

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

7 NORTHUMBERLAND STREET, LONDON WC2N 5RD TEL: 020-7930-6441 FAX: 020-7930-1359
e-mail: info@atl.org.uk web site: http://www.atl.org.uk VAT REG NO 539 0866 17
GENERAL SECRETARY Dr MARY BOUSTED B.A.(Hons) PhD



The Bew Review into Key Stage 2 testing, assessment and accountability

Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

Date: 17 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 and colleges 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.

Executive Summary

- Children's learning needs to be the government's number one priority.
- The current testing and accountability system for Key Stage 2 is flawed beyond repair.
- We offer an alternative that can meet government's expectations: teacher assessment reported (and moderated) locally coupled with sample testing to monitor national trends.
- This alternative benefits children, parents, government and the profession.

ATL response

ATL has a long-standing principled policy position on assessment and accountability at key stage 2. The evidence for this is set out more fully in the attached publications. We believe that national curriculum tests must be abolished, but are emphatic that it is not tests per se but the combination with the existing accountability regime that makes them so damaging. At the heart of this position is a belief in education as a means to achieve social justice, to narrow gaps between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers, and to help all young people to learn. That which damages or deters from achieving these goals should be challenged. We welcome this review, but believe it does not go far enough.

Making children's learning the number one priority

Members of ATL are passionate about the power of education to improve children's life chances. They desire professional autonomy while recognising the need, as public servants entrusted with the education of future generations, for their schools to be accountable for what they do.

Though accountability is important, it is necessary – in an effective education system – that learning does not become secondary. Government has both a right to know, and a responsibility to monitor, how well schools are helping pupils learn. But if the accountability system itself undermines learning then we must be bold enough to rebuild it.

Parents want to know their child is doing well before they want to know the broad picture in the school for past or present cohorts – and they care as much about other things that will facilitate learning and development, such as safety and happiness, as test results.

We urge the review team, in making their recommendations, to place children and their learning at the top of any new systems' priorities.

Problems with the current system

The problems with the current regime can be described quite succinctly:

- Tests are not necessarily problematic, but the way they are used with league tables is a toxic combination that, above all, damages learning.
- Tests cannot serve any purpose well if the emerging data is put to too many uses. The remit of the review shows that the government still has too many purposes in mind.
- The high stakes nature of Key Stage 2 tests impacts upon their validity; causes stress, demotivation, and loss of enjoyment for pupils; and results in a short-term focus on the test, instead of a long-term focus on learning. This reduces teachers' flexibility and makes narrowing gaps more difficult.
- Key Stage 2 tests also have weaknesses in their reliability. Margins for error might cancel each other out within a national cohort, giving a reasonable picture of standards and trends. But the effect of a possible 30 per cent unreliability on a small sample, a single class for example, could be catastrophic for individual pupils.

- The tests impact negatively upon planning, teaching, learning and formative assessment – because of the time they take up, the disproportionate focus they demand, or the distraction from using assessment for learning.
- The tests measure limited aspects of two subjects, but are used as a proxy for the overall quality of a school.
- Under current arrangements it is impossible to ensure that data is used appropriately by all who have access to it through league tables. We have deep concerns about the dangers of shining a spotlight on individual teacher effectiveness, based on flawed data, which will do nothing to improve teaching and learning.

The current system is flawed beyond repair. Wholesale change is needed, including a new relationship between assessment and accountability.

What is the alternative?

ATL has published an alternative vision, combining effective assessment that supports learning in year 6 with reporting to pupil and parents, and facilitating the government's monitoring of national trends, or 'standards' in Key Stage two attainment.

This system would operate without high stakes national tests and instead focus on both formative and summative teacher assessment. It would be designed, delivered, and moderated locally, reported directly to pupils and parents, and monitored at a national level by the use of low stakes sample testing. It would be supported by banks of tests and strong continuing professional development (CPD) for the schools workforce as well as a radical overhaul of initial teacher education.

Summative teacher assessment

The principle and substantial advantage of teacher assessment over external testing is that it more easily integrates assessment with the curriculum and pedagogy.

Summative teacher assessment, conducted in a low stakes environment, can be at least as reliable and valid as the use of tests. If validity is the degree of correspondence between an assessment and what has actually been learnt, then teacher assessment may be more valid because it is more likely to cover the range of pupils learning, thus giving pupil and parents a truer picture rather than providing a crude snapshot. The task chosen for the assessment is more likely to be expressed in the terms and context that pupils can understand; and it can be undertaken in non-threatening conditions.

Local moderation

Moderation of assessment between teachers at the same school and between teachers at different schools is a key aspect in developing reliability in teacher assessment. Teachers recognise the role peer discussion plays in improving their practice, both within a school and between schools. The fact that pupils are not identified within inter-school

moderation enables questions of bias to be brought out and resolved neutrally. While all teachers improve their skills by means of such discussion and reflection ATL would also recommend the development of a cohort of teachers who are expert in assessment: national accreditation is one possibility for ensuring quality and professionalising the expertise.

Moderation of teacher assessments, locally led by nationally accredited teacher experts, should be funded and supported. In order to support consistent moderation across England, there should be a national bank of assessment materials from which teachers can choose to draw to calibrate their own assessments.

Continuing professional development

The government should be contributing to a general improvement in the assessment skills of teachers. Professional development that truly harnesses teachers' capabilities and expertise is a powerful tool in helping children learn and develop. And it could counter the perceived lack of trust in teachers' judgments.

