# Teachers know who. The hard part is *what next.*

What primary teachers say they need to turn noticing reading difficulties into action, and what the evidence says works.

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SUMMARY


**Reading at the end of primary school has not moved for a decade.**
About three in four pupils in England reach the expected standard in reading at the end of Key Stage 2. That share has barely changed in ten years.

**Teachers already notice who is struggling.**
In a 2025 Department for Education survey drawn at random from the national school workforce, 93% of primary teachers said they were confident recognising special educational needs. Almost all of them (99%) do it by watching children in class.

**The harder question is what the difficulty is, and what to do next.**
In one large trial, 87% of head teachers in the control schools said their teachers could spot children who decode well but struggle to understand what they read. Only 49% said their teachers knew teaching strategies aimed at that difficulty.

**Asked what would help, primary teachers put people and practical support first.**
On decoding, the most common requests were resources for children with specific needs (60%), ongoing in-school support (58%) and training (49%). Assessment that helps analyse learning needs came fourth, at 48%.

**More information on its own does not change teaching.**
A randomised trial sent research summaries and resources to thousands of primary schools. It found no effect on pupils' results. Research on teacher data use points the same way: information helps when it arrives with a specific next step, and with time and colleagues to act on it.

**The question for the sector** is not how to measure reading more. It is how to give teachers a clearer picture of each child's difficulty, linked to an action they can take with the staff and time they actually have.

# 01

## A stubborn quarter

In 2026, 75% of pupils in England met the expected standard in reading at the end of Key Stage 2. It was the same in 2025, and the figure has stayed between 72% and 75% since 2017 [DfE 2026a]. The government's own SEND reform white paper puts it plainly: in each of the last ten years, at least a quarter of children did not meet the expected standard in reading [DfE 2026b].

The early steps of reading are in a stronger position. Most pupils pass the Year 1 phonics screening check. But the government's reading framework is clear that passing the check does not mean a child is now a reader, and that fluency matters: "Both accuracy and speed are essential" [DfE 2023].

For children who are still not reading well by Year 3 and beyond, the framework sets out a first step: "It is important to identify whether they need support in decoding or reading fluency" [DfE 2023]. In other words, the guidance does not ask schools to find out *whether* a child is behind. It asks them to find out *in what way*.

# 02

# Teachers already notice

It is easy to assume the problem is that struggling readers go unnoticed. The best national evidence suggests that, for most teachers, noticing is not where the difficulty lies.

**Teachers are confident they recognise need.** The Department for Education's School and College Voice survey draws its sample at random from the national school workforce. In October 2025 it asked primary teachers how they recognise special educational needs (n = 877) [DfE 2025a]:

| How primary teachers recognise SEN | Share |
|---|---|
| Classroom observation | 99% |
| Speaking with colleagues | 96% |
| Views and experiences of parents | 86% |
| Non-statutory in-school assessments | 78% |
| Consulting external specialist services | 72% |
| Formal screening tools | 38% |

Table 1. How primary teachers recognise SEN. Source: DfE 2025a.

Confidence was high. 28% said they were very confident in recognising SEN, and 65% fairly confident.

**Head teachers say the same about reading.** Before an Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) trial of a KS2 reading comprehension programme, head teachers in the participating schools completed a short questionnaire [EEF 2019]:

- In the control schools, 93% agreed it was usual for teachers to identify children falling behind in reading comprehension.
- 87% agreed that teachers could identify children who are good decoders but struggle with comprehension.

# 03

# Knowing who is not knowing what

The same questionnaire shows where the confidence runs out:

- Only 49% of head teachers in the control schools agreed that "teachers are aware of instruction strategies that target reading comprehension difficulties". In the intervention schools the figure was 29% [EEF 2019].
- Only around a third (36% and 38%) agreed that teaching in Years 4 to 6 placed as much emphasis on comprehension as on decoding.

Teachers describe the same gap in their own words.

- When Teacher Tapp asked more than 3,500 primary teachers about banded reading books in December 2025, one wrote: "Some children can decode but can't understand the story at that level." Another: "The bands don't always show true reading ability" [Teacher Tapp 2025a].
- A reading level says roughly where a child is. It does not say what kind of difficulty they have.

