has resulted in impressive student engagement figures of 80% – though Karen says they vary by centre.

## Whole-school approach to literacy

All of the Blackpool teachers believe that the literacy programme has helped their students and colleagues cope better with lockdown challenges and provided a firm foundation for reading improvement.

"It has been a real catalyst," Karen says, "and has changed the whole culture and ethos around literacy and how everyone perceives literacy. All the teachers have bought into it, it's a whole school priority. Previously, I felt as though I was single-handedly banging the drum about literacy. But when this project happened, and all the schools signed up to it, it changed views. The longevity and consistency and way it was driven forward ensured it wasn't going to go away."

Karen's colleague, Heather Smith, Deputy Headteacher at Educational Diversity, agrees: "I also think it's about the SLT buying into it. It's important that it moved up the ladder into SLT – that it wasn't just an add-on. It was a whole-school thing, not just an English department thing."

Karen says it was vital that students and staff bought into what the literacy project was trying to do. "It was a complete culture change. Staff realised that if students couldn't access the curriculum, they wouldn't progress. But really seeing that and understanding that and consolidating that - that made the difference."

Senior buy-in is essential, says Becci: "It's quite a brave thing for a head to do to carve out 30 minutes from the school day to ensure everyone is reading." But she also stresses the importance of local collaboration. "The fact that other local schools were doing it meant that there was momentum, and it made the decision easier." Bernadette echoes her point: "To be part of placed-based change was really important. I wanted my colleagues to be invested and to see the whole-town picture. Historically, the school might have been an underdog, but we could make meaningful changes."

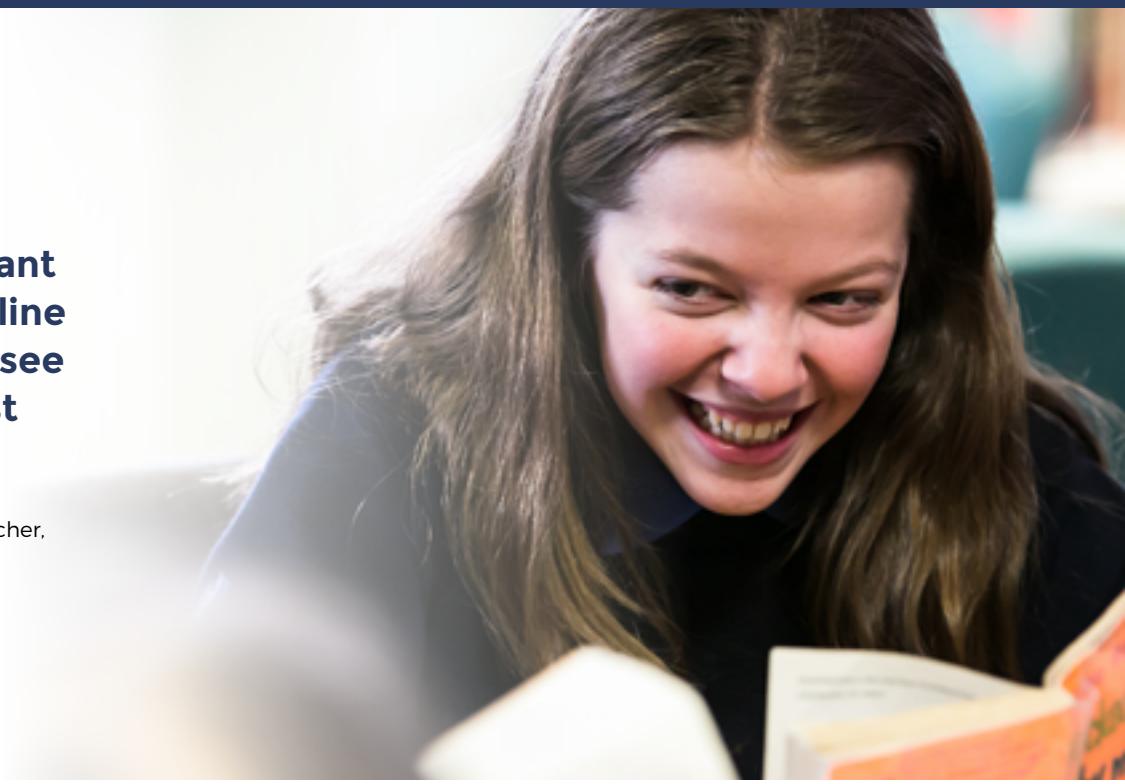
"The other thing I would mention is the quality of training," says Becci. "It has been so good for us as leads and for colleagues to know that this initiative was going to be backed by training and support. St Mary's is a research school and we do benefit from a lot of EEF works and links with people like Alex Quigley. It really helped get buy-in from staff. I'm not an English specialist, my subject is science, but the training was so good that I feel I'm a little bit of a reading expert now after coming from a baseline of zero."

