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NEU Councillors Network

School assessment briefing for local councillors

National Education Union
Autumn term 2019



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Foreword from Kevin Courtney and Mary Bousted



Councillors,

Thank you for taking the time to read this briefing on assessment in schools.

We must be clear from the beginning; our assessment system is broken.

The current system is obsessed with league tables and high stakes accountability, turning children into data points and denying them a broad, stimulating education. It puts an unnecessary burden on children, parents and teachers.

Over the summer of 2019 the National Education Union balloted over 54,000 primary school members – a massive 97 per cent said they wanted to see an end to toxic testing.

This was the largest ballot of primary practitioners ever, with a higher response rate than the DfE's 2014 workload survey.

We feel this is an endorsement of the work the NEU, along with other likeminded stakeholders representing parents and carers, has been doing to replace the current inadequate assessment system with something that works better for our children and young people.

We hope you find this briefing useful and please feel free to share with other councillor colleagues you know.

We are always happy to hear from councillors regarding education, so please do not hesitate to get in touch via cllrs@neu.org.uk

Yours sincerely

Mary W. Bousted. Kevin Courtney

Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney
Joint general secretaries, National Education Union

Section A: Background to assessment in schools

Assessment: a broken system

There are serious question marks against every aspect of our assessment and examination system.

The narrow academic emphasis of GCSEs leaves many students disengaged from learning.¹ Progress 8, which measures pupil progress in secondary education, works against many schools with working class intakes.² These are serious issues, which a new government will need to address.

But it is in primary schools that the problems of assessment are felt most acutely – by teachers, children and parents.

What is the primary assessment system?

The primary assessment system is organised around SATs, which were introduced in 1991, following the Education Reform Act of 1988.

SATs are assessments of primary pupils' progress and attainment. They are taken at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2 – the end of the infant phase and the end of the junior phase at school.

At KS2, the results of the tests are published in national performance tables - sometimes known as league tables – allowing comparison between different schools.

SATs cover core academic subjects – English, maths and science, though science is not tested in formal conditions.

In 2011, a phonics screening check was introduced for year 1 children.

In 2015, the Government changed the content and format of SATs. This was met with great resistance from the teaching trade unions.

In 2017, following a formal consultation, the Government announced plans to introduce two more tests – the reception baseline assessment and the multiplication check (sat by pupils in year 4). Both are being piloted in 2019, and the Government intends to introduce them formally in 2020/21 and 2019/20 respectively. From 2023 onwards the KS1 SATs will then

¹ www.edsk.org/publications/a-step-backward/

² www.tes.com/news/progress-8-has-been-blown-out-water

become optional, provided the Government is happy with the state of reception baseline assessment.

The rapidity and frequency of change within the assessment system over the last several years has severely impacted staff workload and work/life balance.

What is wrong with the system?

With the introduction of academies and free schools, school funding has changed radically over the last 15 years.

The primary assessment system is a 'high-stakes' system. This means that the consequences of children's performance in the tests are extremely significant for schools: the scores achieved by children, for instance, are an important factor in whether or not local authority schools are 'academised'.

Many researchers, as well as policy-makers in other parts of the United Kingdom, have spelled out what this means for children, teachers and the quality of education:

- 'In every single instance in which high-stakes accountability systems have been implemented ... adverse unintended consequences have significantly reduced, and in many cases have completely negated, the positive benefits.'³
- 'The pressure that teachers feel to increase test results is often transferred to pupils. This research shows that under these pressures teachers focus... [on] teaching to the test – effectively training pupils how to pass the tests, thus narrowing the classroom interpretation of the curriculum, to the detriment of pupils' wider and deeper understanding and skill.'⁴
- 'The evidence of the effects of 'high stakes' use of assessment information is accepted internationally By 'high stakes' we mean a system which places undue weight on

outcomes and where 'failure' or perceived failure has consequences beyond what is intended or appropriate. In this case, it means that rather than being about the learner... fulfil[ling] their potential, learner assessment has become something which is seen to reflect on the performance of teachers and schools.'

- In a survey carried out by Alice Bradbury at UCL (September 2019) 73 per cent of head teachers agreed that 'The content of SATs means we have to 'teach to the test'...'⁶

Alongside these effects on teaching and learning, high-stakes assessment has also had a wider impact on children's wellbeing. Teachers emphasise that children with special needs and disabilities are particularly badly affected: many are forced to take a test which is irrelevant and damaging to their needs. But the problems extend to a much larger group of children.

