



**Year 1 phonics screening check**  
*Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers*  
*14 February 2011*

ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. We recognise the link between education policy and members' conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

**ATL policy**

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

**ATL response**

ATL is against the introduction of a national phonics test for 6 year olds. We believe the test

- ◆ is based on a simplistic view of reading, of learning and of teaching
- ◆ will quickly be viewed as a 'high-stakes' test by teachers, leading to a focus on decoding at the expense of understanding and enjoyment
- ◆ demonstrates government's lack of trust in teachers' abilities and professionalism
- ◆ will lead to a wealth of data that will not raise standards nor be useful for parents
- ◆ is an increase in bureaucracy and a waste of money in a time when government needs to prioritise its spending on resources for teaching.

We believe that teacher assessment, properly supported and professionally moderated, should be used to assess children's reading. Data from these assessments can be used at local level by schools to challenge themselves and each other to improve. We call on government to trial this form of assessment instead of, or alongside, the phonics test trials.

If government goes ahead with phonics test trial, ATL believes it must allow the possibility that the tests will not be rolled out nationally. The trial must be independently evaluated, considering a range of factors beyond the feasibility of the test. Teacher unions, professional associations and other stakeholders must be invited to play a full part in discussions of the parameters of the evaluation and its outcomes.

### **Teaching reading**

ATL has consistently argued that while it is important for children to be able to decode text, the ability and motivation to read depends on much more than that. We have acknowledged that synthetic phonics is an important part of teaching children to read, and that teachers should have a good understanding of its methodology. We are not convinced that the evidence is as clear cut as government might believe that synthetic phonics is the best method of teaching reading, or even the best method of teaching phonics. Children start school with very different abilities, experiences and interests, so that a single method of teaching reading will not be suitable for all.

It is also vital to remember that children need to hear and participate in a variety of rich spoken, sung and written language, to experience stories and to find out information through text. Children also need developed physical skills, the ability to concentrate, and an understanding of how to find meaning in written text.

ATL firmly believes that children's learning and development does not happen in a straight line, nor do all children go through the same stages and come to the same outcomes at particular ages. Learning to read is not a straightforward path from knowing letter sounds through phonic decoding to making sense of text. Nor is there strong evidence that decoding skills at 6 will necessarily lead to effective reading skills later.

ATL firmly believes that children should be taught to read. Teachers are best placed to identify how to motivate children to want to read, how and when to challenge them to progress. Teachers are also best placed to understand when and why children are struggling to read, and to support them. Blanket statements about expectations for all children in a single aspect of a complex process immediately condemn some children to failure.

### **High stakes testing**

Michael Gove, in setting out proposals for the phonics check, states the government's determination '*to raise literacy standards in our schools, especially of those not achieving the expected level*' (Angela Harrison report for BBC website, *New reading test for six-year-olds spelt out*, accessed 10.2.2011). We believe that setting an 'expected level' for children to reach on a set date in June will make this a high stakes test, as will making children who do not reach the 'expected level' sit this test again'. The possibilities within the proposal of reporting to parents whether their child has reached the 'expected level, measuring schools against each other based on how many children reach the 'expected level, and allowing this data to be reported, all make this a high stakes test.

High stakes testing has a detrimental effect on teaching. It may not be possible to 'drill' for this test, but the fact that teachers' 'success' at teaching reading will be measured and reported on a single test of a single skill is highly likely to result in greater focus on teaching that skill to the detriment of any other strategies for reading, including those strategies that help children to find meaning, and to enjoy reading. There is ample evidence from key stage 2 that reporting test results has a wash-down effect on the rest of the school, including the EYFS, as teachers perceive strong expectations that 'formal' teaching must begin earlier and earlier.

