

Conor's Commentary

A blog about politics, education, Ireland, culture and travel. I am Conor Ryan, Dublin-born former adviser to Tony Blair and David Blunkett on education. Views expressed on this blog are written in a personal capacity.

Friday, 8 February 2008

Tested to destruction?

The latest predictable 'findings' from the self-styled primary review gets its desired headlines today. The Independent uses its findings to repeat the canard that our children are 'tested to destruction'. This is simply nonsense. There are no formal national tests sat under proper conditions, and independently marked, before the age of 11. (Those at age seven are internally marked teacher assessments; other tests are sensibly set by teachers, sometimes using optional QCA test papers). After that, the only requirement on schools is that pupils sit tests in English, Maths and Science at age 14 (though many schools do them a year earlier). GCSEs suffered from excess coursework, but teachers objected when QCA sought to get rid of it; so it will survive in a supervised form in most subjects. Beyond that, whether or when pupils sit tests depend on the choices they make. If they do A-levels, their marks are awarded for modules: again this was something for which teachers argued; but they could do the tougher but less tested International Baccalaureate and will soon have Diplomas. In Helsinki, in Finland, the Shangri-La for educationists, children are tested annually. Testing helps do two things: it enables teachers to have an independent check on progress, and that measurement is crucial to the pupil's educational development. And it allows us to know how well - or badly - a school is doing. Those who think that we would know this without testing should remember the reaction in many Home Counties primary schools which had a nice image when the tests revealed the terrible truth to trusting parents. Thankfully the government is not listening to these siren voices; its progress tests, once they get them right, could offer a better measure than the existing tests, but they will be independently set and marked. Equally, the idea that structured lessons before the age of seven or eight is 'damaging' is a fallacious argument that ignores the fact that too many children lack the structure

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TOP 50 LEFT WING RI OGGER provided in middle class homes; as other research shows, early learning makes a huge difference. When I asked a primary teacher in Helsinki whether all her pupils couldn't read until the age of seven, she laughed and pointed out that the majority of her children were fluent readers by that stage, having been taught by supportive parents at home. Some still needed to learn, but most didn't. The real problem we face in this country is the twenty per cent of pupils who lack fluency at the age of eleven: they need to learn to read through synthetic phonics by the age of six or seven. They do not need well-meaning liberals pushing their progress even further behind.

Posted by Conor Ryan at 08:26:00
Labels: education, Primary Review, reading, tests

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WHAT OTHERS SAY

- The "best blogger" on education John Rentoul, Independent Minds, March 2009
- "Short of a blog by Alastair Campbell you can't get [a] much better perspective" -Hopi Sen, March 2008
- "Excellent, well-written blog" Nick Gibb, Schools minister, Hansard April 2009

GOOGLE ANALYTICS

BBC Education News

- Playgrounds squeezed in places crush
- Exam reform delayed by schools
- Degrees least likely for white teens
- Plagiarism charge rocks US Senate race
- Fewer young smokers and drinkers





Publications

- Academies (Centreforum, 2008)
- Freedom from Failure (CPS, 2002)
- Lessons for Life (HTI, 2011)
- Staying the Course (SMF, 2008)

Excellence in Education (2005)



About Me



Keynsham, United Kingdom

Dublin-born in 1963, from September 2012 I am Director of Research and Communications for the Sutton Trust. I was previously senior adviser to David Blunkett from 1993-2001 and Tony Blair's senior education adviser from 2005-7. I have also been an independent writer and consultant. I am the author (with Cyril Taylor) of Excellence in Education (David Fulton, 2004)and Freedom from Failure (CPS, 2002); and editor

of Bac or Basics (SMF, 2004) and Staying the Course (SMF, 2008), co-editor with Julian Astle of a book on Academies (Centreforum, 2008) and author of Lessons for Life (HTI, 2011). I have also written many articles for the Guardian, TES, Independent, Daily Mail, Evening Standard, Irish Times, Public Finance, New Statesman and Tribune, among other publications, and contributed to BBC radio and TV news programmes. All views expressed on this blog are my own and appear in a personal capacity.

