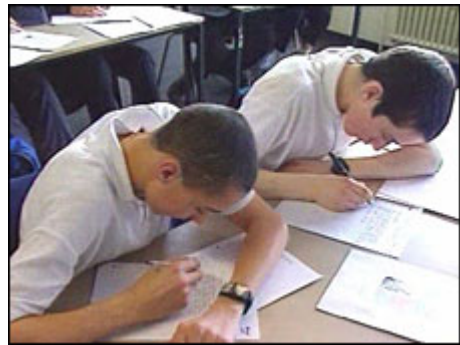


# Signs of a turning tide on tests

**Just like the difference between the climate and the weather, there are long-term and short-term trends in education.**

9<sup>th</sup> January 2010 – From BBC News

So, while it still feels as if schools, particularly in England, are wading through deep drifts of accountability - everything from Sats and league tables to Ofsted inspections - there are growing signs that a long-term change of direction has begun.



Tests have been scaled down

The latest sign was this week's report from the Commons Schools Committee. It delivered a message we don't often hear from politicians: trust the teachers.

The MPs argued that the "complexity" of the school accountability system in England is creating "a barrier to genuine school improvement".

The report highlighted the "adverse effects" that often flow from a target-driven school culture and criticised Ofsted for taking a narrow, results-based view of learning in schools.

## Turning tide

There have been many other signs of a turning of the tide. The government in England has abandoned the Sats at age 14. In Wales they jettisoned the Sats at all ages some years ago. In Scotland, pupils aged five to 14 are assessed "when ready", not tested all at the same time to produce league tables.

Last year, the Expert Group established by the Westminster government recommended dropping the science Sats at age 11, although - to the government's great relief - it did not recommend ending the tests in maths and English.

However, the Expert Group added that if the reliability of teacher assessment could be improved, ministers could decide "whether a move away from externally marked tests might be viable at a future date".

As yet, despite the threat of a boycott of the Sats by teachers and head teachers, the government still insists that externally set and marked tests are essential.

The Conservatives, too, would keep the Sats, although they would shift them from the end of primary school to the start of secondary education.

For Labour and the Conservatives alike, the Sats are a symbol of tough accountability. It is where they are making their last stand.

But all around them the arguments mount for a shift to more subtle, less disruptive, and frankly cheaper, forms of accountability.

This week a joint report from the National Education Trust and the Association of School and College Leaders argued that, particularly in the tough economic climate ahead, it is time to cut back on the £700 million spent on external tests and examinations.

**“ The current era of high accountability stretches back only about 20 years ”**

The report did not argue for an end to all external assessment. But it called for a shift toward more within-school, teacher-led assessment. This, it said, would not only save money but also a lot of the teaching time that is lost to exam preparation and administration.

And this is the key point: it is not about dropping school accountability altogether, but about making sure it does not obstruct teaching and learning.

This is where it is helpful to look at long-term trends. The current era of high accountability stretches back only about 20 years.

Sats, league tables, local and national exam targets, and Ofsted inspections are all still relatively new innovations. None of them existed before 1989.

They were a response to the 1970s and early 1980s, when schools had a great deal of autonomy but very little accountability.

There were many signs then that, at least in some schools, standards were not as good as they could be and that many pupils were being let down.

A re-balancing was needed. Taxpayers and politicians were entitled to have some means of monitoring how schools individually, and collectively, were doing. Testing was also used as a lever to change teaching methods and to tie teachers to the new national curriculum.

But over the next two decades the school system shifted from high autonomy and low accountability to the very reverse: low autonomy and high accountability.

### **Narrow curriculum**

The tests and targets culture, backed by centrally-driven reforms, left schools constantly looking over their shoulder at what they were supposed to be doing. They feared they would be pilloried if they did not follow the current orthodoxy.

But - as the Welsh Assembly, the Commons Select Committee, the Expert Group on Assessment and the Cambridge Primary Review have all argued - it is now possible to ease up on some of the cruder aspects of this accountability and end some of the unintended effects of Sats, such as the narrowing of the curriculum.

Parents should continue to be given the full range of information they need to assess how their children's schools are doing. Ofsted should continue to publish the results of their visits to classrooms.

But why not train some teachers in each school to be "chartered examiners" - as the NET/ASCL report suggests - and then trust them to oversee internal assessments. Ofqual, or a similar body, could check a randomised sample of test papers to police any temptation to dishonesty.

If crude league tables became a thing of the past, assessment could return to what it should mainly be about: checking pupils' progress not attempting to produce a spurious consumers' market in school choice.

### **Ofsted tick-boxes**

And do Ofsted inspectors really need so many tick-boxes and criteria when judging a school? Does it really help parents get a good idea of the quality of learning in a school when failure in one specific area (safeguarding procedures, for example) limits the overall grade given to a school?

This narrow approach to grading schools could be exacerbated if, as seems likely, the government opts for putting a single overall grade on the proposed new School Report Card.

Just because something was needed 20 years ago, does not mean the same conditions apply today.

However, as the current dispute about the Sats at 11 shows, the government and the Conservatives still fear the disapproval of the tabloids (as a proxy for public opinion) should they consider switching from external testing to monitored teacher assessment.

They are not yet ready to trust teachers' professionalism. But are they still fighting yesterday's battles?

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