- A survey of year 6 children conducted for Children's Mental Health Week 2017 showed that 41 per cent were worried 'all the time' or 'a lot' about not doing well at school, 37 per cent about taking tests, and 29 per cent about getting school work wrong.'⁷
- A survey of primary school head teachers showed that 80 per cent had seen an increase in mental health issues among children at the time of national tests. They reported that children were suffering sleeplessness and panic attacks.'⁸
- A survey⁹ by the National Education Union received abundant and moving reports of psychological harm:

"Pupils at our school have cried, had nightmares and have changed in behaviour due to the pressure on them – and we do our best to shield them from it and not make a huge issue out of the tests."

"We see children in highly anxious states, sometimes vomiting because of pressure. More children are displaying signs of poor mental health and we do not put pressure on them."

Despite extensive research, the Government has refused to heed the advice of professionals – the proposed introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment in 2020 has been deemed likely to produce results with little relevance to a child's learning experience.¹⁰

³ Dylan Wiliam, 2011. This article was originally published in Swedish translation as "Bryggan mellan undervisning och lärande" (The bridge between teaching and learning) in the September 16, 2011 issue of Pedagogiska Magasinet, a Swedish education journal.

⁴ Wynne Harlen, 2014. cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Cambridge-Primary-Review-Trust-Research-Report-1.pdf

⁵ Welsh Government, 2019. gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2019-01/consultation-document-transformational-curriculum.pdf

⁶ Alice Bradbury, 2019. www.morethanascore.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SATs-research.pdfcontent/uploads/2019/09/SATs-research.pdf

⁷ www.place2be.org.uk/our-story/news/survey-pupils-share-their-views-for-children-s-mental-health-week.aspx

⁸ www.theguardian.com/education/2017/may/01/sats-primary-school-children-suffering-stress-exam-time

⁹ www.tes.com/news/stress-sats-gives-children-nightmares

¹⁰ www.bera.ac.uk/publication/a-baseline-without-basis

Section B:

What are the alternatives?

What do the main political parties think?

After decades of political consensus around primary assessment, there is now a new recognition among political parties that the system is in desperate need of change. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party are all now opposed to the SATs and the high-stakes system that they are a central part of.¹¹

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party, told the 2019 NEU conference:

'Today I can give you this commitment: the next Labour government will scrap primary school SATs for seven and eleven year olds.

'And we'll scrap the Government's planned new baseline assessments for reception classes too because they can't give accurate comparisons between schools when pupils have such different backgrounds.'¹¹

Layla Moran, Education Spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, has said:

'Ban league tables. Publish a broader range of data so parents get a better feel for the school, like survey feedback or comments from other school leaders on the quality of pastoral care or the breadth of subjects they offer.

'And abolish SATs. Stop this obsession with teaching to the test, reduce the pressure on our primary school pupils and give teachers the freedom to teach a broad, diverse curriculum.'¹²

The Green Party policy is likewise clear:

'The Green Party will abolish external SATs exams and the year 1 phonics test.

'The Green Party will abolish league tables in their current form as they give an over-inflated impression of schools with a higher ability intake which can contribute towards problems with admissions.'¹³

In a recent poll of more than 50,000 NEU members there was massive support for policies like these: 97 per cent voted to abolish SATs and to develop alternative policies.

What should come after SATs? Drawing on the work of many researchers and policy-makers, the NEU has outlined an alternative to the present system.

What could this mean for pupils?

At the level of the pupil, the emphasis will be on formative assessment, which gives continual feedback to pupils while they are learning and which supports effective reporting to parents/carers about their child's progress, achievements and areas for development.

In addition, teachers will use tests, including test material produced at a national level, to diagnose particular weaknesses, to locate gaps in knowledge, or to estimate proficiency at accomplishing tasks.

Teachers will make sparing use of tests, setting them as appropriate in the pupils' learning journey. Teachers will produce annual reports on each child, attending to the breadth of their learning. Reports will make use of teacher observations, pupil tasks and test scores. Assessment of reception-age will take the form of teacher observation, using the established early years foundation stage profile.

What could this mean for schools?

