

# Targets are not the way to make schools accountable

Sats tests cause pupils great harm and the information they provide is often of little use



**Warwick Mansell**

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Peter Preston, in discussing the Cambridge primary review, repeated misconceptions which regularly feature in the debate about whether the current system of holding schools – and other public services – to account is working effectively ([In praise of targets](#), 19 October).

First, he said that "around a fifth of all children moving on to secondary education at 11 remain fundamentally illiterate". In 2009, 20% did indeed fail to reach the government's "expected" level – level 4 – in English tests. But most of those achieved level 3, which has been defined, for reading, by the people who set the tests, as "pupils read a range of texts fluently and accurately". Level 4 was originally set at what the average pupil would achieve.

Second, Preston suggested that parents would be worse off if they "didn't know exactly what was going on" through the [Sats](#) tests. But this overlooks whether the information provided by the Sats is actually of much use. A report by Ofsted last year said schools could boost their pupils' performance in the maths tests without building underlying problem-solving ability, partly because the tests do not assess it well.

The English tests have been criticised for a mechanistic mark scheme which can overlook and marginalise imaginative writing. And the science tests were abandoned last year following widespread complaints from scientists that they sidelined practical science work.

More fundamentally, most of the difference between schools' Sats results is the product of pupils' backgrounds, while the artificial quality of the results generated after months of teaching to the test is reflected in many secondary schools' decisions to re-test pupils when they receive them.

Third, he implied that those – such as the authors of the primary review – who criticise this system simply want a return to the past and to do away with accountability. But the review was clear that it was not a question of whether there should be accountability, but of which type.

Finally, he set up the old Thatcherite dichotomy of "producers" versus "consumers": whatever the professionals (teachers) or producers want is by definition wrong because

we are meant only to care about the consumers they serve (pupils and parents).

But the dichotomy is false. The targets/league tables/high-stakes testing system is indeed widely disliked by teachers. But it is also letting pupils down. And while the "cerebral leader writers on the Times" may like it, other intelligent, disinterested people – including scientific and mathematical organisations and exam boards – have serious reservations about it: the government's was the only one of 52 submissions to a parliamentary investigation two years ago which backed it.

The producer/consumer dichotomy assumes that what teachers want is always bad, or against the pupils' interests. This is perverse. While it would be foolish to believe that teachers' interests are always aligned with those of their pupils, in many cases they are. And if many teachers actually want to help their pupils, that false dichotomy is doing huge harm.