

Written Evidence to the Education Select Committee

Primary Assessment Inquiry

October 2016

Submitted by Head Teacher's Roundtable (HTRT)
@Headsroundtable.

About Us

The Headteachers' Roundtable is a non-party political group of headteachers operating as a think-tank, exploring policy issues from a range of perspectives. Our goal is to provide a vehicle for people working in the profession to influence national education policymakers so that education policy is centred upon what is best for the learning of all children.

The original core members of the Headteachers' Roundtable met through Twitter in 2012. The think-tank initially consisted of secondary and special school Headteachers and formed in response to frustration regarding Government educational policy and the Opposition response to it. The group has now extended to include primary school colleagues. Its origins and subsequent growth are down to the power of social media as a tool for connecting people to try and bring about change where they believe it is needed.

The five principles guiding our work are:

1. The pace of educational change should not be affected by party politics;
2. Schools must be able to offer all their pupils the chance to thrive and flourish;
3. Educational change should begin by identifying the desired outcomes for children;
4. Prioritising high quality teaching & learning and the curriculum will lead to world class assessment and accountability;
5. The teaching profession should be centrally involved in developing future education policy.

In September 2016 we published an Alternative Green Paper, [*Schools that Enable All to Thrive and Flourish*](#) to help inform the policy debates on education.

Executive Summary

- The purpose of Primary Assessment is to support learning and enhance teaching. To achieve this assessment must be diagnostic, formative, evaluative and summative.
- In addition to this, fixed point standardised and summative assessments are used by central government, governors/directors and senior leaders to judge the effectiveness of the education provided by a school.
- The removal of levels has not yet had the positive impact it could and should have had on assessment within primary schools.
- This year's attempt to baseline pupils nationally on entry was flawed due to a lack of comparability. This has left schools with no comparable scores upon which to base a national value added system measuring the progress a child makes whilst at school.
- The current assessments at Key Stage 1 fail to produce a sufficiently granular outcome on which a future value added measure could reliably be determined.
- The use of teacher assessments at Key Stage 1 and for Writing at Key Stage 2 for accountability purposes is hugely problematic.
- Outcomes of Standard Assessments in Year 2 and Year 6 were difficult to comprehend for many parents.

- The advantages of assessing pupils in primary schools far outweigh the disadvantages. Assessment provides the essential evidence base about which elements that have been taught have actually been learnt and by which children.
- *Teaching to the tests* has impacted in many schools. The high stakes accountability linked to the end of Key Stage 1 & 2 assessments has produced a curriculum which is far too narrow for a child at the ages of 7 and 11 years.
- An overwhelming focus on assessments linked to accountability is having a negative impact on the further development of high quality assessment processes required to support learning and enhance teaching. There needs to be a better balance achieved between these two competing elements of assessment in primary schools.
- Insufficient thought and planning was given by Ministers and the Department for Education about the impact of substantial concurrent changes to curriculum and assessment within a very condensed time period.
- The SATs Reading Paper bore too little resemblance to the one exemplar paper and was far more challenging than previous year's assessment.
- Too little regard was given to children with Special Educational needs.
- Schools need a period of curriculum and assessment stability. Further change to the system of assessment within primary school must be effectively planned from the outset with a key objective to minimize disruption, workload and stress to classroom teachers.
- HTRT believe that a National Baccalaureate for Primary Schools should be established based on core learning, a personal project and a personal development programme. It would aim to help broaden the curriculum and recognise the achievements of pupils within a broader view of education.
- The discontinuous change associated with new externally imposed assessment procedures – reception baseline, Key Stage 1 & 2 tests and criterion expected and exceeding based standards – are intrinsically linked to accountability and need to be viewed within this wider context.
- The use of floor targets and definitions of coasting based on attainment measures should cease immediately. These are more a measure of a school's intake rather than the quality of the education provided to pupils.
- To assess the effectiveness of the education offered by a primary school a contextualised multi-year value added measure should be used. This measure must be based on the progress made by children from entry to leaving the infant/primary school. This will require standardised objective teacher-led baseline assessment at the start of reception.
- Key Stage 1 assessments, in their current form based on Teacher Assessment, should be discontinued and replaced with appropriate standardised, objective and granular set of assessments. These assessments would be statutory for Infant Schools. These Key Stage 1 assessments would be available to all other primary schools for diagnostic, formative and evaluative purposes but would not be statutory.
- The assessment of writing must be standardised and moderated at a national level at both Key Stage 1 and 2. Consideration should be given to a national system of moderating children's written work using comparative judgements.
- Once changes have been made to the assessment of writing, at the end of Key Stage 2, along with the current tests for Reading and Mathematics a contextualised value added measure may be determined using the nursery baseline assessment as the starting point.
- Spelling, punctuation and grammar and synthetic phonics assessments should continue to be made available to schools but should be non-statutory and not be used as a separate accountability measure.

