SATs VS STANDARDS

REDEFINING QUALITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Should SATs results be used as shorthand for high standards? Do other measurements provide a more accurate representation of educational standards? How do parents and school leaders believe high standards should be measured? Research with both groups shows a clear consensus: it's time to stop conflating test data with quality of education.

more than a score

Throughout the country and across the political spectrum, parents and educators agree on the importance of high standards in primary school. But what do high standards really mean? In recent years, the results of standardised government tests, particularly year 6 SATs, have been used as convenient shorthand for educational standards.

Children are told whether they have reached the government's "expected standard" in English and maths before they start secondary school. Pre-Covid, around one-third of children failed to do so, disproportionately those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs. In 2022 — the first year of SATs since 2019 — that figure rose to 41%.

The government has now set a target of 90% of pupils achieving the expected standard in SATs by 2030. However, for many years, parents, heads and teachers have expressed concerns about the negative effects of these tests. The unnecessary pressure adversely affects mental health and wellbeing; cramming in English and maths narrows the curriculum; and love of learning is damaged. These impacts will only be exacerbated by this unrealistically high target, which was achieved by only 1% of schools in 2022.*

Should high standards be equated simply with SATs? More Than A Score researched the views of parents with children under 18 via YouGov and those of heads and senior teachers with Teacher Tapp, asking how they believe high standards should be measured.

The results demonstrate that both groups agree:

- **SATs are not a good measure of high standards in primary schools**
- **SATs results are not a good indicator of whether a child has received a high standard of education**
- **SATs are not a good indicator of whether a child has the skills necessary for secondary school**

It is time for policy makers to move away from relying on SATs data to measure the quality of education our youngest children receive.

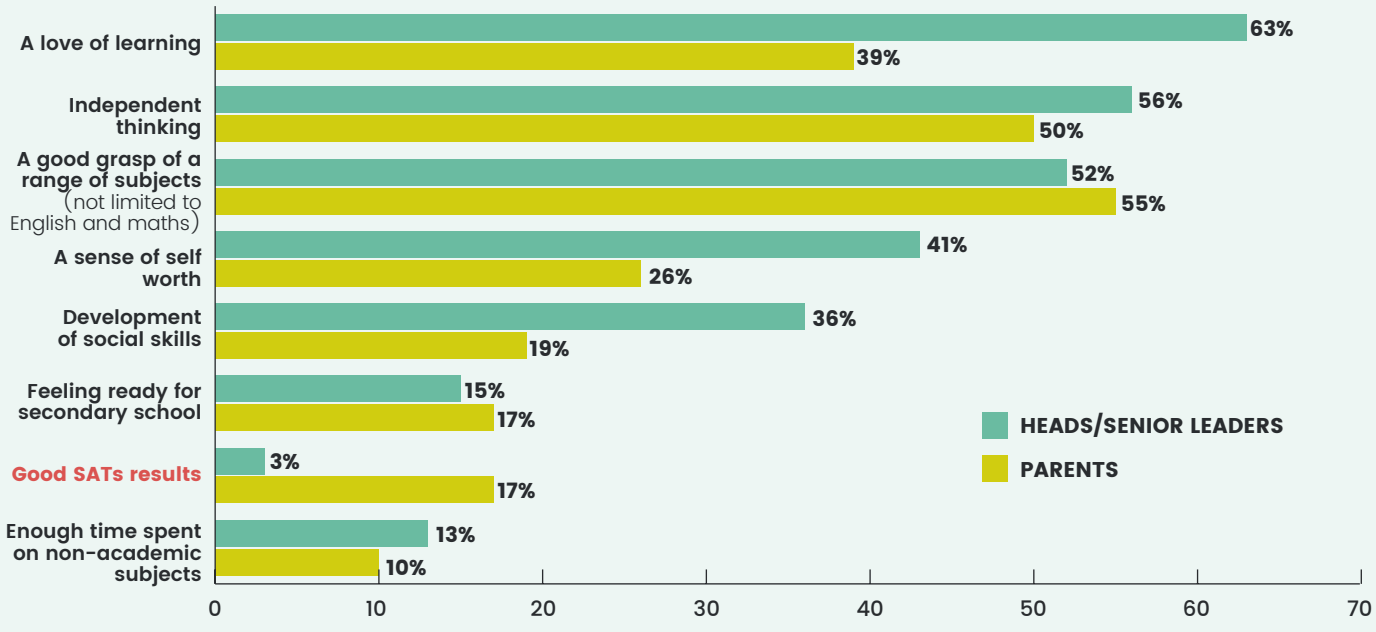
WHAT DOES A HIGH STANDARD OF EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL MEAN?

Parents and school leaders agree: SATs results are not a key indicator for the quality of education a child has received in primary school.

Both groups surveyed stress the importance of children gaining a good grasp of a range of subjects and leaving primary with a love of learning (particularly important to school leaders) and the development of independent thinking.