## Firm foundations

Bernadette underlines how beneficial it was that the Blackpool schools had a well-embedded, whole-school literacy strategy before the pandemic hit. "It wasn't just about any of our schools having a reading programme in the morning. It was also about embedding those long-term curriculum changes, to ensure all subjects had a focus on reading. And that wasn't done overnight. I think our schools have rethought the curriculum and revamped it to ensure it's more rigorous and that all subjects have a strong emphasis on literacy development."

Before the project started, Blackpool hadn't suffered from a lack of literacy initiatives. The problems rather were the lack of a joined-up community-wide approach, inconsistent investment in staff training and any long-term consistency. "When we first started off on the journey there were an abundance of transactional interventions aimed at supporting targeted cohorts of pupils," says Paul O'Neill, Chief Programmes Officer at Right to Succeed. "And while there will always be a need for impactful interventions, especially for pupils with specific needs, and some of those interventions have been very successful, what we're really seeing now is a cultural shift across all the schools where every child in Key Stage 3 is receiving a high quality literacy offer." Schools across the town are now being far more forensic in their approach to literacy development and focusing on doing fewer interventions, but implementing the selected research-informed approaches really effectively, says Paul. "In the past there were so many interventions that people were apprehensive about stopping any of them because they weren't sure which were working."

Another problem, he says, was that expectations were unrealistic – that the interventions alone would solve the literacy issues within the schools, when in reality they are only part of the long-term solution. Paul believes what's different about the literacy project is the significant investment in professional development, the whole-school approach to reading and the local shared endeavour: "All the schools are going on a collective journey, with an unwavering commitment to learning and sharing what has and hasn't worked."



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>
> Becci Jones, Assistant Headteacher, St Mary's Catholic Academy

## Importance of baseline testing

Data and showing teachers how to get the most from it has been crucial. "The New Group Reading Test has been vital to be able to baseline and show the progress that's been made. It's cemented where we are and where we wanted to go," says Karen.

"It meant we could be more strategic about how we target interventions," agrees Bernadette. "We didn't have an equivalent benchmark before, it was all driven through teacher assessment, which at best was sporadic, especially given the high staff turnover at the time. To have a standardised assessment offered a level of trust and reliability we didn't have previously. It's enabled us to categorise students in terms of need and to be more strategic about where we are putting our resources."

The schools will retest students with NGRT towards the end of the academic year. "It's consistently used across the town," says Bernadette, "which is a good thing – we share the data across the schools as soon as we get it."

## Variability of student performance

In common with the experience of teachers elsewhere, and in line with our initial analysis of trends nationwide, Blackpool's schools have witnessed student progress as well as frustrations during lockdown. "We've noted some really positive progress," says Karen. "It wasn't nearly as frightening as I had feared. Almost three-quarters of our students made progress in their reading ages – some by almost two years."

Karen puts that improvement down to the heavy lifting done by the PRU on literacy before lockdown. "It's down to the fact that prior to lockdown we'd changed the timetable to put in place reading time, the fact that reading became a real ethos across the school, the fact that on the remote learning platform so many of the activities involve reading. The focus on reading didn't change during lockdown. It was a whole ethos across the board."

"The NGRT testing meant we had that baseline and were able to see where the biggest gaps were," says Becci. "Interestingly, at St Mary's the Standard Age Scores of our Year 7s into Year 8s remained quite stable. It was the older year groups where we started to see a drop off in reading performance – in Years 9 and 10 particularly, and with boys more than girls, with FSM more than non-FSM students. So NGRT was really helpful in September in allowing us to see who needed help and putting in place the necessary interventions."

## Transition and data triangulation

The absence of SATs means the NGRT has become even more important to the Blackpool schools. "We will have had two years without standardised data by the summer," says Bernadette. "So NGRT will become even more crucial to help fill in those gaps. I was involved in a really small project where some of our local primaries did the NGRT in Years 5 and 6. They hadn't done that kind of standardised reading assessment before, which I think is a missed trick in terms of data sharing, because it would help capture the journey students have been on and help with transition."