The purpose of Primary Assessment:

1. The purpose of Primary Assessment is to support learning and enhance teaching. To achieve this assessment must be diagnostic, formative, evaluative and summative.
2. Teachers use a variety of different forms of assessment in the classroom within and across lessons. At its best they assess how each and every child is progressing against the expected learning outcomes and intervene to enhance progress. Responding within lessons or revising future lessons, according to the learners' responses, allows teachers to address gaps in learning or misconceptions of individuals, groups and cohorts. Baseline assessments are frequently used by teachers to assess a child's prior learning at the beginning of a topic; gaps in prior learning can be addressed or expectations increased depending on the outcomes. Assessment in the classroom is a highly complex process which involves a teacher managing and responding to thousands of interactions a day. The outcomes of assessments provide feedback to teachers about what children have and have not learnt. This process is also critical to the development of increasingly effective pedagogy.
3. In addition to this, fixed point standardised and summative assessments are used by central government, governors/directors and senior leaders to judge the effectiveness of the education provided by a school. This currently consists of a range of attainment measures against a set standard (expected/exceeding) and a progress measure from the end of Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 relating to performance in reading, writing, mathematics and spelling, punctuation and grammar.

The HTRT is fully supportive of the principle of holding schools to account for the quality of education offered to every child but believes the current assessment and accountability system is not yet fit for purpose.

How well the current system meets this ... in schools:

4. The concept behind the removal of national curriculum levels had much to commend it. Levels had become contorted beyond their original purpose which was to provide a holistic end of key stage reference point. The removal of national curriculum levels had the potential to empower school teachers and leaders to build assessment systems incorporating diagnostic, formative, evaluative and summative elements, at a grain size appropriate to each subject and varying across age group, to support learning and enhance teaching.
5. However, due to a lack of professional development and training - many school leaders and teachers have only known the system of national curriculum levels during their career - too many primary schools have spent a long time re-inventing something analogous to levels, which has led to confusion and huge variance in practice. Some schools have even gone as far as to create their own version of the old national curriculum levels. The removal of levels has not yet had the positive impact it could and should have had on assessment within primary schools. Similarly for secondary schools.

How well the current system meets this ... in holding schools accountable for the quality of education provided:

6. This year's attempt to baseline pupils nationally on entry, using three different baseline assessments, was flawed from its inception, due to a lack of comparability between the different baseline assessments creating unnecessary and unproductive work for teachers. The subsequent withdrawal of the assessments had been predicted by many. This has left schools with no comparable scores, across all primary school pupils, upon which to base a national value added system measuring the progress a child makes whilst at school.

