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Heads lash out at the 'tyranny of testing'



Unreasonable pressure? Critics say tests narrow academic achievement in primary schools

By **Julie Henry, Education Correspondent**

12:01AM GMT 09 Dec 2007

Tests and league tables are "deeply damaging" the quality of schoolchildren's lives and their education, a major report by head teachers will warn this week.

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The obsession with national assessment that has seen pupils in England become the world's most tested is putting huge pressure on children, stigmatising them as failures and forcing teachers to narrow the curriculum, according to the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT).



The report, to be published this week following a 10-month inquiry by the NAHT, calls for the "examinations factory" in England's schools to be scrapped and radically redesigned. It adds to concerns about the National Curriculum tests, known as key stage tests or "Sats", and their effect on millions of children.

Just last month, two reports revealed widespread disquiet about the regime. In a review of primary school education, Prof Robin Alexander, from Cambridge University, concluded that the tests heaped stress on children and produced inaccurate results. This was followed by a report from the influential Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, which listed a series of "damaging side effects", including teachers drilling children to pass tests and the "unreasonable pressure" of continual testing.

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Mick Brookes, the NAHT general secretary, said: "Teaching to the test is



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having a disastrous effect on the curriculum and on children." He added that the report had uncovered "overwhelming evidence" of the "tyranny of the testing regime".

According to the association's inquiry, a broad and balanced curriculum is being sacrificed on the altar of statutory assessment.

It quotes numerous subject specialists, who have raised concerns about the system. The Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education, for instance, said that the continual testing and practising for tests "had resulted in a narrow and impoverished maths curriculum and poor quality teaching of that curriculum".

Sue Palmer, the author of Toxic Childhood who gave evidence to the inquiry, raised fears about the effect of "conveyor belt" testing on pupils' wellbeing. "Parents often tell me about the tears, nightmares and anxiety that accompany Sats week," she said. "I've spoken to many children who are convinced that their performance at the age of 11 on a batch of papers will determine their future chances of happiness."

Some contributors cast doubt on government claims that the tests were driving up standards, pointing to the international league tables published last week which showed that since 2000 England had nose-dived out of the top 10 in maths, reading and science. "Our school population is the most tested in the industrialised world," said Judith Bennett, the chair of the National Governors' Association.

The yearly publication of schools' test results in league tables is also condemned by the association. It said that schools that struggle to cope with high numbers of children who do not speak English or who have special needs are unfairly compared with schools with higher-performing intakes.

The report calls for the current system to be scrapped and replaced with a bank of tests that are available throughout the year so that teachers can informally check a child's progress. The results would be given to parents but not published in tables. While the Government has steadfastly refused to accept that the current system is flawed, it is

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testing a new "lighter touch" form of assessment.

A pilot project which started in 500 primary and secondary schools this month will see pupils taking tests when the teachers decide they are ready. Jim Knight, the schools minister, said: "Our system provides the best combination of valid, reliable data on children's attainment. Since 1997 there have been dramatic improvements in standards at all key stages."

Testing times

Age five: Statutory assessment of skills in six areas, including social development, language and literacy and numbers.

Age seven: Key Stage 1 assessment in speaking and listening, reading and writing, maths and science.

Age 11: Key Stage 2 tests in maths, English and science.

Age 14: Key Stage 3 tests in maths, English and science.

Age 16: GCSEs. Most pupils take eight or nine subjects but some sit as many as 12.

Age 17: AS exams, worth half an A-level. Most pupils take four subjects.

Age 18: A2 exams. The second part of the full A-level. Most take three or four.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority also produces "optional" tests for eight-, nine-, 10-, 12- and 13- year-olds.

Schools often run their own GCSE mock exams half way through the course.

If schools use these optional and mock exams, children will face tests every year of their school lives, apart from one.



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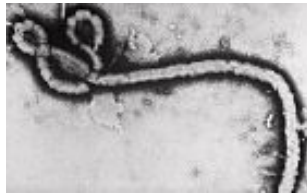


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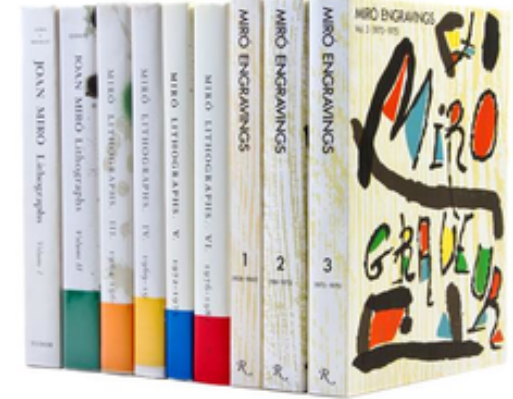


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