

[Using the NCETM curriculum prioritisation materials](#) (NCETM article, August 2022)

A maths lead tells his school's story.

There's no single, perfect way for every primary school to organise its maths planning and teaching. But more and more schools are using the NCETM [Curriculum Prioritisation Materials](#) for this purpose.



Craig Tilstone is maths lead and Y5 teacher at The Flying High Academy, Ladybrook, Mansfield. He is an NCETM Mastery Specialist, working with East Midlands West Maths Hub and the school has been using a teaching for mastery approach since 2015. The school has two-form entry and 35% of pupils are in receipt of FSM. At the end of the 2022 summer term, Craig sent us this account of how his school began using the materials in 2021/22.

My school decided to base our curriculum around the NCETM Curriculum Prioritisation materials at the beginning of the 2021/22 school year, switching from a widely-used online scheme. With Ofsted well overdue, this was a gamble to say the least! After having completed a year of using the materials throughout Key Stages 1 and 2, here are my reflections.

Headline attractions

- For kick off, it's completely free!
- A carefully (and cleverly) thought-out long-term plan for each year group is in place, with certain units longer than you might ordinarily expect and some shorter – this is, as the name suggests, a prioritised curriculum!
- All of the RTP criteria (from the [2020 DfE primary maths guidance](#)) are considered and incorporated.
- The basis for your medium-term planning is already in place, with all the suggested small steps for the unit identified and sequenced.

What we have found using the materials this year

- Attainment has been good in all year groups this year. Of course, how much of this is as a direct result of the NCETM materials is impossible to gauge. Previous learning and daily practice sessions have also contributed to that bigger picture.
- Pupils and staff alike enjoy the clarity of the models and animations. As a school we have used other textbooks and online schemes, and none come close to the NCETM materials in terms of how engaging and how easy to understand they are. They are delivered in a colourful but unfussy style, on white backgrounds, with no extraneous graphics or information to distract attention.
- The accompanying [professional development materials](#) are exceptional. They allow any teacher to become a true expert in the learning being delivered, arming them with an array of rich and precise vocabulary, potential misconceptions and (my favourite thing of all) stem sentences and generalisations. I, hand-on-heart, believe they are the best maths lessons I have ever delivered. More pleasingly still, when I have conducted learning walks, they are the best maths lessons I have ever observed from the staff at my school.
- The small steps really are small – this is true granular learning. A good example is from Y5 (my current year group). With previous schemes, rounding has been treated as a broad concept, and tackled all at once. After learning about decimal numbers, pupils have been taught how to round those numbers to the nearest whole number, tenth and hundredth. With the NCETM materials, an entire small step is devoted to rounding to the nearest whole number, and it appears as part of the sequence of steps dedicated to tenths. A *different* small step is devoted to rounding to the nearest tenth, and it appears much further down the line, as part of the hundredths sequence. And a *different* small step still is devoted to rounding to the nearest hundredth, as part of the (very short) thousandths sequence of lessons. I probably don't need to say which approach has yielded the most success.
- The straitjacket of textbooks is removed. Historical gaps (including those arising from the school closures) can be addressed. Teachers now have a greater freedom to amend units of learning so that they are truly bespoke to *their* class, with small steps added or lengthened to meet their needs – independent learning can likewise be tailored. Of course, there are ways to achieve this even with a textbook scheme, but, to me, not having a textbook at all felt like an advantage.
- They are, simply enough, the best maths *teaching* materials available (in my opinion of course!)

What you should also bear in mind

- It is not, and nor does it claim to be, a scheme of work. The upside of this is that it has forced our teachers to consider and craft their lessons more carefully; to really *know* and really *own* the content of their lessons. As mentioned earlier, they are better lessons as a result.

- The materials provide lots of ‘assessment questions’ that can be used as part of the independent tasks that teachers will have to create, but these are not exhaustive. It is possible, on occasion, to create a worksheet comprised entirely of those given questions. Most commonly, however, worksheets are a blend of those questions and questions sourced from elsewhere (including three paid-for resources we subscribe to). I made it clear to my colleagues that as long as the materials fully match the small step identified by the NCETM, it is acceptable to use an entire worksheet from a secondary source. I seldom see this, however.
- This does have CPD implications. As a maths lead, you will need to ensure your staff are fully *au fait* with mastery principles, which will need to be applied when designing the independent tasks. They will need to ensure that (as with any textbook scheme) there are reasoning and problem-solving opportunities presented every day and that tasks are designed progressively, with increasing depth and challenge. None of this is a given of course; monitoring and support is essential.
- Thankfully this did not happen at my school, but you may need to be prepared for some initial resistance. After all, you are taking away the greatest gift (and biggest curse) of textbook lessons – that all the teaching and learning has already been considered. It is likely to take more time to plan each lesson, so there are workload implications.
- While the vast majority of the units are thought through to a meticulous degree, a very small number of units across the year groups seem under-represented, both in terms of the accompanying PowerPoints and the professional development materials. Staff have had to go elsewhere to source the content to deliver those units.

Will we continue along the same path? Absolutely.

By the way, Ofsted arrived in January. They were very positive and complimentary about the materials, the biggest reason being that they answer the question – ‘What are you doing to address the gaps arising from the school closures?’. It is my genuine belief that over the coming years, more and more schools will migrate towards the NCETM Curriculum Prioritisation materials. The leap of faith taken at my school has certainly paid off so far.