7. The current assessments at Key Stage 1 fail to produce a sufficiently granular outcome on which a future value added measure could reliably be determined.
8. Points 9-14 below are based on the experience of HeadsRoundtable Core Group members and anecdotes from a number of headteachers. They are included by way of “*front line*” information that the Education Select Committee may decide to pursue further to determine their validity across the system.
9. The use of teacher assessments at Key Stage 1 and for Writing at Key Stage 2 for accountability purposes is hugely problematic. Two particular issues are of concern. Firstly, asking a teacher to be the provider of the assessment outcomes for accountability purposes which will also be used to make determinations about their performance pay is less than ideal. Secondly, there are unacceptable variations between schools within a local authority and between local authorities with respect to the standard required. Some local authority moderators have required a *best fit* whilst others have pursued a *secure fit* assessment standard.
10. There is also a perverse incentive, for a school, to minimise attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 to enable exaggerated levels of progress to be shown to Key Stage 2.
11. There has been an unnecessary and unhelpful rise in teacher workload due to a burdensome recording process, against the expected and greater depth standards, across multiple pieces of writing. This has had a detrimental effect on teaching and learning as significant teacher time has been spent ticking boxes. This has been a huge distraction particularly for teachers in Year 2 & 6.
12. An over emphasis on the end of key stage summative assessments, used for accountability purposes, is damaging other important forms of assessment within primary schools as well as significantly narrowing the curriculum for many children. Whilst this narrowing of the curriculum may be most acute in Years 2 & 6 it impacts on other year groups too.
13. HTRT believe that assessment systems must be transparent and accessible to families. They are the first and most frequent point of accountability for schools. Whilst important for all parents this transparency is particularly important in schools that serve deprived communities where there is too often a lack of engagement with an undervaluing of education. The move from national curriculum levels has led to high levels of confusion amongst parents. The Department for Education and Ministers gave insufficient time or thought to the impact of changes in primary assessment on parents’ understanding of whether their child is making progress or not. This issue is not merely parents becoming familiar with new systems but is exacerbated when a child moves school, as each school is now devising its own assessment system.
14. Standard Assessments in Year 2 and Year 6 were difficult to comprehend for many parents who given a test score, a scaled score, with children’s performance either side of 100 being described as pass or fail, and writing assessments being different again. This has not helped or supported parents with their understanding of what their child has achieved. There was no measure given to parents for children working at a high level.

The advantages and disadvantages of assessing pupils at primary schools:

15. The advantages of assessing pupils in primary schools far outweigh the disadvantages. In fact it is inconceivable for high quality teaching and learning to occur in a school where assessment wasn’t a high priority. Assessment provides the essential evidence base, for a teacher, about which elements that have been taught have actually been learnt and by which children.

16. The current issue faced by many schools is managing the competing demands of assessments linked to accountability with those that are primarily focused on teaching and learning. Whilst these two purposes of assessment are not mutually exclusive they are not always compatible. The concern is that too many schools and teachers, particularly in Years 2 & 6, are focused on the high stakes accountability assessments rather than those linked to high quality teaching and learning. The lack of progress in many schools around *assessment without levels* tends to support this assertion.

How the most recent reforms have affected teaching and learning

17. *Teaching to the tests* has impacted in many schools. This has had a detrimental effect on the life of the child at school. The high stakes accountability linked to the end of Key Stage 1 & 2 assessments has produced a curriculum which is far too narrow for a child at the ages of 7 and 11 years. These children, as with others in primary schools should be experiencing a broad and balanced education preparing them for life and giving them a love of learning. We would not dispute the importance of reading, writing and mathematics to achieving these goals; they are rightly considered core subjects. However, we also believe that children of these ages should be able to access all other curriculum areas to ensure that they have broad and balanced education.
18. An overwhelming focus on assessments linked to accountability is having a negative impact on the further development of high quality diagnostic, formative, evaluative and summative assessment processes required to support learning and enhance teaching. There needs to be a better balance achieved between these two competing elements of assessment in primary schools.
19. Teachers no longer desire or want to teach in the high pressure Years 2 & 6. Recruitment is already a challenge and getting teachers to take on these high stakes year groups is becoming increasingly difficult. Teachers' concerns about the outcomes linked to accountability and their own professional progression are disproportionately higher in Years 2 & 6 compared to other year groups in primary education.

Logistics and delivery of the SATs

20. Whilst many primary school leaders argue that "*the wheels came off the assessment bus*" this year we would suggest that the assessment bus never had any wheels on it. Insufficient thought and planning was given by Ministers and the Department for Education about the impact of substantial concurrent changes to curriculum and assessment within a very condensed time period. This lack of planning led to systemic problems both in schools and at the Department for Education that has adversely affected in school and national assessment processes. It would have been eminently sensible and more educationally sound to have implemented the changes to the primary curriculum and associated assessments over a number of years.
21. Already widely reported are issues associated with the publication of the Key Stage 1 spelling, punctuation & grammar and the release of mark schemes on the Department for Education's website. Late publication of exemplification materials, to support teachers in this transition year, was unhelpful and unnecessarily added to workload and a sense of growing anxiety.
22. Concerns were expressed by many schools about the lack of exemplar SATs papers, only one for each area was available. These papers are crucial in developing school leaders' and teachers' understanding of the standards expected. They also give children an opportunity to become familiar with the format and content of papers.
23. The SATs Reading Paper bore too little resemblance to the one exemplar paper and was far more challenging than previous year's assessment with only 66% of children achieving the expected standard