The total resource applied to the current test system is substantial, if school staff time in preparing pupils is included as well as the £20 million annual cost of administering the tests themselves. If the same resource were directed instead towards developing teachers' capacity to make reliable summative assessments, including how to detect and eliminate bias, any amount of difficulties in teacher assessment could be resolved.

The potential impact of integrating assessment into everyday pedagogy is so great that CPD in teacher assessment should be a national priority. A one-off crash CPD programme would be unsuitable. Teacher assessment should be a permanent feature of the CPD offer for all teachers. As with much of the best CPD, local peer group discussion and reflection would be the most effective means and would integrate with interschool moderation practice.

Accountability

ATL believes that schools should be accountable. We do not believe that league tables are the best way to hold schools to account. ATL's model of summative teacher assessment will not be successful in a context where results are reported through league tables at individual school level.

We believe that government, and the wider society, must be able to measure trends in national educational performance. But to be valid, such a national test has to be low stakes at school level. This would be achieved by the replacement of a test of the whole cohort by small sample tests covering the National Curriculum. Sample tests provide the national accountability while parents maintain direct contact with schools to understand their own child's educational development. Pupils themselves benefit from less stress, greater motivation, and the chance to continue their learning.

ATL believes that assessment involving all pupils should focus on enhancing their learning, not on evaluating schools. Instead, other forms

of evaluation should focus on institutional effectiveness. A new accountability system should be developed centred on the different kinds of information that schools should provide for the very different needs of pupils, parents, local communities and national policy-makers.

What role does Ofsted play?

No matter what changes are made to the system, if Key Stage 2 data remains a limiting judgment for Ofsted, then the assessment will be conducted in a high pressure environment which focuses on results and not learning. Training, moderation, improvement and support can continually drive up quality better than a pressurised inspection regime.

A better, professional inspection system which does not base judgements on test data but instead holds school to account for their interpretation and uses of data to improve education, is of clear benefit to pupils, parents, professionals and politicians.

Ofsted would continue to provide thematic reports on the school system. ATL continues to believe that Ofsted should cease individual school inspections. Local inspection should be rigorous in evaluating how schools have used assessment data and national sample testing data to improve learning and teaching. Ofsted would have a key role to play in monitoring the system of local inspections.

Experience from Wales tells us that professional moderation, expert assessors, and an inspection system focussed on how well these systems work to improve attainment and narrow gaps, will be vital.

Why this can be acceptable to government

Though we question the government's approach and do not agree with all of the premises and assumptions it makes, we do believe that this alternative can achieve that which government sets out to do with accountability and assessment at the end of Key Stage 2.

- This model will stimulate deeper, fuller learning and eradicate the distraction of over-rehearsal for high stakes testing.
- Productive learning across the curriculum is the best way to improve pupils' attainment, progress and love of learning – all of which help to narrow the gaps.
- Teacher assessment can be more accurate and reliable than the existing tests – and teachers will embrace dealing with issues of objectivity through moderation partnerships and professional development.
- This localism really can be the basis of schools' accountability to pupils, parents, and the taxpayer. But one single form of pupil assessment cannot illustrate a schools performance in the round.
- National sample testing can be developed to be much more rigorous, valid and reliable than individual pupil testing, can support schools to

improve, and can provide evidence of national progress (including making international comparisons where this is desirable).

- This model reduces bureaucracy and workload, by cutting out the unnecessary test-preparation and paperwork associated with individual pupil testing.
- The removal of nationally reported school level data is the only way to mitigate the concern for ensuring fair use, and sound interpretation, of performance information. Sample testing for national trends will provide answers to the country on performance.
- On a local level, parents will discuss their children's own performance, and will be able to look at the school in the round through other measures and mechanisms for accountability, as well as applying their own judgments on whether a school 'feels right' and is somewhere their child will enjoy being and benefit from.
- Improvement can be 'proved' without test results: accredited assessors can validate the process of peer moderation that underpins teacher summative assessment.

Conclusion

Though the current system of Key Stage 2 assessment and accountability is fatally flawed, we believe that an alternative model could be adopted, which will ensure children's learning is the top priority. This offers many benefits:

For children, the model can reduce pressure in the classroom and focus on more flexible and enjoyable learning that does not risk damaging their long-term interest in education.

For parents, the real information they need about their children will not be lost amongst sensational – frequently uncontrollable – media reporting of the school. Local accountability mechanisms, such as regular parent-school contact and school self-evaluation with local authority validation, will exist to give a more accurate whole school picture.

For government, the model will provide parents with both the information they want and happier children. National trends can be monitored and politicians held accountable for national improvement. Investment in the development of school staff can demonstrate in no uncertain terms the commitment to the importance of teaching and maximise the effect of teacher-pupil time. The proposal is money-saving in an era of reduced departmental budgets.

For the schools workforce, it heightens professionalism through professional development and proper accountability, gives a boost to confidence and motivation, reduces stress and ultimately allows their passion for education to impact upon children's learning.

For ATL, the education union, members want to educate young people, make learning not just an exciting experience but an exciting prospect for the future, and increase pupils' chances in twenty-first century Britain. A system that allows members better opportunity to do this for pupils whilst

also developing as autonomous, reflective and effective professionals can only be good.

We strongly advocate change and improvement to Key Stage 2 assessment and accountability and think the government has an opportunity now to make a difference. We urge the review to recommend to the secretary of state that he adopts ATL's alternative on a trial basis.

ATL publications attached:

- [Common ground on assessment and accountability in primary schools](#) (2010)
- [Make assessment measure up](#) (2010)
- [Assessing to learn: teachers at the heart of assessment](#) (2008)
- [New accountability for schools](#) (2007)