National data does not fill that gap either.

- **Primary teachers are split on the phonics check.** In December 2024, the School and College Voice survey asked whether information from the phonics screening check is useful when identifying the support pupils need. 37% agreed and 39% disagreed (n = 313) [DfE 2024].
- **School leaders are blunter.** In a 2024 NAHT survey of its members, "only 8% of respondents agree that statutory assessments inform future teaching and learning" [NAHT 2024]. This was a self-selected sample of 1,442, mostly heads and senior leaders.

The NAHT survey matters for a second reason. Its respondents were not against assessment as such. Their objection was to how results are used to judge schools, and many said the same checks could inform teaching if schools controlled when and how they were used [NAHT 2024].

Teachers also lack the specialist help that would let them pin down a difficulty. In a 2018 Teacher Tapp poll commissioned by the Driver Youth Trust, only 18% of primary respondents had access to an accredited specialist teacher for literacy difficulties [DYT 2018]. That figure is now dated, and we have not found a more recent one.

# 04

# What teachers say would help

The most direct evidence comes from the School and College Voice survey of May 2026. It asked primary teachers (n = 550) what would be most useful "to help them to identify and support children who may require additional support to make progress in decoding, including those with specific needs such as dyslexia, autism or ADHD". Teachers could choose more than one option [DfE 2026c]:

| What would help most | Primary teachers |
|---|---|
| Resources to support children with specific needs | 60% |
| Ongoing in-school support for teaching those with specific needs | 58% |
| Training to effectively support children needing more support | 49% |
| Assessment materials to support analysis of learning needs | 48% |
| Guidance on adapting phonics for individual needs | 47% |
| Guidance on organising and delivering phonics interventions | 23% |
| I do not need further support | 8% |

Table 2. What would help most. Source: DfE 2026c.

Two things stand out.

**First, people and practical resources come first.** The top requests are about what to do and who will help do it. That matches what teachers say about support for SEND more widely. In a 2024 Teacher Tapp summary, 78% of primary teachers said more teaching assistants would improve support for pupils with SEND, and 52% said more planning time would [Teacher Tapp 2024].

**Second, about half still want better analysis.** The survey also asked teachers who use a systematic synthetic phonics programme how it helps.

- 88% said its assessment materials helped them identify children who needed more support (n = 362).
- But when asked what helped them meet those children's needs, only 46% chose "assessment materials that support analysis of children's learning needs" (n = 352) [DfE 2026c].

Current tools are good at telling teachers *who*. They are weaker at helping teachers understand *what*.

The English Hubs evaluation shows where this bites hardest. Hubs reported that schools ask for help "for children in KS2 … where children are struggling with reading and teachers feel ill-equipped to support these specific children". But hub support centres on Year 1 because "that's obviously what we're measured on" [DfE 2024b].

# 05

# Why more data is not the answer

If teachers want a clearer picture, the obvious response is to give them more data. The evidence suggests caution.

**Teachers have been here before.** In 2016 the Department for Education's workload review group warned against data collection becoming "an end in itself", and against the "false comfort" of numerical progress tracking. Its advice was to "collect once, use many times" [DfE 2016].

The pressure has eased since then, but it has not gone. In 2025, data administration was the second task primary teachers most wanted to spend less time on (21%), just behind marking (22%) [Teacher Tapp 2025b].

**Information alone does not change practice.** The clearest test is the EEF's Literacy Octopus trial. Research summaries and evidence-based resources were sent to primary schools in England, with 12,500 schools randomised across the trial arms. The evaluators found "no evidence" that this passive dissemination improved pupils' Key Stage 2 English results [NFER 2017].

**Reports often go unused, or are read in ways their designers did not intend.** International research on teachers' use of assessment data finds the same pattern:

- Efforts to build teachers' capacity to use data "often fall short of their goals" [Datnow and Hubbard 2016].
- Teachers tend to use results to decide *who* to reteach and *what*, more than *how* [Olah et al. 2010].
- Teachers reading school monitoring reports "often cannot interpret them entirely correctly" [van der Kleij and Eggen 2013].

# 06

# What turns noticing into action

The research is not only cautionary. It also says what makes the difference.