All the teachers agree that having access to baseline data is essential and being able to triangulate with other datasets, like the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) measure also helps. "PASS is really important to us," says Heather. "What we have found this year is that how students feel about themselves and school has actually improved. We're not absolutely certain why – but we think that because students had to remain in small class bubbles because of lockdown, we think that contributed to a very nurturing and caring environment. We were really worried when students came back in September, but they were fine."

Becci agrees that the wealth of data – not just NGRT but PASS and the Progress Test Series – and the ability to cross-reference is very helpful. She says St Mary's was concerned about transition and the amount of missed schooling primary pupils had missed last year. "We were really worried. Transition preparation had been very limited – normally we would do a transition week in Blackpool, we weren't able to do any of that."

However, when the school came to do NGRT in September, they were reassured by the results. "Some of our concern was unnecessary – we were able to target the right things at the right students. We've gone from thinking of NGRT as a test to benchmark our students nationally and where they might be at GCSE, to actually thinking, 'That's helpful, but let's think about individual students and groups of students'. We delve much deeper and start connecting bits of the data together and sharing it with learning support and making sure teaching staff and form tutors have the information they need. I think we're using the data better now than we were at the start of the project."

PASS data too, she says, is painting a more positive picture. "It's a sea of greens. The students want to be in school and with their teachers. Again, things we were worried about we need not have been."

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## Priorities post-lockdown

Now Blackpool's schools have returned to in-person teaching, what are the priorities for literacy? "Ethos and routine," says Becci. "We want to get students back to reading for 30 minutes each day as soon as possible. We're making sure the book they will start with is a book they will enjoy. Re-inducting them into their reading routine will be crucial."

"It will be the same for us," says Karen. "Getting them back into the routine of form-time reading. We'll also carve out some enrichment time in the afternoon for lots of wellbeing interventions – allowing students to meet and to talk to people. We're trying to cover as many bases as we can and adapt where necessary now the students are fully back."

Bernadette says South Shore's focus will be on supporting those students who she thinks have suffered most during lockdown. "We'll have to dedicate some real legwork with our stanine 1 and 2 students, who I feel have really suffered in the lockdown, a) in terms of engagement, and b) in terms of meaningful interventions via the screen. So that will be our main priority." She also says that while most departments have embedded disciplinary literacy, others need more support. "There is still some work to do with some faculties– on how to tackle literacy barriers within their classroom."

But Heather says some of the lessons learnt during lockdown they will aim to keep. "One of the things we've noticed is that some students who are typically really hard to reach and engage, they won't often set foot in school, are really keen on live lessons and remote learning. Over 90% of these students have been engaged. The blended learning approach is really important for them. And we may well continue with that if it's possible."

All secondary schools in Blackpool, including two all-through schools and the pupil referral unit have been involved in the project's journey to date, and the collective endeavours of Armfield, Aspire, Ed-Diversity, Highfield, Montgomery, South Shore, St Mary's, St George's and Unity will be called upon to catalyse the reading recovery efforts across the town as Blackpool embarks upon its aspirational new 10-year education vision and strategy.

# Plot twist: The Trust where every character plays a leading role

A coherent literacy strategy embedded in every school and driven and shared by each department was crucial in helping one Trust in County Durham sustain reading progress during lockdown. Sarah McCarthy and Catherine Taylor explain how

## Highlights:

- The **Advance Learning Partnership** consists of five secondaries and one primary school in County Durham and caters to communities with some high levels of deprivation.
- **Literacy has become central to the Trust's culture** and has cascaded down to each school and every department. This includes training each department on NGRT data as well as giving them specific reading strategies that they can use in their disciplines.
- Three elements have proven crucial: **keeping the profile of reading and literacy high, collaboration, and sharing best practice.**

> **"We wanted a systematic, Trust-wide approach to reading, so we correlated NGRT with CAT4 scores to identify students in need of additional support. Strengths and weaknesses were identified, cohorts were compared across our schools and then benchmarked to the national picture."**
>
> Sarah McCarthy, Assistant Headteacher at Parkside Academy and Literacy Coordinator for Advanced Learning Partnership

Students at Advance Learning Partnership schools in County Durham have had a challenging year, much like their counterparts in the rest of the country. But much like their peers elsewhere, they are taking the pandemic and its consequences in their stride.

"On the whole, students have coped really well," says Sarah McCarthy, Assistant Headteacher at Parkside Academy and Literacy Coordinator for the Trust. "They've even improved in certain respects – lockdown has helped them develop their independence, for instance."

