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Key Stage 2 testing review claims to put more trust in teachers

The review of the testing, assessment and accountability system at the end of primary school published its final report yesterday. The independent review chaired by the cross-bench peer Lord Bew claimed that its report sought to put more trust in teachers, create a fair balance between teacher assessment and tests, put greater emphasis on the progress of pupils and bring in new rolling averages for schools. The review group claimed that its recommendations would make the system fairer for schools, teachers and pupils, and would help raise attainment.

Education Secretary Michael Gove set up the review last year. He said external accountability at Key Stage 2 was “vital” because it was shown to drive up standards, but he agreed the current system was flawed and could be improved. More than 4,000 schools boycotted the tests in 2010 (26 per cent of the 15,515 maintained schools expected to administer them). Heads at those schools, and others, argued the test results led to unfair league table rankings and meant children were drilled for the tests rather than given a broad education.

The panel that reported yesterday says that there must be external school-level accountability in the system but that more trust should be placed in teachers, with a greater weight given to their assessment of pupils. A wider range of data – including new progress and attainment measures, and rolling averages – should be taken into account to give a less arbitrary and fairer picture of a school’s performance.

The report recommends that:

- The current writing test should be replaced by teacher assessment of writing composition. This will ensure pupils can be more creative and will overcome the dangers of teaching to the test. This teacher assessment should always make up the larger part of any overall writing judgement.
- As part of writing, there should be a spelling, grammar, punctuation and vocabulary test. The panel believes a test will raise attainment in these areas and is appropriate because there are clear right or wrong answers.
- Maths should continue to be externally tested.
- Reading tests should continue but should be refined over time.
- Science should continue to be teacher assessed with a sample test to monitor national standards.
- Speaking and listening should continue to be teacher assessed.
- Three-year rolling averages should be introduced to give a rounded picture of a school’s performance.
- There should be a greater emphasis on the progress of pupils:
 - Progress should be one of the two headline published measures, alongside attainment. Any overall judgement of a school by the Government, local authorities or Ofsted should give at least as much weighting to progress as attainment.
 - There should be a strong focus on the progress of every pupil, as well as greater emphasis on the progress of each Year 6 cohort. A new progress measure should be

introduced to focus on the performance of lower-attaining pupils. Schools which work hard to accelerate the progress of those who started with low prior attainment should be recognised. This will help stop schools focusing on children on the Level 3/4 borderline.

- New progress and attainment measures should be introduced for pupils who have completed all of Years 5 and 6 in a school. This would recognise that schools should not be held wholly responsible for the performance of pupils who have just joined them.
- Teacher assessment judgements should continue in English, maths and science, and should be submitted before test results are announced. This will mean more weight is attached to them and allow longer for these results to inform Year 7 teaching and learning.
- Transition to secondary school should be eased for pupils and their new teachers. There should be more detailed reporting to secondary schools so Year 7 teachers know right from the outset a pupil's attainment and the areas where extra work is needed.
- Pupils who are ill on the day of a test should have a week to sit it, rather than two days.

Reaction

Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, the largest teachers' union, said:

“At a time when there is not much good news for education, Lord Bew's Review certainly looks like a step in the right direction. In his introduction he acknowledges that it is a complex situation and we are heartened that he has paid close attention to our joint document with ATL and NAHT, *Making Assessment Measure Up*. Throughout the Review, Lord Bew sends a clear message that more trust has to be placed in teachers and that it is teachers who are best able to assess individual children. It is also made clear that the current system is flawed and leads to teaching to the test...Unfortunately there are inconsistencies in his recommendations. For instance, we see no need for a separate test to be introduced for grammar and punctuation. If we are trusting teachers to assess writing across a range of genres, that should also include pupils' technical writing skills.”

A rather more critical view came from Professor Colin Richards, a former HMI, who said: “Make no mistake. This so-called “independent” report is a white-wash. It is not a good read; it doesn't illuminate the assessment issue; it does not entertain but it does infuriate. It offers no fundamentally new insights; proposes no fundamental changes; and offers no prospect of relief from a testing regime that many, both children and teachers, find oppressive and miseducative.”

- Colin Richards writes about his reaction to the report below.

Battle over pensions looms for next Thursday

With the NUT and ATL having both held ballots of their membership which endorsed strike action over government attempts to change the rules over public sector pensions, including those for teachers, as we reported last week, strike action next Thursday in schools across England looks a real possibility. This is despite the fact that negotiations are continuing.

The Education Secretary, Michael Gove, wrote yesterday to all schools and local authorities with education responsibilities urging them to take action to keep schools open next Thursday. In his letter to all directors of children's services, the Secretary of State asked for their help in collecting information before the strike “to enable us to better understand the local and national picture”.