compared to 80% the previous year.¹ This difference appears excessive when compared to a 1% difference in the GPS assessment and 7% in the Mathematics one; with the percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in 2016 lower in all cases compared to 2015. HTRT believe in raising standards and creating more challenge for our children but the level of challenge must be appropriate to the age group. This was not the case with the Summer 2016 Reading SAT. It has led to many children, who in previous years had been assessed as meeting national expectations throughout their primary career, to suddenly be assessed as being below the expected standard.

24. Further, the lack of exemplar materials made it difficult for school leaders and teachers to track accurately progress in year.
25. Too little regard was given to children with Special Educational needs. There is a concern that there was no consideration given to accommodating them at all. Anecdotally this led to many being made to feel they were a failure which is an unhelpful basis on which to end primary school or start secondary school. We are concerned that these children are at very high risk of long term disengagement in learning because of the detrimental effect the assessments have had on their view of themselves as a successful learner.
26. With no higher level Mathematics Paper (Level 6 in previous years) available this year the most able children in primary schools were not challenged sufficiently.

Training and support needed for teachers and senior leaders to design and implement effective assessment systems

27. Schools need a period of curriculum and assessment stability to allow teachers time to teach their classes well and to ensure that good learning takes place. The Secretary of State for Education's statement on the 19th October 2016² and forthcoming review are to be commended. This must be an opportunity to ensure professionals are listened to and will hopefully encourage many of the expert practitioners to contribute to reform proposals.
28. Further change is needed to the system of assessment within primary school and associated accountability. This change must be effectively planned from the outset with a key objective to minimize disruption, workload and stress to classroom teachers. The change, over a realistic and reasonable timescale, must be accompanied by bespoke training around statutory assessment as well as development in teachers and school leaders understanding of high quality diagnostic, formative, evaluative and summative assessment in the class room and at a whole school level.

Next Steps following the most recent reforms to primary assessment ... In School Issues

29. Whilst many professionals welcome the news that there will be no changes to the current interim assessment framework, it is vital that sufficient time and planning is undertaken to re-design and implement them. Schools cannot implement assessment systems effectively without sufficient notice. Teachers and school leaders would welcome the opportunity to support policy makers to create a meaningful and manageable assessment framework that will stand the test of time.
30. There should be greater adherence to the recommendations in the 'Final report of Commission without

¹ Thomson, D. (2016) How did this year's Key Stage 2 reading test compare to last year's? Available: <http://educationdatalab.org.uk/2016/09/how-did-this-years-key-stage-2-reading-test-compare-to-last-years/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/primary-education>

levels' (2015)³. There is not yet full understanding of how the different types of assessment are used and can be implemented. Greater time and resource should be directed to schools, trusts and agencies that can enable schools to develop 'best practice' in the various valuable yet complex aspects of assessment.

31. HTRT believe that a National Baccalaureate for Primary Schools should be established based on core learning, a personal project and a personal development programme. It would aim to help broaden the curriculum and recognise the achievements of pupils within a broader view of education. There is evidence that these far broader indicators of future success, including at the end of formal statutory education and employability which must be taken into account. Tyler refers to the strong correlation between and child's non-cognitive functions⁴ and access and interest in 'top jobs'. Examples of these functions are 'self-perception and awareness (represented by locus of control, self-esteem and academic self-concept); self-control and regulation (represented by externalising behaviour and application); social skills and emotional health' (IOE 2016)
32. The business and financial sector is rightly challenging the system to ensure that we are growing the skills that will be essential for a successful transition out of Europe. This means that we must pay heed to the needs and demands to self-generate a successful broad based workforce. There is an urgency to pay due consideration to more than exam and test results.

