What parents **really** think about standardised testing in primary schools

A report by More Than A Score
Foreword by Dr Alice Bradbury, UCL Institute of Education, University College London
Too many tests for no good reason
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All figures, unless otherwise stated are from YouGov plc. Total sample size was 2,028 adults with children aged 3 – 13 in state primary education. Fieldwork was undertaken between 12th – 18th November 2019. The survey was carried out online.

More Than A Score is a coalition of parents, teachers, heads and education experts, working together to call for change in the government’s over-testing regime. www.morethanascore.org.uk
Foreword by Dr Alice Bradbury,  
UCL Institute of Education, University College London

As a parent, I am all too aware of the impact of testing on school life. As a researcher, I have seen countless schools reluctantly change what they do in order to improve test results. And yet, my main concern is that my children are happy and enjoy learning, not their test scores or the results of the school. This research suggests that I am not alone: 81% of parents in England with a child in primary school agree that “my child’s happiness at school is more important than the results of tests imposed by the government”.

Indeed, among the parents surveyed, only a quarter said that test results influence their decision when choosing a primary school. The most popular factor (77%) is “teachers that care about their pupils and inspire them to learn”. Meanwhile, nearly three-quarters (73%) of parents surveyed believe standardised testing puts too much pressure on their children.

Parents are concerned about the pressure placed on children, and object to a narrow test-focused curriculum. However, we know that this is the impact of testing, particularly in preparation for Year 6 SATs. Research with headteachers commissioned by More Than A Score showed that over 90% of heads agreed the curriculum was narrowed in Year 6 and half agreed the curriculum in other year groups was reduced too.* A significant new finding, however, is that 30% of parents surveyed whose children have taken SATs in year 6 agreed the tests had a negative impact on not just their 10- and 11-year-olds but the well-being of their family as a whole. It is clear that the detrimental effects of SATs are felt far beyond the school gates.

PARENTS’ VIEWS SHOULD RAISE SERIOUS CONCERNS ABOUT THE CURRENT SYSTEM.

But primary assessment is not all about SATs. This report shows that only 4% of parents surveyed were aware that there are statutory assessments in five out of seven school years and almost two thirds of parents surveyed (61%) think it is too much. This suggests that many schools, rightly, make sure that children’s school lives are not dominated by test preparation. However it also suggests that young children are being formally tested more often than parents are aware of, and more than they agree with.

Parents’ views, as shown here, should raise some serious concerns about the current system. Only 12% of parents surveyed believe schools should be measured on the basis of standardised tests taken under exam conditions, and yet this is the entire justification for putting children through the pressures of testing – to provide information on the quality of a school. If parents are not using this information to choose a school, then the underlying premise of parents as consumers in a market-based system is failing. Information is being created which parents do not appear to trust, or need, when choosing a school; while the process of producing these data is seen as damaging to children’s well-being by those who know them best. I hope, as a parent and a researcher, that these findings cause policymakers to reflect on whether, with this current testing regime, the pain is worth the gain.


2 Too many tests for no good reason
Standardised testing in primary schools has been the subject of increased debate in recent years. The use of statutory assessments — including year 6 SATs, the phonics screening check, the multiplication tables check, and the planned introduction of reception baseline assessment — to measure primary schools has been scrutinised by educators, policy-makers and academics. However, the parent voice has often been missing in these discussions.

Do parents understand the extent of formal testing in primary schools? Do they use the resulting data to judge a school’s performance, or make decisions about where to send their children to school? What do they consider the most important aspects of school life? And how does formal testing affect their children and family life?

More Than A Score commissioned research with YouGov to better understand parents’ understanding of and attitudes towards the tests themselves and how the data is used by the government and the public.

The results demonstrate that government policy does not reflect the views of the majority of parents. The research highlights a number of themes including:

- Parents are unaware of the number of formal tests in schools. When they are made aware of the true picture, the majority believe there is too much standardised testing.
- Parents believe formal testing places too much pressure on children. They say preparing for tests has a negative effect on the curriculum; impacts how much children enjoy school, and even affects family life.
- The results of standardised tests are low on the priority list when parents are choosing a school for their child.
- When it comes to how the government should be measuring schools, the results of standardised tests score well below quality of teaching and overall pupil well-being.

