

## Education Select Committee inquiry into primary assessment

### Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

#### **A Introduction**

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
- 2 ASCL welcomes this very timely inquiry.
- 3 Our remarks are organised in sections as follows:
  - A Introduction**
  - B Summary**
  - C The purpose of assessment in primary schools**
  - D The problems with the current approach to assessment**
  - E How might primary assessment be improved?**

#### **B Summary**

- 4 The assessment of pupils in primary schools serves a number of purposes. The current system unhelpfully conflates these purposes, distorting the curriculum and children's broader education.
- 5 The current statutory assessments don't always focus on the most important things, leading in some cases to too much time being spent on peripheral aspects of learning and reducing the time available for potentially more worthwhile learning.
- 6 The current approach to assessment in primary schools risks damaging children's wellbeing and mental health – a concern which has been exacerbated by the way in which changes have been introduced this year.
- 7 The frameworks for teacher assessment are not being applied or moderated consistently, making it very difficult to accurately judge the relative performance of schools.

- 8 ASCL welcomes the announcements in the Secretary of State's recent written ministerial statement on primary assessment. The changes proposed for this academic year address many of the most glaring short term problems, and the commitment to a formal consultation exercise early next year is also welcome.
- 9 The issues identified for consideration during this consultation are important, but other areas should also be looked at; including the number of tests children are required to sit, the way in which grammar and writing are assessed and the way in which children's attainment is described.
- 10 Finally, consideration should be given to instigating a broad, long term review of the way in which children are assessed in primary schools, in order to build an effective, sustainable approach for the future. This review should explore, among other things, how we might design an assessment system that focuses on the most important knowledge, skills and understanding primary-aged children should develop, and how we can effectively hold schools to account without the perverse, curriculum-distorting incentives of the current system.

## **C The purpose of assessment in primary schools**

- 11 The assessment of pupils in primary schools serves a number of purposes, including:
  - enabling teachers to check pupils' understanding of concepts taught
  - enabling teachers to plan future learning which builds on pupils' prior knowledge, skills and understanding and addresses gaps or misunderstandings
  - enabling pupils and parents to understand how children are doing and what they can do to support their learning
  - enabling stakeholders to hold schools to account for the effectiveness of the education they provide, and to intervene if necessary
- 12 All of these purposes (and others) are important. The challenge is that they can conflict with each other. Goodhart's Law, for example, states that 'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure' and Campbell's Law that 'The more any quantitative social indicator (or even some qualitative indicator) is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.'

## **D The problems with the current approach to assessment**

- 13 School leaders have a number of concerns about the current approach to assessment in primary schools. These include the following:

### **The high stakes assessment and accountability system is distorting the primary curriculum and children's broader education**

- 14 We can see the effects of both Goodhart's and Campbell's laws clearly playing out in our primary schools. The role that the statutory national assessments at the end of Key Stage 1 and, particularly, Key Stage 2 play in school accountability creates a perverse incentive for schools to 'teach to the test', reducing the effectiveness of these assessments as a measure and distorting the education of the children whose attainment and progress they seek to assess.

### **The current statutory assessments don't always focus on the most important things**

- 15 This distorting effect is compounded by concerns that these high stakes assessments, as currently designed, don't always focus on the most important knowledge, skills and understanding children need to develop in order to succeed at secondary school and beyond. This is particularly the case with the grammar, punctuation and spelling test and the writing assessment framework. School leaders and teachers (in both the primary and secondary phases) place a high value on the importance of grammar, but many are unconvinced that 11 year-olds require the detailed, technical grammatical knowledge needed to succeed in these assessments. They do not believe that assessing grammar in an isolated, decontextualized manner is the best way to judge a child's aptitude in this area. They believe that the approach to assessing writing required by the interim assessment frameworks places too much emphasis on the technical elements of writing, tipping the balance too far towards writing which is technically correct but uninspired over that which may not 'tick boxes' but is much more effective.
- 16 Another concerning aspect of this increased focus on grammar, punctuation and spelling is the impact it may have on children with additional needs, particularly those with dyslexia. Teachers are only able to assess children as working at the expected standard in writing if they are able to spell most of the words in the national curriculum for Years 5 and 6 correctly, with no exemptions available for children with dyslexia.
- 17 The introduction of high stakes assessments which require this level of focus on the 'nuts and bolts' of grammar, then, are not only distorting the curriculum, but doing so in a direction which many teachers feel is actually leading to a deterioration in children's writing and which may be discriminating against children with additional needs. Anecdotal evidence from secondary teachers suggests that the current approach to primary assessment appears to be polarising attainment, with lower attaining pupils having struggled to access the new, more challenging primary curriculum and to demonstrate their ability in the new assessment system.

