

House of Commons  
Children, Schools and Families  
Committee  
**Testing and Assessment**

Third Report of Session 2007-08

## Conclusions and recommendations

### **The need for national testing**

1. We consider that the weight of evidence in favour of the need for a system of national testing is persuasive and we are content that the principle of national testing is sound. Appropriate testing can help to ensure that teachers focus on achievement and often that has meant excellent teaching, which is very welcome. (Paragraph 25)

### **The purposes of national testing**

2. The evidence we have received strongly favours the view that national tests do not serve all of the purposes for which they are, in fact used. The fact that the results of these tests are used for so many purposes, with high-stakes attached to the outcomes, creates tensions in the system leading to undesirable consequences, including distortion of the education experience of many children. In addition, the data derived from the testing system do not necessarily provide an accurate or complete picture of the performance of schools and teachers, yet they are relied upon by the Government, the QCA and Ofsted to make important decisions affecting the education system in general and individual schools, teachers and pupils in particular. In short, we consider that the current national testing system is being applied to serve too many purposes. (Paragraph 44)

3. We consider that the over-emphasis on the importance of national tests, which address only a limited part of the National Curriculum and a limited range of children's skills and knowledge has resulted in teachers narrowing their focus. Teachers who feel compelled to focus on that part of the curriculum which is likely to be tested may feel less able to use the full range of their creative abilities in the classroom and find it more difficult to explore the curriculum in an interesting and motivational way. We are concerned that the professional abilities of teachers are, therefore, under-used and that some children may suffer as a result of a limited educational diet focussed on testing. We feel that teacher assessment should form a significant part of a national assessment regime. As the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors states, "A system of external testing alone is not ideal and government's recent policy initiatives in progress checks and diplomas have made some move towards addressing an imbalance between external testing and internal judgements made by those closest to the students, i.e. the teachers, in line with other European countries". (Paragraph 58)

4. We are concerned about the Government's stance on the merits of the current testing system. We remain unconvinced by the Government's assumption that one set of national tests can serve a range of purposes at the national, local, institutional and individual levels. We recommend that the Government sets out clearly the purposes of national testing in order of priority and, for each purpose, gives an accurate assessment of the fitness of the relevant test instrument for that purpose, taking into account the issues of validity and reliability. (Paragraph 61)

5. We recommend further that estimates of statistical measurement error be published alongside test data and statistics derived from those data to allow users of that information to interpret it in a more informed manner. We urge the Government to consider further the evidence of Dr Ken Boston, that multiple test instruments, each serving fewer purposes, would be a more valid approach to national testing. (Paragraph 62)

### **Performance targets and tables**

6. We endorse the Government's view that much can and should be done to assist children who struggle to meet expected standards. However, we are concerned that the Government's targetbased system may actually be contributing to the problems of some children. (Paragraph 81)

7. We believe that the system is now out of balance in the sense that the drive to meet government-set targets has too often become the goal rather than the means to the end of providing the best possible education for all children. This is demonstrated in phenomena such as teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum and focusing disproportionate

resources on borderline pupils. We urge the Government to reconsider its approach in order to create incentives to schools to teach the whole curriculum and acknowledge children's achievements in the full range of the curriculum. The priority should be a system which gives teachers, parents and children accurate information about children's progress. (Paragraph 82)

8. Whilst we consider that Contextualised Value Added scores are potentially a valuable addition to the range of information available to parents and the public at large when making judgments about particular schools, we recommend that the information be presented in a more accessible form, for example graphically, so that it can more easily be interpreted. (Paragraph 98)

9. We are concerned about the underlying assumptions on which Contextualised Value Added scores are based. Whilst it may be true that the sub-groups adjusted for in the Contextualised Value Added measure may statistically perform less well than other sub-groups, we do not consider that it should be accepted that they will always perform less well than others. (Paragraph 99)

10. In addition to these specific recommendations about Contextual Value Added scores, we recommend that the Government rethinks the way it publishes the information presented in the Achievement and Attainment Tables generally. We believe that this information should be presented in a more accessible manner so that parents and others can make a holistic evaluation of a school more easily. In addition, there should be a statement with the Achievement and Attainment Tables that they should not be read in isolation, but in conjunction with the relevant Ofsted report in order to get a more rounded view of a school's performance and a link to the Ofsted site should be provided. (Paragraph 100)

11. The scope of this inquiry does not extend to a thorough examination of the way Ofsted uses data from the performance tables under the new, lighter touch, inspection regime. However, we would be concerned if Ofsted were, in fact, using test result data as primary inspection evidence in a disproportionate manner because of our view that national test data are evidence only of a very limited amount of the important and wide-ranging work that schools do. (Paragraph 102)