Brian Lightman, general secretary of ASCL, said: “School leaders are fully aware of their moral duty to pupils and their parents and of their responsibilities regarding decisions about the operation of their schools. This problem is, however, not of their making ... The solution is for the government to avert this dispute by seeking an urgent resolution to the current impasse rather than sending unnecessary and unhelpful exhortations of the kind received by headteachers today.”

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Commons committee slams Coalition for cuts to the most needy

Government failure to outline youth policy or a strategic vision for the sector is heavily criticised in a damning report by the Commons Education Select Committee this week. The report, *Services for Young People*, accuses the government of imposing disproportionate cuts on the most disadvantaged 13 to 25-year-olds and says that “regrettable” though it is, plans to extend the flagship National Citizen Service (NCS) to all 600,000 16-year-olds would be too costly – at over £350 million a year – in view of the cuts.

Following similar criticisms of ESOL cuts and other education support services, such as Education Maintenance Allowances and post-16 enrichment funds, it is increasingly clear that the Coalition government policies have hit the most disadvantaged disproportionately on every front. This latest report reveals the depth of anger among MPs of all parties. The committee had looked for and failed to achieve a rescue package for NCS initiatives, already facing swingeing cuts.

Graham Stuart MP, Committee Chair, said: “Youth services matter. Children spend more than 80% of their time outside school yet we don’t know what services best help them lead rich and fulfilling lives. We need a better understanding, backed by research, to help guide spending decisions. “The Government hasn’t produced a youth strategy and, in the meantime, services like youth clubs are being slashed by local authorities in their bid to balance the books. The Government, local authorities and service providers all need to understand and demonstrate the effectiveness of youth services – not stand by while they are dismantled”. Schools and colleges were hoping to further develop citizenship initiatives around the NCS and build programmes akin to the Duke of Edinburgh award and other schemes to promote leadership training, competitions and self-esteem-raising college award schemes particularly for the most disadvantaged. NCS cuts are a double whammy following the abolition of EMAs and other funds.

Commenting on his report, Stuart said: “The Government’s idea of using the National Citizen Service to inspire young people to engage with their communities, mix socially and build their skills is a good one. However, the pilots are proving to be expensive and full roll-out would be hard to justify when cuts, which the Government itself calls disproportionate, are impacting existing youth services provided by local authorities. The NCS should be adapted so that it accredits existing programmes while introducing a new focus and resources into the sector.”

Government apprenticeships target of 50,000 exceeded two-fold

The statistics show that the Government has actually delivered over 103,000 additional adult apprenticeship starts over the 2010-11 financial year. In May 2010 the Government announced an aspiration to deliver 50,000 additional adult apprenticeship places during this time. Provisional data shows that a total of 257,000 adult apprenticeship starts have been delivered between April 2010 and March 2011. Business Secretary Vince Cable said: "The growth in apprenticeships to over double the planned ambition, including sectors such as IT, advanced manufacturing and engineering demonstrates our commitment to delivering the skills businesses need to grow and young people need to build productive careers."

Lancashire wins top prize for helping children avoid sexual exploitation

An innovative multi-agency programme to help children at risk of sexual exploitation has won first prize in the children's category of the annual awards organised by weekly news magazine The MJ (Municipal Journal). Lancashire County Council's entry showed 'clear objectives with the strong involvement of young people' according to the judges of the Best Achievement in Children's Services category sponsored by 4Children. Runners-up are Bexley, Calderdale MBC, Cambridgeshire CC, Leeds City Council and Wokingham BC with Leeds and Calderdale both also being highly commended. The awards were presented last night at London's Hilton Hotel in Park Lane by former No 10 communications chief Alastair Campbell at an event attended by nearly 700 guests. The MJ's editor Michael Burton said: 'We had some extremely good entries in the children's services category and it was hard for the judges to decide. Nonetheless all agreed Lancashire's was a particularly impressive programme.' A total of 81 finalists for 13 categories were chosen for the awards, now in their eighth year and regarded as the most prestigious in the public sector.

What are the good alternatives?

Ofsted has published a [survey](#) evaluates the use of off-site alternative provision by a small sample of schools and pupil referral units. Schools and pupil referral units use a range of alternative provision to try to prevent students from being excluded, or to re-engage students in their education. Key findings include: more boys than girls attended alternative provision; two thirds of the students had special educational needs; one third had been excluded from the school or unit on a fixed-term basis at some point in their school career; schools and units visited often found it difficult to evaluate the overall impact of the provision. The recommendations include: the DfE require all providers to register with the DfE; which should develop a quality assurance framework; local authorities should produce a database of alternative provision within the local area, and support partnerships of schools and units to ensure a coordinated approach to commissioning; schools, including academies, and pupil referral units should give careful consideration to the desired outcomes of the alternative provision they use, and select the provision accordingly.

