
Assessment: the alternative

MORE THAN A SCORE

ABSTRACT This position statement presents a summative argument against current structures and practices of assessment in England's primary schools, and some key principles for its replacement. The text was agreed by *More Than A Score*, a broad coalition of professional, curriculum, research and campaigning organisations opposed to the current assessment system and its links to accountability, and published early in 2017.

'More Than a Score' is a broad coalition of organisations committed to changing the current assessment system in English primary schools. The following position statement was published early in 2017 as a challenge to the government to rethink the aims and modes of assessment and its link to accountability. It is available at the 'More Than a Score' website. <https://morethanascore.co.uk>

Assessment – what we stand for

England's system of statutory primary assessment has been in place for 25 years. Most teachers and most parents have known nothing else, and it has become difficult for us to imagine a different way of doing things.

- Can we really do without our SATs?
- Wouldn't standards fall if schools weren't held to account for their results?
- Wouldn't teachers slacken and pupils regress?
- What would managers and policy-makers do without the information that tests provide?

More Than a Score says: yes, we can manage without SATs, and the whole battery of other assessment instruments that dominate the life of schools.

The current system of testing every individual child in order to judge the effectiveness of teachers and schools is deeply flawed, and has had negative effects. It focuses the energies of pupils, teachers and parents on achieving success in limited aspects of a narrow range of subjects: the school curriculum is

dominated by Maths and English, and these subjects are themselves distorted by the need to make them testable. When schools are judged primarily on statutory test results, pressure and stress builds up on pupils and teachers alike: the system becomes punitive.

To leave this system behind would not be a leap in the dark. Other countries do things differently. We can learn from them.

Across the world, and in England too, there are educationalists who have thought deeply about assessment issues, and concluded that there are better ways of achieving excellent teaching and learning than our present system allows.

What Should Assessment Do?

- We want assessment that supports children in their learning – and enables teachers to identify pupils' attainment and learning needs.
- We want assessment that treats young people in the round as whole persons.
- We want modes of assessment that are appropriate to children's development.
- We want assessment which helps to identify schools which need extra support.
- We want assessment that enables a dialogue between parents and teachers.
- We want assessment that enables schools to develop improvement strategies in line with their own values.
- We want assessment that tells us about national standards of attainment across the whole curriculum.

What Does the System Need to Look like to Achieve This?

No one test can reasonably perform all these tasks. We need different forms of assessment for different purposes.

In the classroom, we want to see both formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is ongoing assessment that supports pupils while they are learning. It is based on observing what children can do, and discussion and feedback between learner and teacher. Summative assessment tests pupils to find what they have learned at a particular point in time – at the end of a project or unit of work, for instance. Teachers should be trusted to use their professional expertise in determining the best methods of assessment. In some countries, summative tests can be based on national 'question banks'. Formative and summative assessments can be combined in an approach that is detailed, rigorous and supportive.

We want an assessment system which enables teachers in different schools to compare the progress made by their pupils against national standards. This can be done by teachers coming together to moderate pupils' work. The results of moderation will feed into a school's self-evaluation and plan for self-improvement. This in turn will be assisted by supportive inspection of schools.

Parents should be acknowledged as partners in children's learning and need information that enables them to support their children's learning. For reports to be meaningful to parents, they need to summarise what children can do and understand. Some schools already aim to produce rich, detailed descriptive reports on pupils' progress, that use the outcomes of formative and summative assessment to inform feedback to parents and pupils, and to plan learning development. Assessment in the early years, culminating in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, offers an example of an approach that can be used to track children's learning throughout primary education.

We propose that national monitoring of standards should involve testing only a sample of children; when it comes to the evaluation of national standards in Primary Science, this is what the DfE already does! There is a need to monitor the standards of the primary school system. But there is no need to impose high-stakes testing of every child to provide this information. Tests could include different curriculum areas so that a picture of standards across the whole curriculum would become available, informing teachers' work.

Where Would These Changes Take Us?

With changes like these, we would have an assessment system which covered the whole range of children's learning, not just a small number of core subjects.

- It would be a system that encouraged teachers to think inventively about children's learning and how to support it.
- It would avoid the negative impact of high-stakes testing on children's mental health.
- It would form part of arrangements for a different kind of accountability, which combined school self-evaluation with ways of reporting to stakeholders outside the school.

The voices of those calling for changes like these are growing louder and more various. Most of the business world wants learners who are well-rounded and creative. Parents are increasingly frustrated by the way the school system works against their children's development. Even within the current system, many teachers are working on practical alternatives to the testing culture.

For too long, the needs of external testing have dominated pupils' entire experience of school. Successive governments have failed to ask a crucial question: what kinds of assessment create the conditions for young people to thrive in an uncertain and innovation-rich world? It is time for our energies to shape an education system in which such a question can be answered.

More Than a Score calls on the Government for an urgent, thorough review of assessment and accountability of primary schools.

MORE THAN A SCORE is a broad coalition of professional, curriculum and campaigning organisations. Its members include, among others, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the National Association for Primary Education (NAPE), the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) and the British Education Research Association (BERA). Resources, including video, can be accessed from www.morethanscore.co.uk