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BLOGROLL AND OTHER LINKS

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- A Great Short Term Plan?
- An Inspector Calls
- Back to School Teachers
- Best to Think Small
- Can Bac Be The Future?
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- Catchment if you Can
- Clarke's Top-Up Dilemma
- Death of the Evening Class?
- · Fight on Failure Goes on
- Fresh Air, Fresh Ideas
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- Go Forth and Multiply
- Grants: Are We Paying Too High a Price?
- Helping hand onto the stage
- History's Fighting Back
- · How to Tackle the Bullies

- How to ease those 'Big School' Blues
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- Return of Old Values
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- Ruling the Unruly Roost
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- Single Way to Success
- Sixth form dilemma
- So Will a Click Replace a Tick?
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- Stress Gets A Caning
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- The Devil in the Detail
- The Inner City Saviours?
- The Weekend Starts Here
- Toddlers' One-Stop Shop
- Truth About Homework

- When a House is a Home
- Where Did The Money Go?
- Where Minds Can Blossom
- Year of living creatively
- You've Had Your Chips
- Young, Gifted and Keen

Guardian Articles

- A question with no answer
- Accounted for
- After the acronym explosion
- Basic write
- Bench marks
- Cherry-pick Tomlinson
- Class divide still rules in Ireland
- Come on teachers, cheer up
- Delegation and delivery
- Education maintenance allowances campaign
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- Grammar schools should give pupils a fair chance
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- Industry back in
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- Labour's tuition tussle
- Middle march
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- More is needed to restore A-level credibility
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- Porridge with attitude
- Qualified to differentiate

- Reforming student finance
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- The challenge for colleges to set the agenda
- To distribute money sensibly
- Trades Secret
- Union blues
- Why politicians ignore colleges
- Widening the net
- Won't add up
- You can't beat a bac

Independent Articles

- All parties are making promises they cannot keep
- Brown is right to set tough targets
- Can Collins sack all those civil servants?
- Can the NUT be saved from itself?
- Change primary tests but don't scrap them
- Don't panic: the private sector will help only a handful of schools
- Great concept, shame about the expectations
- How good is a teacher? Check the exam results
- In a crisis, you still can't reach a social worker
- Ministers need the levers for their plan
- Parents want choice and they can have it
- Pupils need better advice on their options
- Schools need super parents to support them
- Schools should be free to have big classes
- The buck shouldn't always stop at the top
- The pupil premium won't work unless it's new cash

- Tories grab a head start from Blunkett legacy
- Union victory is poor pupils' loss
- Universities must earn the right to charge higher fees
- We have too many but targets do work
- We must not baby our schoolchildren
- We need a cross-party fees review after 2010
- We need tests to improve bad schools
- We should break up the exam quango
- We should keep tests to check on schools
- When talent is the bottom line
- Where has all the schools' money gone
- Why Ed Balls should keep tests and tables
- Why league tables must stay
- Why ministers should follow Eton on the IB
- Why money must go straight to schools
- Why reading should be a primary concern
- Why we must not ditch national tests
- Why we will be keeping A levels
- You've got to have faith

Public Finance Articles and blogposts available online

- A hard lesson to learn
- Back to basics?
- Back to schools
- Best laid plans
- Big society or BS?
- Blue school thinking
- BSF backtracking is bad for business
- Cameron's chaotic reforms
- Centred on localism
- · Class of their own?
- Cracking the code
- Do Michael Gove's changes add up?

- Easy targets
- Education is no longer sacrosanct
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- Get on your bike to study
- Gove in a muddle
- Gove's curriculum conundrums
- Green greeted with groans
- Grim reality of a graduate tax
- Hanging in the balance
- Has Osborne really protected school budgets?
- Heads on collision
- Heads you win
- Home truths on tuition fees
- Ireland: new politics, old problems
- Learning to Share
- Michael Gove: What U-turn?
- New schools of thought
- No protection for schools
- Not quite the heirs to Blair
- Parent power battles
- Political pariahs?
- Press Freedom, Public Interest and the **PCC**
- Pupil premium: another funding row in the making
- Put to the test
- Qualms over quango cull
- Rocky road to a national funding formula
- Schools funding: getting behind the spin
- Shuffling the pack
- Spare us another bout of quango-bashing
- Testing times
- The no-win generation
- The social cost of tuition fees

- The trouble with boys
- Time for a genuine cross party consensus on care
- Today vs Parliament
- Tories education appeal busted
- Unhappy returns
- Unions should embrace academies
- University challenge
- Vocation, vocation
- Yew turns and U-turns