### **The current approach to assessment in primary schools risks damaging children's wellbeing and mental health**

- 18 Accurate assessment of all children is essential, and it is important that primary schools are held to account for the attainment and progress of their pupils. This needs to be done, however, in a way which is proportionate and appropriate to the age of the children involved, and which encourages them to see themselves as effective and resilient learners.
- 19 The current approach to primary assessment risks prioritising accountability over children's wellbeing. The high stakes nature of the Key Stage 1 and 2 statutory assessments inevitably creates pressure on teachers and school leaders. Most teachers and school leaders try extremely hard to insulate children from that pressure, but inevitably children will pick up on it (and parents may also exert pressure on their children to do well).
- 20 The pressure felt by children taking the 2016 tests was exacerbated by a number of factors:
  - They had only been following the new, significantly harder, primary curriculum for two years. This meant that teachers, in order to give children the best possible chance to do well in the assessments, had to cram a large amount of content into the last two years of primary school.

- Children found the new reading test this year particularly challenging. Many found the content difficult to access, and the introduction of ‘harder’ questions early in the test led many of them to become demotivated and unable to fully demonstrate their ability.
- The raising of the expected standard meant that many more children than in previous years didn’t receive the results they were hoping for.
- The requirement on schools to tell children, in as many words, that they hadn’t reached the (new, ambitious) expected standard, has led to a very large number of children feeling disappointed and demoralised as they move on to the next stage of their education.
- Talk of children being required to resit their SATs in Year 7 if they didn’t reach the expected standard added extra pressure. Although this was never intended to happen this year, many parents had picked up on the proposal, and were concerned about the implications if their child didn’t ‘pass’ their primary ‘exams’.

**The interim assessment frameworks are not being applied or moderated consistently**

- 21 Anecdotal evidence suggests that both teachers and moderators interpreted the new interim teacher assessment frameworks in different ways. A recent on-line survey of teachers<sup>1</sup>, for example, reveals stark differences of opinion among teachers about the extent to which the guidelines permitted them to support and scaffold children’s writing. And this analysis of the difference between reading and writing results in different local authorities by Rebecca Allen of UCL and the Education Datalab<sup>2</sup> suggests a lack of consistency in how writing was moderated.
- 22 If these assessments are to be used as part of a high stakes accountability system, with potentially significant consequences for the futures of both whole schools and individuals within them, school leaders and teachers need to be confident that the assessments are being consistently administered and moderated.

**E How might primary assessment be improved?**

- 23 There is a balance to be struck between addressing the problems with the current approach to primary assessment and providing primary school leaders and teachers with a period of stability and consolidation.
- 24 ASCL welcomes the Secretary of State’s written ministerial statement of 19 October in which she committed to addressing some of the most glaring short-term problems, to refraining from introducing any new national tests or assessments before the 2018/19 academic year, and to consulting on a longer term, sustainable approach to primary assessment and accountability. This responsive but considered approach is, in our view, a sensible way to work towards a better long term solution without further destabilising the current situation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://michaelt1979.wordpress.com/2016/06/15/consistency-in-teacher-assessment/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://educationdatalab.org.uk/2016/09/consistency-in-key-stage-2-writing-across-local-authorities-appears-to-be-poor/>