12. We consider that schools are being held accountable for only a very narrow part of their essential activities and we recommend that the Government reforms the performance tables to include a wider range of measures, including those from the recent Ofsted report. (Paragraph 106)

### **The consequences of high-stakes uses of testing**

13. We received substantial evidence that teaching to the test, to an extent which narrows the curriculum and puts sustained learning at risk, is widespread. Whilst the Government has allocated resources to tackle this phenomenon and improve practice they fail to accept the extent to which teaching to the test exists and the damage it can do to a child's learning. We have no doubt that teachers generally have the very best intentions in terms of providing the best education they can for their pupils. However, the way that many teachers have responded to the Government's approach to accountability has meant that test results are pursued at the expense of a rounded education for children. (Paragraph 130)

14. We believe that teaching to the test and this inappropriate focus on test results may leave young people unprepared for higher education and employment. We recommend that the Government reconsiders the evidence on teaching to the test and that it commissions systematic and wide-ranging research to discover the nature and full extent of the problem. (Paragraph 131)

15. A creative, linked curriculum which addresses the interests, needs and talents of all pupils is the casualty of the narrow focus of teaching which we have identified. Narrowing of the curriculum is problematic in two ways: core subjects are emphasised to the detriment of other, important elements of the broader curriculum; and, for those subjects which are tested in public examinations, the scope and creativity of what is taught is compromised by a focus on the requirements of the test. We are concerned that any efforts the Government makes to introduce more breadth into the school curriculum are likely to be undermined by the enduring imperative for schools, created by the accountability measures, to ensure that their pupils perform well in national tests. (Paragraph 140)

16. We acknowledge the reforms the Government has made to GCSE and A-level examinations. However, the Government must address the concerns expressed by witnesses, among them Dr Ken Boston of the QCA, who see the burden of assessment more in terms of the amount of time and effort spent in preparation for high-stakes tests than in the time taken to sit the tests themselves. This could be achieved by discouraging some of the most inappropriate forms of preparation and reducing the number of occasions on which a child is tested. (Paragraph 149)

17. We are persuaded by the evidence that it is entirely possible to improve test scores through mechanisms such as teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum and concentrating effort and resources on borderline students. It follows

that this apparent improvement may not always be evidence of an underlying enhancement of learning and understanding in pupils. (Paragraph 161)

18. We consider that the measurement of standards across the full curriculum is virtually impossible under the current testing regime because national tests measure only a small sample of pupils' achievements; and because teaching to the test means that pupils may not retain, or may not even possess in the first place, the skills which are supposedly evidenced by their test results. (Paragraph 162)

19. It is not possible for us to come to a definitive view on grade inflation in the context of such a wideranging inquiry. However, it seems clear to us from the evidence that we have received that the Government has not engaged with the complexity of the technical arguments about grade inflation and standards over time. We recommend that the Government addresses these issues head-on, starting with a mandate to the OCA or the proposed new regulator to undertake a full review of assessment standards. (Paragraph 171)

20. Whilst we do not doubt the Government's intentions when it states that "The National Curriculum sets out a clear, full and statutory entitlement to learning for all pupils, irrespective of background or ability", we are persuaded that in practice many children have not received their entitlement and many witnesses believe that this is due to the demands of national testing. (Paragraph 183)

21. We are persuaded that the current system of national tests should be reformed in order to decouple the multiple purposes of measuring pupil attainment, school and teacher accountability and national monitoring. The negative impacts of national testing arise more from the targets that schools are expected to achieve and schools' responses to them than from the tests themselves. (Paragraph 184)

22. School accountability should be separated from this system of pupil testing, and we recommend that the Government consult widely on methods of assuring school accountability which do not impact on the right of children to a balanced education. (Paragraph 185)

23. We recommend that the purpose of national monitoring of the education system, particularly for policy formation, is best served by sample testing to measure standards over time and that cohort testing is neither appropriate nor, in our view, desirable for this purpose. We recommend further that, in the interests of public confidence, such sample testing should be carried out by a body at arms length from the Government and suggest that it is a task either for the new regulator or a body answerable to it. **(Paragraph 186)**

### **Single-level tests**

24. Our predecessors warned the Government about bringing in new tests with undue haste. We recommend that the Government allows sufficient time for a full pilot of the new single-level tests and ensures that any issues and problems arising out of that pilot are fully addressed before any formal roll-out of the new regime to schools. (Paragraph 198)