TES articles

- 'I told you so' culture infects A level counsel
- Anyone listening to the Tories
- Bad news on the test tactic
- Battle won but not the war
- Bell's top spin and Tomlinson's off spin
- Blair expands Clarke's empire
- Blair holds off baying press pack
- Blair pins election hopes at the gate
- Book review: A shared childhood
- Brighouse: education authorities saviour
- Cash as elusive as Iraqi WMDs
- Cheeky Miliband pits the Daily Mail against Middle England
- Chief inspector drags watchdog into the spotlight
- Children in need of a decent education
- Clarke's gangster lingo backfires
- Cult bedevils Kelly's first days
- Defector adds to Tory blues
- Desperately seeking a headline
- Did we really need more reform, Estelle?
- Do teachers have the heaviest load?
- Employers can plug the degree funding gap
- Error lets press pack pounce

- · Estelle's hell of a week
- Every August it's the same old cynical stories
- From shaky beginnings to Sure Start
- Green wants a happy party
- Honest reformer needed no spin
- How are we doing? Very well actually
- How ministers made exams popular
- lain should be grateful to Edwina
- Inventing names is a brainstorm in a teacup
- Is health taking over as the new buzz word
- Is this intervention divine?
- Is Welsh grass greener
- Let's be open about exams
- Maligned exam is now fighting for its life
- Mr Blair forced to face friendly fire
- Mum's the word for Blair
- No return to the secret garden
- Nuggets to replace the spin cycle
- OK, I admit it, the coalition's got some good ideas
- Our target should be to streamline targets
- PM's passion fails to excite media
- Politicians set to dance around May poll
- Press hail Tony, saviour of Alevels
- Pukka Tukka is a choice for parents
- Pundits praise the bruiser
- Red tape must not strangle new learning accounts
- Repeat, there's more innovation in 'ER'
- Self-flagellation leaves Abbott out in the cold
- Short term spin may be a long term mistake
- Should we scrap tests at age seven?
- Six-stop pledge to destination unknown
- Snail mail allowed for second thoughts

- Student top-up fees look inevitable
- The carping and political fudging starts
- Throwing out the baby
- Timely confirmation of minister's humanity
- Tough Estelle who wins without a fight
- Tough talk to impress the voters
- · Tuition fees and exams will test Blair to the limit
- We should trust ministers not a quango to rule on exams
- What happened to the choice advisers?
- What to put in a 20-min mix
- Winners and losers in the spinning game

Other Articles

- A growing consensus (Progress)
- A third term must complete reforms (Progress)
- Book Review: Keane on Havel (Independent on Sunday)
- Book review: The Rise and Fall of Self-Taught Man (Evening Standard)
- Could Brighouse be London's saviour? (LGC)
- End of the road for Lane (LGC)
- Frontline first council performance (LGC)
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- Frontline first union conferences 2003 (LGC)
- Gove put to the test (Progress)
- How to bury the Truth (Evening Standard)
- Labour's first lady in Belfast (Irish Times,

- 1988)
- Labour: where to next? (Irish Times, 1987)
- Leading over a million students (Irish Times, 1988)
- Learning curve (Progress)
- Making the most of the pupil deprivation grant (Teaching Wales)
- Making the most of the pupil premium (Teaching Leaders)
- Middle earners will pay most in this student loans mess (The Times)
- More Revision Needed (House Magazine)
- Not out of the woods yet (LGC)
- Radical with results? (Parliamentary) Monitor)
- Raising our Game (Vision 2020 -Learndirect)
- Right way to raise the bar (House Magazine)
- Second term issues (New Statesman)
- Should early GCSEs be discouraged? (The Times)
- Sizing up the problem of regional disparities (ESRC Society Today)
- Spin doctors play key role in health of our democracy (Irish Times, 2002)
- Teacher shortages (LGC)
- The Day of the Censor (Irish Times, 1985)
- Towards fairer school admissions (Progress)
- Unions must share blame for teaching shortage (Evening Standard)
- Whatever happened to the University for Industry? (New Statesman)
- Where are all the £100k heads? (Evening) Standard)
- White paper, bleak future (LGC)
- Working with the blind man who saw politics clearly (Sunday Times)





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