In year 6, teachers' reports will summarise pupils' achievements at the end of KS2. The reports will make an assessment of pupils' progress in relation to objectives set at national level. The reports will be peer-moderated by other teachers, on a sampled basis, in school clusters. Assessments will not be published but will be available to parents and to advisors and inspectors when they are evaluating the work of the school.

What could this mean for the system?

It is not necessary to test every child in order to monitor the standard of the primary school system. National monitoring of system quality and standards can be carried out by testing a representative sample of children. Tests could include different curriculum areas, so that over the years a picture of standards across the whole curriculum will become available.

¹¹ labour.org.uk/press/jeremy-corbyns-speech-neu-conference/

¹² schoolsweek.co.uk/heres-the-lib-dems-vision-for-the-school-system-of-the-future/

¹³ policy.greenparty.org.uk/ed.html

Section C:

Actions that you and other councillors can take

There is already a broad and vibrantly supported campaign against the present system of primary assessment: **More Than a Score**.¹⁴

More Than a Score has over the last year:

- Organised a massive campaign against Baseline assessment. It has contacted every school in England, drawn up a petition with over 70,000 signatures and mobilised the 'March of the Four Year Olds' to Downing Street. Partly as a result of this activity, the number of schools signing up to participate in the voluntary 2019 pilot of Baseline is much lower than in 2016.
- Worked with headteachers to develop a 'pledge' that they will work to protect teaching and learning in their schools from the effects of high-stakes accountability.
- Developed a wide social media reach, with 400,000 watching MTAS videos or sharing its tweets.

In addition to supporting More Than a Score, councillors can:

- Support the model motion, already passed by St Helens and Portsmouth Councils, opposing SATS. (See Appendix 2)
- Sign the More Than a Score petition against Baseline assessment: morethanascore.org.uk/baseline
- Support local NEU activities against the current primary assessment system: find out more at neu.org.uk/campaigns/assessment
- Encourage schools in your local area to take the More Than a Score pledge: morethanascore.org.uk/pledge to put children and their education ahead of SATS and other high-stakes tests

¹⁴ www.morethanascore.org.uk/

Section D:

Appendix 1

Rapid response to Government claims on assessment

The then Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds, made many claims about SATS which are likely to come up in debates and discussions about primary assessment. This is what he has said, along with responses drawn up by More Than a Score (MTAS).

1. 'The SATs are not about testing children, and they are not public exams that will stay with children into their adult life.'

MTAS response: Despite what Mr Hinds says, the SATs are plainly about testing children: almost all children are tested, and the results are reported individually to schools and families. Many children and parents feel acutely that they are being judged and fear the consequences. On the basis of the test results the government categorises children; each year more than a third of children arrive in their new secondary school having been categorised as 'below expectations' in at least one of the SATs subjects. The dangers of labelling and the impact on children's sense of self-worth should be obvious, but are in fact disregarded by the government.

2. 'Schools and teachers [should] administer SATs in an appropriate way so that stress is not put on to children.'

MTAS response: The SATs are high-stakes tests. The results are publicised in local papers, comparisons between schools made on websites, and Ofsted grades are largely based on them. Consequently the future of a school depends to an important extent on how well its pupils perform in them. It is unrealistic for the Secretary of State to tell

schools not to put stress on children: the system he oversees is designed in such a way that stress is a likely outcome.

3. 'It is common practice around the world to have standardised assessment of one sort or another in primary schools.'

MTAS response: There has indeed been a global trend towards standardised national assessments, but England is one of the most extreme cases in terms of the frequency and consequences of tests. In places as different as Massachusetts, Wales and Singapore, educators and policy-makers are aiming for a different approach, which does not place children under stress, label them as failures, and narrow the curriculum.

4. 'SATs are a very important part of our architecture to raise attainment and, critically, to narrow the gap in performance between the rich and the poor.'

MTAS response: If this is the intention, it has clearly failed. Despite the testing system, and the hard work of teachers in raising scores, there has been no improvement in achievement in England as judged by international tests such as PISA.

There has also been no reduction in the performance gap between rich and poor. In 2018 54 per cent of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) were failed in at least one of Reading, Writing or Maths. In other words, more than half of FSM-eligible pupils started secondary school with a label saying they were 'not secondary ready'. The failure rate for other pupils was 32 per cent – a gap of 22 percentage points.

