

Open letter

The government plans to spend £10 million on testing four-year-olds on literacy and numeracy – the latest addition to England’s obsession with testing children. Such a test would be both pointless and damaging.

If so-called baseline assessment goes ahead in 2020 every four-year-old will be tested in their first six weeks in school, using a 20-minute one-to-one test. The results will inevitably be unreliable, as two previous expensive and abandoned trials proved. The results cannot provide an accurate picture of young children’s ability and potential. Yet seven years later children’s scores will be compared with their scores in Key Stage 2 tests to give a measure of ‘value added’. Schools will then be judged against each other on this basis.

We know that assessment of children’s learning is essential to good teaching and to helpful conversations between teachers and parents. Good teachers already assess reception children in order to do just that. But baseline testing is not designed to benefit children. There are better alternatives for ensuring the quality of schools without subjecting young children to a punitive system of school accountability.

Testing such young children is fraught with problems. It cannot provide a valid account of their learning, because they will not be able to show their true abilities in a test taken out of the context of familiar relationships and practical experiences. There is no evidence that early testing can reliably predict children’s later achievements. Developmental psychologists have shown that children’s well-being, confidence and self-regulation are central to their future learning, but these cannot be tested by baseline.

Children will suffer through being labelled at a young age, particularly disadvantaging the most vulnerable children – those with special needs, those suffering the effects of poverty, the summer-born, and those whose first language is not English. The tests risk children’s well-being and confidence by interrupting the crucial early period when they are forming relationships and settling into school. And many schools will teach to the test so that early years education will become more narrow and formal. This is not good for children.

Children deserve an education that places them at the centre. Children are more than a score.

(Signed)

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| Professor Sir Tim Brighouse | Formerly Commissioner for London Schools and Chief Education Officer Birmingham |
| Prof Cathy Nutbrown | Professor of Education, The University of Sheffield |
| Prof Mick Waters | Professor of Education, Wolverhampton University |
| Dr David Whitebread | Retired Senior Member, Homerton College, Cambridge |
| Professor Tina Bruce CBE | Author, consultant, trainer |
| Caroline Lucas | MP and Green Party Co-Leader |
| Sacha Powell | Professor of Early Childhood Care and Education, Chair of TACTYC |

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| Prof Peter Moss | Emeritus Professor, UCL Institute of Education |
| Wendy Scott, OBE | TACTYC President |
| Beatrice Merrick | Early Education Chief Executive |
| Nancy Stewart | TACTYC Vice Chair |
| Chris Merrick | Nursery Federation Chair of Governors |
| | EYs/Yr1 teacher, trainer, author, founding member of Keeping |
| Elaine Bennett | Early Years Unique |
| Madeleine Holt | Co-Founder, Rescue Our Schools |
| Wendy Ellyatt | Save Childhood Movement Chief Executive |
| Kevin Courtney | NEU Joint General Secretary |
| Mary Bousted | NEU Joint General Secretary |
| Vicky Ireland MBE | Chair Action for Children's Arts |
| Carolyn Silberfeld | Chair/Director Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network |
| Emeritus Professor Tricia | |
| David | Emeritus Professor |
| Michael Fielding | Emeritus Professor of Education, UCL Institute of Education |
| Helen Moylett | Vice-President, Early Education |
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| | Reader in Childhood, Youth and Education, Chartered |
| Dr Pam Jarvis | Psychologist, Grandparent |
| John Coe | National Assoc for Primary Education Information officer |
| Professor Colin Richards | Governor and Former HMI |
| Neil Leitch | Chief Executive, Pre-school Learning Alliance |
| | Chief Executive, Professional Association for Childcare & Early |
| Liz Bayram | Years |
| Purnima Tanuku OBE | Chief Executive of National Day Nurseries Association |

... and 709 others.