Reach for the stars – but now with distinction

With A* at GCSE becoming common currency, the [AQA](#) is about to launch an “A* with distinction” grade for its international GCSE in further maths. According to the exam board, the new grade will not be norm referenced, but awarded to students displaying “sustained performance in higher order mathematical thinking”. Andrew Hall, AQA chief executive told the Daily Telegraph: “We believe that the most able mathematicians... will be motivated by the added challenge of mastering the most demanding skills and being rewarded for this.”

Government north wind blows away consultancies

As Capita’s contract to run the official National Strategies came to an end, there were strenuous efforts to maintain some sort of a relationship with local authorities. As there were few takers for what was on offer, the plans came to nought, leaving many of the consultants without work. Final blow to the project comes with the news that Ian Harrison, who has run the programme for Capita since quitting his job as Director of Education, is to leave Capita. The reason given is that “this is an appropriate time to leave the company and to consider new challenges and opportunities elsewhere”. In common with all of the other major consultancies, the coming of the Coalition marked the end of a golden age, with a dearth of contracts emerging from government and with local authorities finding more pressing demands on their budgets. There were always concerns about how accountable the NatStrats were and about the way they passed on pressure from within the then DCSF to local authorities and schools. John Chowcat, General Secretary of Aspect, while accepting some of the weaknesses of the programme, pointed out: “Many of the specialists employed by the national strategies made a very valuable contribution at the front line. The well-regarded McKinsey reports on top-performing school systems recognise the importance of support and challenge when schools are under pressure. The focus on school autonomy without an insistence on this crucial external input is a leap in the dark.”

Gove sets the schools system free, or so he says

In a major – and, of course, well-trailed – [speech](#) on Monday, the Secretary of State told the Policy Exchange that he was setting the school system free with the expansion of the free schools policy. He said: “We are not being prescriptive about Free Schools and so they come in all shapes and sizes. Some are housed in existing schools. Others will be based in a range of refurbished and adapted buildings, including a former library in London and an office building in Norwich. The critical point is that we have been thinking creatively about how to secure excellent new schools at a time when budgets are tight.” As is the norm, the speech included a litany of other countries doing better than us, but he did seek to answer criticism that Singapore cannot be directly compared with England: “In Singapore, often cited as an exemplar of centralism, the Government has deliberately encouraged greater diversity in the school system - and dramatic leaps in attainment have been secured as a result. Schools where principals are exercising a progressively greater degree of operational autonomy are soaring ahead.” Of concern to local authorities will be the over supply of places that will result in the establishment of free schools. On the one hand, they are lauded as a cheaper alternative to providing additional places in areas of shortage but on the other “even where there are places at local schools, they’re not necessarily the type of school places parents are happy with. A choice between two things you don’t want is hardly a choice at all.” John Chowcat, General Secretary of Aspect, commented: “Many of the ‘new’ freedoms being given out are already available and being used by schools: innovative curriculum approaches; length of the school day; and term dates. It is hard to understand what real difference to the legal status of schools will make.”

Watching white paint dry- first reactions on reading the executive summary of the Bew Report Opinion by Professor Colin Richards

Make no mistake. This so-called “independent” report is a white-wash. It is not a good read; it doesn’t illuminate the assessment issue; it does not entertain but it does infuriate. It offers no fundamentally new insights ; proposes no fundamental changes; and offers no prospect of relief from a testing regime that many, both children and teachers, find oppressive and miseducative.

As the Cambridge Review argued, what is needed is a fundamental review of the accountability system in primary education but this has never been on this Government’s (or its predecessor’s) agenda. Given its initial terms of reference and the “packed” nature of its membership (involving no assessment specialists) the review committee’s report is entirely predictable. Following on from the so-called “expert” report on assessment from the previous administration it offers “more of the same”, albeit with some slight variations. It tinkers at the edges but never gets to the heart of the assessment issue.