**A specific next step.**

- A review of curriculum-based measurement found that gains depended on "systematic data-based decision rules, skills analysis feedback, and instructional recommendations". Data on its own was not enough [Stecker et al. 2005].
- In a randomised trial with Grade 3 pupils in the United States (the same age as Year 4 in England), teachers received recommendations on the type and amount of reading instruction for each child, based on their skills. Their pupils made greater gains in reading comprehension than those in an active comparison group [Connor et al. 2011].

**Support, and a colleague to think it through with.** A 2025 meta-analysis of ongoing support for teachers using pupil data to individualise teaching found:

- larger effects on teachers' practice (g = 0.86) than on pupils' outcomes (g = 0.31);
- descriptively larger effects when the support included collaborative problem-solving [Shanahan et al. 2025].

In England, this is the shape the SEND Code of Practice already describes: assess, plan, do, review, with the class teacher and SENCO working together [DfE 2015].

**A match between the difficulty and the response.** The EEF's guidance for Key Stage 2 literacy is clear that the response should depend on the difficulty:

- teach vocabulary explicitly;
- develop fluency through guided oral reading and repeated reading;
- teach comprehension strategies explicitly;
- use structured interventions that match a pupil's needs once whole-class teaching is strong [EEF 2021].

It also cautions schools to check decoding and comprehension before choosing fluency as the focus.

**A record of what was decided and done.** Ofsted's current approach points the same way. Schools do not need to provide pupil-tracking information or predictions for inspection [Ofsted 2026]. What matters is what leaders understand from their own analysis, and what they do about it.

# 07

# The honest caveats

- **Teachers' judgement is a strength, not a gap to be filled.**
  - Research comparing teachers' judgements of pupils' achievement with test results finds them reasonably well aligned. A meta-analysis of 75 studies found an average correlation of 0.63 [Südkamp et al. 2012].
  - Any information given to teachers should support their judgement, not replace it.
- **The binding constraint is often capacity, not knowledge.**
  - Secondary school leaders asked about barriers to supporting struggling readers named lack of staff time or resource (66%) far more often than uncertainty about which assessment tools to use (6%) [DfE 2025b].

## A clearer picture of a child's difficulty does not create a teaching assistant.

- **Much of the research on data use comes from outside England,** and much of it is about mathematics rather than reading.
- **Several surveys cited here are self-selected** (NAHT, Teacher Tapp, Driver Youth Trust) or report teachers' own views of their confidence. Teacher Tapp weights its panel but it is not a random sample. The School and College Voice figures are the strongest evidence here.
- **We found no published survey that asks primary teachers directly what they want to know about a pupil's reading, or how they want it presented.** That is a gap the sector, including us, should fill by asking.

# 08

# The policy moment

2026 is the National Year of Reading. The government's response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review describes fluency as the bridge between phonics and comprehension, and has announced a reading fluency check in Year 8 [DfE 2025c]. Its SEND reform proposals describe layers of support that start with high-quality teaching for every child and add targeted help on top [DfE 2026b].

All of these place more weight on what happens between Year 3 and Year 6, when a child who can decode is expected to become a fluent reader who understands what they read. That is the stage where teachers say they feel least equipped, and where knowing *what* a difficulty is matters most.

# 09

# Questions for the sector

1. **What does a teacher need to know about a child's reading in order to act?** Is it a level, a profile of strengths and difficulties, or a suggested next step? We would like to hear from teachers directly.

2. **How do we link a clearer picture to a response a school can deliver** with the staff and time it actually has, including whole-class options and not only one-to-one?

3. **How can information support the conversation between class teacher and SENCO,** rather than adding another document to read?

4. **How do we make sure any new information reduces work rather than adds to it?**

Share your view at **pupilpower.com/contact**.

## ABOUT PUPILPOWER

PupilPower is building tools to help teachers and SENCOs understand how each child engages with learning, through everyday, curriculum-aligned lessons, so that support can start from evidence rather than waiting for a label. PupilPower does not diagnose and is not a substitute for clinical assessment or professional judgement. Our aim is to give schools and families clearer, earlier observations to inform the support they choose to put in place.

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