25 ASCL offers the following suggestions to support this approach:

### **In the short term**

26 We welcome the short term changes proposed in the 19 October ministerial statement and the Secretary of State's subsequent letter to ASCL clarifying the proposals, including that:

- no new national tests or assessments will be introduced before the 2018/19 academic year
- the guidance for the moderation of teacher assessment will be improved, and accompanied by mandatory training for local authority moderators
- the Key Stage 1 grammar, punctuation and spelling test will remain non-statutory this year
- accessibility and pupils' experience will be considered alongside the psychometric evidence when the Key Stage 2 reading test is constructed
- statutory mathematics and reading resits on children's arrival at secondary school will not be introduced, with instead a targeted package of support made available to help teachers to support struggling learners in Year 7

27 Also welcome is the Secretary of State's reaffirmation of her predecessor's commitment that that no more than 6% of primary schools will be below the floor standard in 2016, and that no decisions on intervention will be made on the basis of the 2016 data alone.

28 In addition, we would encourage the government to also consider the following for the 2016/17 academic year:

- introducing an element of teacher discretion around the spelling aspect of the teacher assessment framework for writing, to reduce the disadvantage to children with dyslexia
- changing the order in which children sit the Key Stage 2 SATs so that they are not faced with the reading paper (which many children find daunting) first
- implementing an ongoing communication strategy to reinforce to parents the extent to which expectations have been raised, that a scaled score of less than 100 does not mean their child has 'failed', and that a child who hasn't met the expected standard won't now be required to resit the tests in Year 7
- sharing as much national data on, and analysis of, pupil and school performance as possible with both primary and secondary schools, to enable them to better understand and put into context the performance of their own pupils

### **In the medium term**

29 ASCL welcomes the Secretary of State's commitment, in her 19 October statement, to launch a consultation on primary assessment early next year. The issues she identified for inclusion in this consultation exercise – the details of the implementation of the proposed new multiplication check, the role and operation of teacher assessment, and the best starting point from which to measure the progress that children make in primary schools – are all important, and worthy of consideration.

30 We would also like to see this consultation include consideration of the following issues:

- The number of tests children are required to sit. Could this be reduced – perhaps even to a single paper for each subject?

- The expectations around grammar, and the way in which this is assessed. What are the most important aspects of grammar for 7 and 11 year-olds to understand and be able to apply, and are there better ways of assessing these than through decontextualized exercises?
- The challenge of meaningfully and accurately assessing writing, potential ways of meeting this challenge, and the pros and cons of different approaches.
- The binary nature of the 'met expectations / not met expectations' label, and the language used around this. Might it be better to have broad bands of attainment, rather than a single pass/fail cut-off point? Are there less damning ways to describe children who have not managed to reach the ambitious new attainment targets?

### **In the long term**

- 31 If the Secretary of State's admirable intention to move towards a long term, sustainable approach to primary assessment is to be achieved, however, we believe there is a need for a much broader review than a structured consultation exercise is likely to elicit. We would encourage the government to engage deeply with school leaders, teachers, parents, children, researchers and others to consider the broader issues with the current approach identified in this paper and elsewhere.
- 32 Asking the following questions might help to do that:
- How might we design an assessment system that
    - focuses on the most important knowledge, skills and understanding primary-aged children should develop
    - actively encourages schools to develop and deliver a broad, balanced curriculum
    - is appropriate and proportionate to the age of the children being assessed, and enables us to accurately demonstrate what all children can do?
  - Are we putting more weight on the national statutory assessments at Key Stage 1 and (particularly) Key Stage 2 than they can bear?
  - Do we need to find ways to separate assessments used for checking pupils' understanding, planning future learning and reporting to parents from those designed to hold schools to account and potentially trigger intervention?
  - How can we effectively hold schools to account without the perverse, curriculum-distorting incentives of the current system?
  - How might we design a coherent approach to assessment across the early years, primary and secondary phases?
- 33 I hope that this is of value to your inquiry, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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 28 October 2016