The key to the report’s thinking is contained in its very first recommendation: “There should be only three main uses of the data from Key Stage 2 statutory assessment:

- holding schools accountable for the standards of attainment and progress made by their pupils and groups of pupils;
- informing parents and secondary schools about the performance of individual pupils;
- enabling benchmarking between schools, as well as monitoring performance locally and nationally”

This makes a number of highly questionable assumptions. It assumes that schools are the major determinants of individual children’s performance rather than factors beyond school’s control – a debateable proposition. It assumes that statutory assessment in just three subjects gives a valid picture of schools’ “standards” – also highly debateable . It assumes that parents need information about the performance of their children – true- but favours publicly available league tables rather than face-to-face, confidential information their child’s teacher- debateable again. Tellingly that first recommendation makes no mention of “fostering children’s learning” as one of the main uses of statutory assessment.

In an apparently liberal recommendation the report advocates that a wider range of data –including new progress and attainment measures, and rolling averages “should be taken into account to give a lesser arbitrary and fairer picture of a school’s performance” .But that data rests essentially on the same series of tests and the same conceptualisation of progress in terms of levels which have promoted so much concern in the first place. The report claims to help to reduce teaching to the test. Yet the reading and mathematics tests remain unaltered; and there is still to be a “secretarial’ test of spelling, grammar, punctuation and vocabulary – eminently suited to excessive test preparation . No relief in sight then from a test-dominated year 6 experience for hard-pressed pupils.

There is a welcome recommendation that “the statutory assessment system should include both external testing and teacher assessment” but on an equal footing? Very doubtful given the experience of an identical but abortive recommendation from Dearing over a decade ago. One of the few “silver linings” in the assessment “cloud” is the belated realisation that the assessment of children’s “creative” writing can only validly be undertaken by teachers. But even here will that assessment be given equal, or preferably greater, prominence in published data compared with the test assessment of secretarial skills? The omens are not good, particularly given the expense likely to be involved in external moderation of that element of teacher assessment. The review was originally set up to placate teachers’ professional associations and has been successful in this thus far. But now that it’s been published and its true colours are apparent the report needs to be vigorously contested by those associations and by all others concerned with promoting a liberal approach to primary education before its “white” paint” dries and hardens!

Research Roundup

Only one education journal reached us this week. *Educational Psychology* (Vol. 31 No. 4, Routledge) includes papers on the influence of formal and informal formative pre-service experiences on teacher self-efficacy and sequential pattern learning and its associations with inattentive hyperactive concerns in college students.

Conference and events round-up

Developing Valued, Accessible and Effective Apprenticeships (London)

Date & Venue: 7th July – Manchester

Event Organiser: Westminster Briefing www.westminster-briefing.com

Description: Participants will consider recent Government investment in apprenticeships and how the creation, structuring and promotion of these new apprenticeships will require partnership working between local authorities, education services, and employers from all sectors.

The Future of Vocational Education: Implications of the Wolf Report

Date: 22nd June

Venue: Westminster

Event Organiser: Westminster Briefing www.westminster-briefing.com

Description: Delegates at this conference will have the opportunity to examine the details of the Wolf Report and the implications for vocational education in this country.

Academy Status for All Schools: The Implications & Timetable (Manchester)

Date & Venue: 23rd June – London, 7th July – Manchester

Event Organiser: Westminster Briefing www.westminster-briefing.com

Description: Delegates at this briefing will have the opportunity to examine the implications for local authorities and schools of this new drive to increase significantly the number of academies.

Raising the Bar: From good to outstanding teaching and learning

29 June 2011, Venue: Campaign for Learning, 19 Buckingham Street, London, WC2N 6EF

Event Organiser: Campaign for Learning www.campaignforlearning.org.uk

Raising the Bar: From good to outstanding teaching and learning

7 July 2011, Venue: Campaign for Learning, 19 Buckingham Street, London, WC2N 6EF

Event Organiser: Campaign for Learning www.campaignforlearning.org.uk

Learning and Thinking Skills which deliver A*/A grades

7 July 2011, Venue: Campaign for Learning, 19 Buckingham Street, London, WC2N 6EF

Event Organiser: Campaign for Learning www.campaignforlearning.org.uk

Delivering the Child Health Programme: The Developing Role of Health Visitors

Date: 16th July

Venue: Westminster

Event Organiser: Westminster Briefing www.westminster-briefing.com

Description: Delegates at this briefing will have the opportunity to consider and debate the government's recently published policy on the future and leadership role of Health Visitors and examine the proposed structural changes.

International Primary Curriculum Summer School

Date: 25th – 27th July 2011

Venue: University of Greenwich, London

Summer School is the biggest IPC event of the year and there are a number of courses and workshops available which will give you a clear picture of the depth and rigour of the curriculum. It's also a great chance to network with Headteachers and teachers from both the UK and around the world who are already using, or thinking about implementing the IPC. This year's Keynote Speaker is Sugata Mitra.

For more information go to www.internationalprimarycurriculum.com/summerschool

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