⁵ *"The government must concentrate more on career outcomes than grades alone. Exam results are only a part of the package that set people on the path to success, alongside the wider range of qualities that employers look for, such as resilience, creativity and a positive attitude. Both parts of this have a common source - great teaching in great schools, so it's vital we support head teachers in a system where the right behaviours and experiences are just as important as the right grades."*

Next Steps following the most recent reforms to primary assessment ... Accountability Issues

33. The discontinuous change associated with new externally imposed assessment procedures – reception baseline, Key Stage 1 & 2 tests and criterion expected and exceeding based standards – are intrinsically linked to accountability and need to be viewed within this wider context. There is nothing inherently flawed in a system of summative assessments within primary schools, however, the details of what they should constitute and the process of implementation needs to be given much greater thought and debate. Any review should be carefully conducted and include consultation with experts who have a proven track record and knowledge of how to assess very young learners.
34. The review proposals may take up to a decade to fully implement; before we have a means of evaluating the effectiveness of primary schools. Whilst this may be of concern the greater issue is the cliff edged, high stakes judgements, the validity of which are highly questionable, that are currently being made. It is within this context that the following proposals are made.
35. The use of floor targets and definitions of coasting based on attainment measures should cease immediately. These are more a measure of a school's intake rather than the quality of the education provided to pupils. With the continued use of attainment measures as criteria in floor targets, schools in deprived areas are at a significant and unfair disadvantage; conversely schools with higher attaining children on entry are effectively exempted from external scrutiny.
36. To assess the effectiveness of the education offered by a primary school a contextualised multi-year value added measure should be used. The general principles on which the contextualisation would be

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commission-on-assessment-without-levels-final-report>

⁴ OECD (2015). Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills. OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264226159-en>

⁵ <http://www.cbi.org.uk/news/education-matters-delivering-a-great-future-for-young-people-gcse-results/>

based should be placed in the public domain but the specific formula, which may be evolved over time, would not. We believe that this would prevent schools and other organisations wasting time on trying to game the measure and allow them to focus on improving the quality of teaching, assessment, learning, care, guidance and support offered whilst fully recognizing the importance of contextual factors.

37. This contextualised value added measure must be based on the progress made by children from entry to leaving the infant/primary school. This will require standardised objective teacher-led baseline assessment at the start of reception. The same assessment must be used by all schools. The baseline assessment must provide data at a sufficiently granular size to allow for meaningful analysis of progress at the end of Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2 as appropriate.
38. The baseline assessment should be practitioner led. To limit the potential for any conflict of interest, in the Teacher Assessment, a sample of schools' assessment outcomes should be externally moderated by a local or regionally procured moderation team. In addition, a sample of individual pupils' assessments should be cross-referenced with other personal data to identify inconsistencies as well as checking the authenticity of data at an item level. These measures will provide the assurances required about the reliability of the data on which future conclusions will be made.
39. For reasons stated earlier, Key Stage 1 assessments, in their current form based on Teacher Assessment, should be discontinued. The Government should work with the profession and other knowledgeable parties to develop an appropriate standardised, objective and granular set of assessments for Key Stage 1. These assessments would be statutory for Infant Schools. They would be used to determine a contextualised value added score using the nursery baseline assessment as the starting point. These Key Stage 1 assessments would be available to all other primary schools for diagnostic, formative and evaluative purposes but would not be statutory.
40. The assessment of writing must be standardised and moderated at a national level at both Key Stage 1 and 2. Consideration should be given to a national system of moderating children's written work using comparative judgements.
41. Once changes have been made to the assessment of writing, at the end of Key Stage 2 along with the current tests for Reading and Mathematics - with revisions as required following the evaluation of this year's SATs - a contextualised value added measure may be determined using the nursery baseline assessment as the starting point.
42. Spelling, punctuation and grammar assessments should continue to be made available to schools but should be non-statutory and not be used as a separate accountability measure. Spelling, punctuation and grammar should be assessed as part of writing. School leaders and teachers should be free to choose whether to use the non-statutory assessments for diagnostic, formative and evaluative purposes.
43. Similarly, the assessment of synthetic phonics in Year 1 should be for diagnostic, formative and evaluative purposes. The summative assessment of phonics should be through the reading and writing assessments. Plans for the introduction and use of times tables assessments and holding primary schools to account should not be implemented. Times tables should form part of the assessment of Mathematics.

We would welcome the opportunity to support policy review and design and the opportunity to further discuss these proposals with the Committee.

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