

News story: Pilot launched to boost early language skills and cut teacher workload

Schools are set to pilot improved measures to support children's early development in language and vocabulary in the Reception year, making sure they have the skills needed to thrive at school.

From September, 25 schools across the country are set to trial revised Early Learning Goals, the key measures teachers use to decide how prepared children are to begin Year 1 at the end of Reception year. The changes are aimed at reducing teachers' workload to free up more time to support children's early skills and produce engaging lessons.

The pilot will help to address the problem of children arriving at school struggling with language and social skills, helping to close the so-called 'word gap' – the gap between disadvantaged children's communication and that of their peers when they start school.

They mark the first step of a full consultation process working closely with the early years sector, following the Government's commitment to improve the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile in response to the Primary Assessment consultation last September.

Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi said:

We want to improve education for every child and the early years in a child's life are critical in laying strong foundations for future success. That is why we want to free up more time for Reception teachers to interact with their pupils, and make sure they are developing the rich vocabulary, skills and behaviours they need to thrive at school and in later life.

The schools taking part in this pilot will help test these proposals, designed to cut down the burden of paperwork that exists with the current system. Teachers have the best understanding of their pupils, so it's absolutely right that we empower them to use and trust their own professional judgment based on what they see.

The proposals will help reduce teacher workload, in response to feedback from teachers during the consultation that they feel pressured to collect multiple pieces of evidence that justify their own observations of how a child is progressing.

Ed Vainker, Principal at Reach Academy Feltham, said the following:

The Early Years are a critical time, especially for the most vulnerable children, where teachers have an opportunity to avoid an achievement gap developing. These proposals provide a welcome focus on speech, language and communication and confirm that teacher judgment, rather than onerous evidence collection, is expected.

Jan Dubiel, National Director of Early Excellence, said:

I am pleased that the Department is engaging in such a thorough and robust consultative process in developing these reforms. I applaud the fact that they are ensuring that the proposals are tested and shaped by the actual reception teachers who will use the new Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. This will ensure the reforms are informed by best practice and the expertise of practitioners – especially Reception teachers – themselves.

The new Early Learning Goals remain in the spirit of the original, internationally renowned Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), focusing on the core skills, knowledge, understanding and behaviours that children need in order to thrive and develop successfully – and I am confident this has the potential to result in positive changes and ensure that practitioners continue to deliver in a holistic approach to children's learning and development.

Lauren Costello, National Director of Primary and SEND at The Academies Enterprise Trust, said:

Today's proposals represent a really positive move forward to build on the already great practice that exists in the Early Years Foundation Stage. As someone who works in the EYFS and primary sector on a national scale and across a wide range of socio and economic settings, I can clearly see a real commitment in these new Early Learning Goals to focus on key things that every child should know, master and have confidence in during their vital early years education.

The new Early Learning Goals will be especially helpful for EYFS teachers working with those who may have gaps in their very early life experiences and will allow these very talented practitioners to quickly identify and addresses these gaps and fix them. I am particularly pleased to see that the relentless focus on providing solid foundations for children's reading is a prominent feature within the new Early Learning Goals.

The pilots build on two schemes [announced](#) by the Education Secretary in April that will improve children's early language and literacy skills at home before they start school. These include £5 million with the Education

Endowment Foundation (EEF) to trial projects that offer parents practical tools and advice on learning new words with their children, and an £8.5 million programme open for councils to fund projects that help disadvantaged children's language and literacy.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is carried out in the final term of Reception year, and is a summary of a child's development that year against 17 Early Learning Goals. These look at each child's development across a broad range of skills including language and communication, reading and writing, numbers, art and design, physical development, self-confidence and ability to build relationships, and understanding of the world.

The reforms to the Profile will cut down the administrative burden required of teachers, freeing them up to spend more time teaching, interacting with and supporting their pupils so that they are prepared to move on to Year 1.

The Department for Education has worked extensively with teachers, unions and experts from across early years, schools and child development to ensure proposals are based on the latest evidence and reflect feedback from practitioners.

James Bowen, Director of NAHT Edge, the union for middle leaders, said:

We are pleased to see that the government has prioritised reducing teacher workload as part of these reforms. Excessive evidence gathering, especially for moderation purposes, has for too long been a major burden for many reception class teachers. We hope that these reforms mean that reception teachers are freed up to focus more on the core business of teaching and learning.

We also welcome the message that this is a genuine pilot. We are pleased that schools themselves will be able to directly shape the development of this policy and ensure that government have clear feedback before any decisions are taken on a potential national roll-out.

The pilot will be evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation and Action for Children, and proposals will be refined ahead of a full public consultation based on feedback from the schools involved in the pilot and from experts and practitioners.

Today's announcement is part of wider plans to improve education at every level of the system and will build on the progress already being made in schools across England, with 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010 and the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers narrowing.

Edward Melhuish, research professor at the University of Oxford, said:

Children need to have good language development in the pre-school

years. Our research shows that where that happens we see children do better in school, socially and emotionally, and these benefits last through to adulthood.

The new Early Learning Goals rightly prioritise good language development but also cover the full range of children's development, and they provide a basis for all preschool settings to provide the experiences children need for good development that will show long-term benefits. The new Early Learning Goals will be helpful to all concerned with children's well-being.

Schools were invited to be part of September's pilot based on a range of criteria including location, size, Ofsted rating and free school meal eligibility. Those who expressed interest were chosen to ensure a good balance in the pilot. Those taking part in the pilot will be exempt from elements of the existing profile while they test a revised version.

This is backed by a wider package of reform, set out in the Government's response to the Primary Assessment consultation, which includes the introduction of a [Reception Baseline Assessment](#).

The revised Early Learning Goals being piloted are available on the [Foundation Years](#) website.