25. *Making Good Progress* characterises single-level tests as integral to personalized learning and Assessment for Learning yet also the means by which to generate summative data. We agree with the National Foundation for Educational Research that this single assessment instrument cannot validly perform these functions simultaneously and, if it is attempted, there is a danger that the single-level tests will work for neither purpose. The single-level tests may be useful, however, if their purpose is carefully defined and the tests are developed to ensure they are valid and reliable specifically for those purposes. (Paragraph 210)

26. We recommend that, if single-level tests are introduced, they are used for summative purposes only and that Assessment for Learning and personalised learning are supported separately by enhanced professional development for teachers, backed up with a centralized bank of formative and diagnostic assessment materials on which teachers can draw as necessary on a regular basis. (Paragraph 211)

27. Single-level tests may have some positive effects and we certainly approve of the Government's new emphasis on the personalised approach. However, the Government has structured the single-level testing system in such a way as to risk a transposition of existing, systemic problems into the new arrangements. Without structural modification, we foresee that the existing problems-including teaching to the test, narrowing of the taught curriculum and the focus on borderline candidates to the detriment of others-will continue under the single-level test regime. (Paragraph 215)

28. We believe that true personalised learning is incompatible with a high-stakes single level test which focuses on academic learning and does not assess a range of other skills which children might possess. Children who struggle with the core subjects may receive more targeted assistance in those subjects. However, if this means that children who are struggling with core subjects get less opportunity to access the wider curriculum, they risk being put off learning at an early age. We call upon the Government to invest in ways to help and, if necessary, train teachers to improve the basic skills of struggling pupils while enhancing their enjoyment of learning and guaranteeing their access to a broad curriculum. (Paragraph 216)

29. We are concerned about the "one-way ratchet" on the attainment of test levels under the single-level testing regime and we find persuasive the evidence that this may lead to an apparent, but artificial, improvement in performance standards. We recommend that the Government consider further whether it is in children's best interests that they may be certified to have achieved a level of knowledge and understanding which they do not, in truth, possess. We suspect that this may lead to further disillusionment and children perceiving themselves as 'failures'. (Paragraph 217)

30. We recommend that the Government urgently rethinks its decision to use progression targets, based on pupils' achievement in single-level tests, for the purposes of school accountability. If such high-stakes accountability measures are combined with more frequent testing of children, the negative effect on children's education experiences promises to be greater than it is at present. We urge the Government to listen to the QCA, which has already warned of the dangers of saddling the single-level tests with the same range of purposes which the Key Stage tests demonstrably cannot bear. **(Paragraph 218)**

## **Diplomas**

31. We welcome the Government's stated intentions that both the vocational and the general elements of Diplomas should be reflected in the methods of assessment used. We caution the Government against any haste in shifting this delicate balance in future until the full implications of such a shift have been understood. (Paragraph 225)

32. Schools and colleges, who are required to work in collaboration with each other to provide a rounded education for Diploma students, cannot be expected to do so effectively when the accountability regime places them in direct competition with each other. We welcome the introduction of the Diploma and recognise the determination of all concerned to make it work, but we have some concerns about how it will work in a competitive environment. (Paragraph 233)

33. Given its complexity, the Diploma must, in our view, be given an opportunity to settle into its operational phase without undue intervention from the Government. We consider that this is an area best left to the proposed new regulator who we hope will approach Diplomas with a light touch and at a strategic level in the first few years as the initial problems are ironed out over time. (Paragraph 234)

34. The whole education sector would welcome greater clarity on the future direction of Diplomas. We urge the Government to make clear what its intentions are for the future of Diplomas and other 14-19 qualifications and whether it is, in fact, heading towards one, overarching framework for all 14-19 qualifications as Mike Tomlinson's Working Group on 1419 Reform proposed in 2004. (Paragraph 235)

## **Regulation and development: the new arrangements**

35. We welcome the creation of a development agency and separate, independent regulator on the logical grounds that it is right that development and regulation should be the responsibility of two separate organisations. That assessment standards will now be overseen by a regulator demonstrably free from government control and responsible to Parliament through the Children, Schools and Families Committee is a positive step. (Paragraph 249)

36. However, the Government has failed to address the issue of the standards themselves. In the context of the current testing system, with its ever-changing curriculum and endless test reforms, no regulator, however independent, can assure assessment standards as they are not capable of accurate measurement using the data available. Until the Government allows for standardised sample testing for monitoring purposes, the regulator will be left without the tools required to fulfil its primary function. (Paragraph 250)