This new research demonstrates that parents feel strongly about the quality of their children’s education: they are looking for schools that will nurture and inspire a love of learning. The government continues to claim that parents agree with and value formalised assessment. This research proves that this is not the case. While parents want schools to be measured and held accountable, they don’t believe that standardised testing should be an essential part of this measurement. It is time for policy-makers to recognise that the education of primary-age children is too important to be sacrificed to the collection of data.
What do parents think about standardised testing?

One of the most striking features of the research commissioned by More Than A Score is that parents surveyed are unaware of the extent of government testing in primary schools. From September 2020, there will be statutory assessments in five out of seven primary years. These are:

- The reception baseline assessment in reception.*
- The phonics screening check in year 1.
- Key Stage 1 statutory assessments (KS1 SATs), including papers in English and maths, in year 2.
- The multiplication tables check in year 4.
- Key Stage 2 statutory assessments (KS2 SATs): a week of papers in English and maths taken under exam conditions in year 6.

*Over 9,000 primary schools took part in the pilot of reception baseline assessment in September 2019.

Across the board, parents surveyed under-estimate the quantity of standardised tests. Only 4% correctly state that there are tests in five out of seven primary years. Most (36%) believe there are tests in two years, perhaps reflecting that the highest prompted awareness figures are for KS2 SATs (87%) and KS1 SATs (81%).
Having been made aware of the extent of government testing in primary schools, almost two-thirds (61%) agree that there is too much standardised testing in primary schools.

### TOO MUCH OR LITTLE TESTING

In general, to what extent do you think there is currently too much or too little standardised government testing in state primary schools, or is it about the right amount?

- **61%** Too much
- **26%** Too little
- **10%** Don’t know
- **3%** About the right amount

**ONLY 4% OF PARENTS KNOW THAT THERE ARE TESTS IN FIVE OUT OF SEVEN PRIMARY YEARS.**
What do parents think about standardised testing?

Parents’ opposition to formal testing is also reflected in their responses to the following statements:

- 73% of parents surveyed agree that children are under too much pressure because of standardised testing.
- 70% of parents surveyed agree that “there are better ways to measure my child’s progress”.
- 81% of parents surveyed agree that “my child’s happiness is more important than the results of formal tests” (only 5% of parents surveyed disagree with this statement).
- Fewer than one in three parents surveyed (29%) believe that formal tests are a good way to measure how well their children are doing overall at school.

FEWER THAN A THIRD OF PARENTS SURVEYED THINK FORMAL TESTS ARE A GOOD WAY TO MEASURE HOW THEIR CHILDREN ARE DOING AT SCHOOL.

Parents surveyed also believe that standardised tests do not provide an accurate measure of their child’s overall progress at school. Almost half (48%) think reports from the teacher are most accurate, while 35% prefer to see pupils’ work for themselves. Only 9% of parents believe that the results of government tests provide the most accurate information about overall progress.
The negative effects of standardised testing

Parents have serious concerns about the preparation their children undergo for formal government tests, and its subsequent effect on the curriculum.

Over three-quarters (76%) of parents surveyed believe that spending time preparing for tests does not inspire a love of learning in children, while over two-thirds of parents surveyed (67%) do not want their child to spend time preparing intensively for tests. Parents surveyed are particularly concerned about the effect on the curriculum: 79% do not want the time spent on arts or sport reduced in the run-up to SATs or other tests.

However, the negative effects of children sitting formal tests and thereby carrying the burden for the overall performance of a school reach beyond the curriculum and the classroom.

Almost three-quarters (73%) of the parents surveyed agree children are under too much pressure because of standardised testing and over half (52%) believe that — as parents — they too feel under pressure to ensure their children do well in formal tests.

