

POLICY WATCH

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Another testing season begins with a flurry of announcements

The timing may not have been great—just as half a million 11 year olds were about to pick up their pencils and embark on this year's national tests – but the latest announcements on Key Stage testing and assessment bring to a head a pretty difficult year for one of our national obsessions. The DCSF Select Committee [Inquiry](#) last May, the Secretary of State's announcement last October scrapping Key Stage 3 tests, the [Sutherland Report](#) in December, the [consultation](#) on the School Report Card this spring, the recent [rose Report](#) on the primary curriculum and now this Report from the Secretary of State's appointed Expert Advisory Group, it's been another year on the high wire. Even now, this might not be the end of it. An important White Paper on School Accountability is due out shortly, the threat of a boycott looms over next year's tests and as the Expert Advisory Group themselves recognised, *"we are aware that further developments could mean that further changes need to be implemented."*

For the moment, however, the [Expert Group](#) have set out a way forward that the Secretary of State has been quick to seize. *"I can confirm"* he told the House in a brief statement last week, *"that I will accept the Group's recommendations in full and now consult on their implementation."* So how does that leave things?

First, Key Stage 3 where last autumn's decision to scrap Key Stage tests still stands but where tests will still be available for those schools that want to use them. Many schools do; around $\frac{3}{4}$ of secondary schools have ordered them for this summer, according to this Report and freed now of some of the contentious trappings that come with a national system such as the intensive preparation, the targeted teaching, the burdensome admin and the national reporting, they can now usefully use them *"as part of a broader assessment system."* The price may be greater long-term accountability but that's for the future.

Second, Key Stage 2, where the Group recommends maintaining national tests in English and maths but not in science. The crunch issue here is whether national testing of all subjects should be scrapped in favour of teacher assessment, a position favoured by the unions in their Easter conferences but not by the Expert Group. Teacher assessment is *"improving,"* they felt but is not yet *"sufficiently robust and consistent to be used in place of externally validated assessments at the end of a seven-year phase of education."* The last phrase here is important. One of the arguments used in the scrapping of Key Stage 3 tests was that there were further tests in the form of GCSEs a couple of years later. But as the Secretary of State put it, if we take away the tests at Key Stage 2, there would be no formal measure of progress between entering primary and leaving secondary school; besides, parents *"value the information that the tests provide."* He did however recognise that this decision was *"controversial"* and it may be that this is a holding position while other accountabilities develop.



Science is different because in the view of the Group, *“externally set and marked tests cannot readily assess investigative skills and the ability to design and carry out an experiment and understand its results.”* The Group was anxious that this should not be taken as any lessening in the importance of science and that parents should still receive reports on their children’s progress in the subject but through class room based assessment tasks. The Secretary of State was equally quick to defend the importance of science confirming that he was prepared to *‘go beyond the Group’s recommendations’* by introducing *“a new sample test at Key Stage 2.”* He listed an impressive group of bodies such as the Royal Society who have apparently agreed to work with the Government on developing a national sample test. The Opposition, however, seemed less impressed; *“if the new sample test is so good, why is every child not allowed to sit it?”*

There are a few important codicils that go with the changes at Key Stage 2. One is that the Government will do what it can to reduce teaching to the test. This was a problem that surfaced strongly in witness evidence to the Select Committee Inquiry last year and is difficult to tackle while the tests remain such high stakes. The Group has been working with the Dept to produce guidance *“on what constitutes proportionate and appropriate preparation for Key Stage 2 tests”* but this year again, the TES has been running stories of children starting preparation before Christmas, taking relaxation classes and so on. A further codicil is the recommendation that the tests be moved from May to June. The argument here is that this cuts the gap between the end of the tests and starting secondary school, 16 weeks this year, during which time, pupils may well have lost their momentum. It’s a mute point, particularly as it means that it could mean cutting into the planning for some end of summer term activities, let alone pupils arriving at secondary school without their test results. The Group believes this may be no bad thing as it will encourage better transfer of data between secondary schools and their feeder primaries but this may take some time to line up.

Two other points are worth making. One is that the Group recommends that a system of national sample tests should be introduced for pupils in Year 9. Results from these *“should not be published”* and not used to hold schools to account but could be useful for national and international benchmarking of progress. And the other is the use of IT *“in both the admin of tests and in marking them.”* Only a brief mention in the Report but an important endorsement nevertheless.

Will all this make things better? It’s still too early to tell. As it was, as this Report came out, two other Reports were published ratcheting up tension. One was from the Public Accounts Committee on primary school maths and to quote just one conclusion: *“it is disgraceful that over one-fifth of pupils are still leaving primary school without a secure grasp of essential maths skills.”* The other was from the thinktank Policy Exchange on literacy and numeracy strategies and again to take just one conclusion: *“we do not think SATs are an appropriate way to measure standards over time, and neither are single-level tests or adaptive testing.”*

Single-level testing, however, is one of the measures the Government has been piloting as an alternative model of testing and which the Government is keen to move forward on for maths in pilot schools from next year. The Expert Group were more guarded about the use of such tests; *“we conclude that overall, there is not yet sufficient evidence for us to make recommendations as to whether or not single level tests should be implemented nationally.”* All eyes now shift to the School Report Card and whether that will be the answer. Depends who’s asking.

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