Her colleague Catherine Taylor, Director of Quality of Education at ALP, agrees: "Overall students have been very resilient during the pandemic, they've adapted to online learning, taken things in their stride." Reading ability in particular has not suffered as much as staff anticipated: "It's held up well, largely because of the rigorous work and interventions that were put in place and the efforts of teachers to ensure standards didn't slip."

Catherine says that wasn't true of every student; some coped better than others. "Those who weren't fully engaged received additional support. But there was a big shift from lockdown one to lockdown two, when we moved to all online lessons delivered live and the curriculum was replicated. Keeping the same structure and routines helped us to secure high levels of engagement."

## A 'whole school' reading approach

The Durham duo's perception of how literacy has fared at ALP during lockdown is in line with our countrywide analysis – overall, student reading scores have declined slightly across the country but not significantly, and less so in secondaries than primaries. And while students who had struggled with reading have tended to struggle in lockdown, average and above average ability students have met – or even exceeded – expectations.

Catherine says ALP, which has five secondaries and one primary and caters to communities with some high levels of deprivation, was able to weather lockdown well because it had already a robust literacy strategy in place. It was at the heart of the Trust's culture and had cascaded down to each school and every department. "Our philosophy is every teacher is a teacher of literacy. That's an ethos we've developed across the Trust – in a very collaborative manner – and the staff are completely engaged and on board with that."

At the start of the first lockdown, she says, the Trust conducted technology and literacy audits to determine which students might need the most support. It gave out dongles and laptops to children who needed them and upskilled those who weren't familiar with computers. Best practice was quickly shared in online staff meetings between and across schools and learning adapted in the light of experience.

## The literacy strategy was key

The foundation of their schools' reading resilience, as far as Sarah and Catherine are concerned, is that a comprehensive, strategic plan was already in place before lockdown with a focus on reading. "We wanted a systematic, Trust-wide approach to reading," explains Sarah. "So we correlated NGRT with CAT4 scores to identify students in need of additional support. Strengths and weaknesses were identified, cohorts were compared across our schools and then benchmarked to the national picture."

ALP assesses students twice a year with NGRT, at the start and at the end, with additional assessments for 'spotlight' students, those who may require further investigation and support. "Once we've received the data, we ask the literacy lead in each school to meet with their head to go through the key findings, but also to relate them to that school's specific context so they can formulate an action plan that will lead to improvement," Sarah says.

Ensuring the findings from the data aren't compartmentalised is key to the strategy. "We want all departments in the school, regardless of subject, to use the findings and to embed disciplinary literacy," she says. "We want reading to be a focus of every teacher, in every classroom in every school. So the SLT embed the literacy strategy into their procedures – learning walk throughs, work analyses and so on – to determine if the reading CPD given to staff has fed into the lessons and resulted in progress."

## Giving all staff literacy CPD

The action plan developed by the literacy leads for each school incorporates substantial CPD for staff, which includes training on NGRT as well as giving them specific reading strategies that they can use in their disciplines. "At my school, for instance, we had a session for staff on how they could teach vocabulary remotely," Sarah says. "We had someone from science model literacy in their subject, and someone from maths do the same in theirs and so on."

Literacy awareness and training cascades down to each level – school, department, classroom, and ultimately individual students. "Each department within each school has a literacy link," says Sarah, "They are crucial because it means they can deliver whole school CPD into a very palatable form for their subject-specific context."

Heads of department ensure that their quality assurance procedures take into account the NGRT data – so schemes of work are fluid and literacy CPD is drip-fed into departmental meetings.

Vocabulary lends itself well as a component of literacy strategies, she points out, because every subject will have its own key words. "It's about making it relevant for each subject and purposeful – it's never been a one size fits all approach."

## Variations in performance

Inevitably, not all students have fared as well in their reading as others over the past year. "There have been variations," says Catherine, "which is why the NGRT data has been invaluable – to see those patterns."

Sarah agrees and says there have been variations by school too. "Progress of FSM students and boys in particular is a key priority at my school, Parkside Academy. We've focused on those groups in Year 7 to ensure they have the cultural capital to eventually access the GCSE curriculum. All the schools use the same NGRT data but have flexibility to use it within their own context."

"Finding out exactly what students have learnt when they have been studying remotely is challenging," says Catherine. "It's uppermost in our minds as children return to school – assessments will help us to identify gaps in learning and we will put in place the necessary interventions. But some students have thrived during remote learning and we've got to be careful not to jump to conclusions. It will take time to understand the impact of lockdown and we are focused on ensuring that students receive the appropriate support for all aspects of their learning and personal development."