Appendix 2

Model motion on high-stakes testing in primary schools

This gap was exactly the same as in 2016 and 2011. An enquiry sent to the Department for Education has revealed that one in four FSM-eligible children were failed in all three subjects. This is twice as high as the average for other pupils, and must be seriously demoralising to these children.

If the government were serious about closing the performance gap between rich and poor it would address the question of rising child poverty, rather than expecting schools alone to overcome the consequences of poverty.

5. 'We do not know what the Labour Party's alleged replacement for standardised assessment tests would be, but we do know two things about it: first, it would be less reliable; and secondly, it would require a lot more work for teachers.'

MTAS response: The current system is extremely unreliable, reflecting how much cramming each school is doing in preparation for tests and the school's readiness to narrow the curriculum. It places a major workload burden on teachers, to no educational benefit. Children are repeatedly tested, which generates massive work in analysing the pattern of scores. Partly as a result of the demand to collect, analyse and manage data England's primary teachers spend seven hours more per week on non-teaching work than their counterparts in other OECD countries, as shown in the latest international survey (Talis 2019).

We urgently need to return to the important reasons for assessment: to give feedback to children and teachers in order to improve the child's learning, and to work in partnership with parents. Assessment by teachers provides richer and more reliable feedback than a test result. The reliability of teachers' judgements can be assured through inter-school moderation, or by sample testing a few children.

6. 'It is not and never will be the time to get rid of standardised assessment at primary school.'

MTAS response: If Mr Hinds is saying that the SATs will last forever, he is deluded: the Ozymandias of Westminster. The problems of SATs are more widely recognised than ever, and their time is coming to an end. After SATs, teachers will continue to use some tests as appropriate: for example, test to diagnose an individual's weaknesses, or to locate gaps in knowledge at the end of a sequence of work. This will be a more purposeful use of assessment than the system defended by Mr Hinds.

(NAME OF COUNCIL) welcomes the commitment of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party to abolish SATs and other high-stakes testing in primary schools.

It notes that:

1. Statutory testing in primary schools has increased since 2010 and is increasing further: by 2020, children will be tested in Reception (the Baseline Assessment), year 1 (the Phonics Screening Check), year 2 (SATs), year 4 (the Multiplication Tables Check) and year 6 (SATs).
2. The pressures of statutory assessment contribute to the crisis of teacher morale, workload, recruitment and retention; making it difficult for schools to retain staff.
3. Tests are focussed on the requirements of school accountability rather than on support for children's learning.
4. The pressures of testing in primary schools have a detrimental effect on children's mental health.
5. Educational research has demonstrated repeatedly that teaching to the test narrows the curriculum and the educational experience of children, focussing on labelling not learning.
6. The National Education Union is campaigning to abolish high-stakes primary testing and to halt the introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment in September 2020.

This council believes that campaigning, by those who work in primary schools, parents and academics, to end the current high-stakes system of primary assessment should be welcomed, in particular the More Than a Score campaign.

It resolves:

1. To express its support for campaigns against the current system of primary assessment, including those organised by teacher unions and More Than a Score.
2. To lobby the Secretary of State for Education to listen to the growing number of voices who are calling for the abolition of high-stakes testing in primary schools.
3. To call a meeting of trade unions, parents and school governors to discuss the council's position on these matters and to co-ordinate a response.
4. To offer support to schools within the area which adopt an alternative approach to assessment (for example by taking the More Than a Score pledge)

Appendix 3

Glossary of terms

Baseline assessment – a test to assess the performance of children within a few weeks of them starting school in reception. It focusses on a child’s literacy and numeracy. Baseline assessment is intended to generate a ‘baseline’ against which to measure pupil progress and for the purposes of school and teacher accountability.

Formative assessment – is the use of day-to-day, often informal, assessments to explore pupils’ understanding. It enables the teacher to decide how best to help pupils develop that understanding.¹⁵

Key stage 1 (KS1) – school years 1 and 2, in which children are aged between 5 and 7 years.

Key stage 2 (KS2) – school years 3, 4, 5 and 6, in which children are aged between 7 and 11 years.

Phonics – a method of teaching children to read by correlating sounds with symbols in an alphabetic writing system. Children are currently tested on phonics in year 1 (age 5) as a means of determining their reading and language abilities.

¹⁵ Definition from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, ccea.org.uk/curriculum/assess_progress/types_assessment/formative

Section E:

My action plan

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