Three-quarters of parents surveyed believe standardised testing puts too much pressure on their children.
The negative effects of standardised testing

The most high-profile primary school tests are Key Stage 2 SATs, taken in year 6 by 10- and 11-year-olds. Parents of these children feel the pressure of standardised testing perhaps most of all.

- 66% agree that their child was under pressure to get good marks.
- Over half (57%) say their child was anxious or nervous about taking SATs.

At school, the effect on the curriculum was obvious:

- 61% say that their child spent most of their time studying English and maths in preparation for SATs.
- 45% agree that their child was expected to do far too much homework.

No wonder fewer than a third of parents surveyed believe their child was enjoying school at this time (29%) and 41% believe SATs had a negative effect on their child’s love of learning.

And this pressure is not limited to the classroom: 44% believe SATs had a negative impact on their child’s well-being while 30% of parents agree that SATs had a negative impact on the well-being of their family as a whole.

Figures from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 859 parents of children 10–13 not at an independent school or PRU in England who have taken SATs.
What do parents look for in a school?

The government uses the results of standardised assessments to create data-based league tables for schools. When a school is inspected by Ofsted, these results also play a significant role in determining its ranking (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement, Inadequate). The media report these league tables and rankings and parents are encouraged by the government to measure schools against each other. In many ways, the use of this data has driven government education policy since the introduction of SATs in 1990.

However, our research demonstrates that parents pay less attention to these measures than policy-makers might believe.

When asked which factors would influence the choice of school for their child, the Ofsted rating comes fourth in a list of considerations (selected by 53% of parents), while SATs results are ranked in 8th position (25%) and the school’s position in league tables in 10th position (23%).

The most important consideration for parents is “teachers that care about their pupils and inspire them to learn” (77%) while parents’ own instincts score highly (72%) along with recommendations from other parents (62%).

SATS ARE RANKED A LOW 8TH AND LEAGUE TABLES 10TH WHEN PARENTS CHOOSE A SCHOOL FOR THEIR CHILD.
What do parents look for in a school?

The breadth of a school’s curriculum and the opportunity to learn life skills are also important to parents:

- 90% agree that their children should have access to a curriculum that covers a wide range of subjects.
- 90% agree that schools should make sure pupils spend enough time building social skills and confidence alongside academic subjects.
How should schools be measured by the government?

These priorities are also clear when parents are asked how schools should be measured by the government.

Rather than looking for data-driven test results, parents believe children’s overall well-being and a broad curriculum should be paramount.

The most important factor for parents is how happy pupils are at school, cited by 63% of parents. The same percentage also want to know how well children progress in a variety of subjects. In sharp contrast, only 12% believe schools should be measured on the basis of standardised tests taken under exam conditions, and only 11% think pupils’ performance in English and maths only is a fair way to measure schools.

63% of parents want the government to measure schools based on children’s happiness and on how well they progress across a good variety of subjects.
How should schools be measured by the government?

In light of this, it’s no surprise that only 16% of parents surveyed believe it’s right that children have to sit tests under exam conditions to measure a school’s overall performance.

Parents are also highly aware that many other factors come into play when measuring schools against each other.

These include the socio-demographics of an area: almost half (49%) believe that how well a school performs depends on how well-off the parents are. Geography also plays a part with 58% agreeing that where a school is based can contribute to its performance while 70% believe that the size of classes and number of pupils can affect performance.

As a result, 53% agree that it’s not right to use the same criteria to judge schools from different parts of the country and with different catchment areas.
Conclusion

This research demonstrates it is time to overhaul the way primary school children are assessed and schools are measured.

Parents’ priorities are not reflected in government policy. Parents want to know how well their children are progressing at school and they want to be reassured about the quality of education they are receiving. They do not want their children to be subjected to unnecessary testing purely for the purposes of gathering data to create league tables.

They want their children’s education to be broad, balanced and inspiring. They do not want their children to be carrying the weight of an entire school’s performance on their shoulders.

The government must now listen to those who know children best – educators, experts and, above all, parents.

**They must make our children more than a score.**