> **"There have been variations over the past year, which is why the NGRT data has been invaluable – to see those patterns."**
>
> Catherine Taylor,
> Director of Teaching and Learning at
> Advanced Learning Partnership

## Student wellbeing

Although their students are delighted to be back in school again, because they've missed their teachers and being able to socialise with their friends, lockdown wasn't an equal burden for all of them.

"I've noticed that some of the quieter students have really flourished," says Sarah. "Lockdown seems to have removed a bit of the peer pressure and they're more willing to contribute to chat online. They've gained in confidence, which I didn't expect to happen."

The Trust is trialling PASS, a tool that measures pupils' wellbeing in learning, at one of its secondary schools and its primary for the first time this year, says Catherine. "It's been extremely useful to make the connections between PASS and NGRT. If students say, for instance, that they feel confident or not in aspects of their learning we can match that to their reading scores in NGRT and see if there is any correlation."

Lockdown has forced ALP's schools to adapt and innovate – with some surprising results. "We've actually found real opportunities through adversity," says Catherine. "For instance, one of schools has set up an e-library, so children can download books from home." There was also much more use of pre-recorded lessons and revision topics, which have proved beneficial and will continue to be developed and shared across the Trust.

> **"We use research to inform all our training programmes at the Trust – and how to use it and NGRT data effectively has been very important."**
>
> Catherine Taylor,
> Director of Teaching and Learning at
> Advanced Learning Partnership

## Priorities for the term ahead

As ALP's schools return from lockdown to in-person teaching, they are focused on what support their children need next. "Right now, we're focusing on reading strategies," says Sarah, "and then it will be more about the explicit use of vocabulary and linking it back to reading. More generally it's about transferring what we have been doing remotely back to face-to-face teaching. One of the things we've come up with is a reading reward scheme. As students can no longer move from class to class because of Covid restrictions, we encourage them to read for five minutes between lessons, which adds up to an extra half hour daily."

Encouraging reading for pleasure was a priority for ALP during lockdown and will remain so. "At our primary school the boys are flourishing in reading and we wanted to make sure that there wasn't a dip in reading motivation when they move up to secondary," says Catherine. "Research suggested that boys tend to be turned off by the narrow focus on reading for exams - and we wanted to broaden access and opportunities for reading."

The Trust also takes care to model good reading behaviour and to ensure that everyone reads for pleasure – from the headteacher down.

## Advice for other schools

What advice would they give other schools when it comes to reading strategies?

Catherine says three things are crucial: "Keeping the profile of reading and literacy high, staff collaboration, and sharing best practice. You have to ensure reading has a high profile and that it remains a consistent focus – so don't lose sight of that. Collaboration too is crucial. We're stronger together, and the input and expertise from staff from every school has been incredible – we wouldn't have been able to come up with all the ideas on our own.

"Finally, being able to share what has worked has been very powerful. We use research to inform all of our training programmes at the Trust – using the research in combination with effective use of the NGRT data has enabled us to make a positive impact on student outcomes."

## How GL Assessment can help you

Thanks to the huge efforts of teachers across the country the reading abilities of our children have held up remarkably well during the past year. The community-wide literacy project in Blackpool and the work of Advance Learning Partnership in County Durham, both of which are discussed in this report, are two great examples of the way that GL Assessment has been able to support schools to deliver successful literacy strategies throughout the pandemic. Working together we've been able to help uncover the issues some students faced in reading during lockdown learning, as well as demonstrate the impact of the interventions that were put in place.

Our New Group Reading Test® (NGRT) is ideal as a whole-class screener. It's a standardised, termly assessment that reliably measures reading skills to help schools get to the root of any problems precisely and quickly. And, as it's adaptive, it offers a personalised experience for each student, ensuring it's accessible for the children who are struggling and challenging those who need to be stretched.

NGRT is often used with the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4), where handy combination reports show how a student's current level of reading attainment compares to their potential achievement, and our Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) measure, which can highlight how a student's reading ability can impact on their attitudes to learning.

Schools can also choose from a wide range of diagnostic assessments to support areas for further investigation, based on NGRT results. These include the popular York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (which looks at areas such as phonological skills and reading rate), the Phonological Assessment Battery (for phonological awareness) and the British Picture Vocabulary Scale (for receptive language).

### Find out more:

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