High stakes testing will also have a detrimental effect on children. When teachers read with individual children, those children are supported to make several attempts at words, to try different strategies to work out the words, and to think about the meaning in what they are reading. In a test situation, that relationship with the teacher and with the words will be different. Even if children do not realise that they are being tested, they will recognise that this is an unfamiliar situation. They will also make their own judgements about their 'success' or 'failure' in this task, particularly when some will be asked to take a similar test again within a few months. At the age of six (or five as some will be), children's belief in their abilities, and their confidence in school, can be strongly affected by highly constrained testing situations.

### **The importance of teaching**

In a climate where test results are narrowly interpreted as measures of success across the whole endeavour of teaching and learning, many of the proposals for Y1 phonics testing can be interpreted as a lack of trust in teachers' ability and professionalism. These include the use of 'non-words' (so that children cannot 'cheat' by knowing a lot of English words); using a single teacher to administer the tests (implying that teachers cannot ensure consistency between themselves) and the additional guidance (suggesting that teachers will not understand the impact of dialect and accent on how children decode). More importantly, the use and reporting of a national test over-rides teacher assessment, including in-school testing of pupil progress.

ATL believes that formative assessment is vital for pupils' learning, as it enables teachers to know what children can do and to understand the particular difficulties when children cannot do something. Formative assessment can be used summatively, properly moderated, to provide information that parents need and data that schools need in order to continue to improve. Sample testing can be used to provide national data for government purposes, and so that schools can make meaningful comparisons and challenges.

We are concerned that a national test of a single aspect of teaching reading is prescribing teaching methods, even as government insists that it will not do so.

### **Data**

ATL does not believe that the data collected from these tests will help children to learn. Well-qualified teachers, with access to good quality CPD, and peer support and challenge, can assess pupils' abilities in reading, including their decoding skills, in a range of ways. Having a test outcome in terms of how many words (and non-words) a child can read under contrived circumstances will not provide evidence of any patterns in children's skills, nor information about what individual children need in order to progress. Effective teachers will find ways to report outcomes to parents in ways that make sense, linked with other information about their child's abilities and interests. It is not obvious that parents will want to know how many non-words their children can read.

As with other national tests, collection of data will lead to simplistic reporting as if this were an indication of children's reading abilities. Although government has no control over the way in which results are reported, ministers themselves have a responsibility to ensure that they do not conflate the results of a phonics test with children's ability to read.

### **Increased bureaucracy and financial cost**

Assuming that the tests go ahead, the increase in bureaucracy and the financial cost are unjustified as government attempts to cut both. Money will need to be available for the development of a range of tests (in order to provide different tests for different days of the week), training materials (including video exemplification) and other training costs, distribution of tests and materials, collection and analysis of data, and publication of data. Because of the high stakes nature, workload for teachers and others will increase: staff will be needed to fill out forms to order tests, to administer the test, to collate and manage data, to check the accuracy of data before it is reported nationally, to report to parents. All of this costs money.

In a high stakes environment new tests must usually be developed annually. Most of these costs therefore are ongoing. ATL argues that this money could be better spent in providing additional resources for pupils who need support in order to read.

### **Conclusion**

ATL does not agree that there should be a national phonics test in year 1. We believe that resources would be better used in supporting teacher formative assessment, peer moderation, support and challenge. We would welcome work towards proposals for developing sample testing across the primary age range, to provide contexts for professional support and challenge for teachers and schools.

However, as the government intends to trial the year 1 phonics test, we ask for assurances that this trial will be set up in such a way that it can report on the issues raised above and that government will remain open to the possibility that the tests will not be rolled out nationally. We call for an independent evaluation of the trial, which should consider particularly

- ◆ the impact of test/results for children of different groups (age, sex, ethnic background, FSM, EAL, previous early years experience);
- ◆ whether teachers believe that phonic decoding results tally with their assessment of children's reading competence;
- ◆ consistency of results between teachers/schools;
- ◆ the perceptions of teachers in Y1 and in EYFS of the impact on their practice
- ◆ the perceptions of teachers in Y2 of the accuracy and usefulness of test data.

We insist that teacher unions, and other stakeholders, are involved in setting up the evaluation and in discussing the results.