Good SATs results are valued by only 17% of parents surveyed as an indicator of high standards and are ranked last by school leaders.

Which of the following qualities would BEST demonstrate to you that your child/a child has received a high standard of education in primary school? (Please select up to three options)



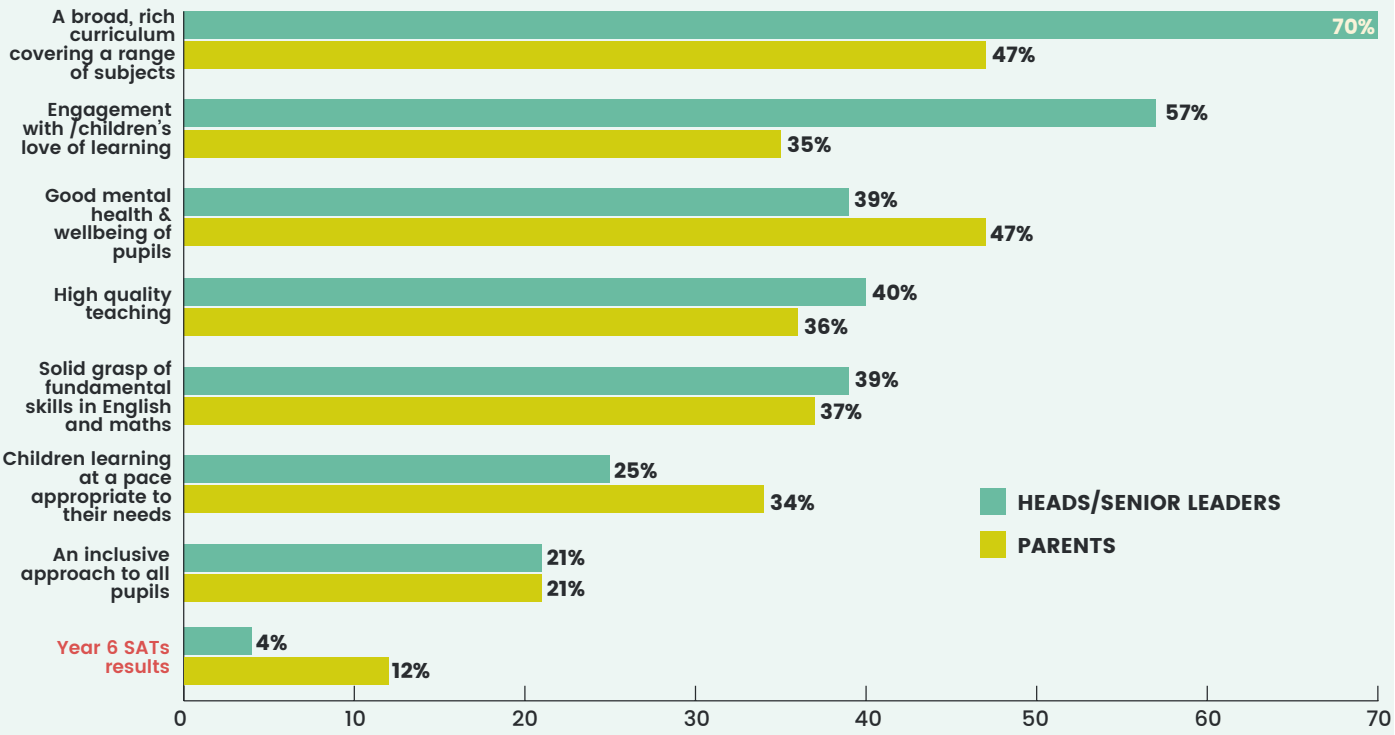
*Source: FFT Education Datalab

HOW SHOULD STANDARDS BE MEASURED IN SCHOOLS?

SATs results are currently used as shorthand for the measurement of school standards. But parents and school leaders both say this is wrong.

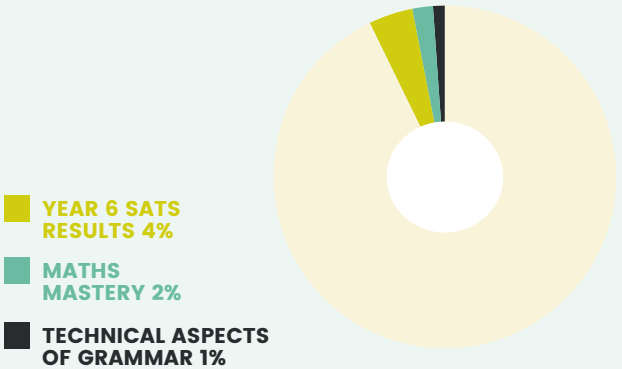
SATs results came bottom of the list when parents were asked to select what they think would be the best three measures of high standards in primary schools (12% of those surveyed). Good mental health and wellbeing and a broad, rich curriculum came top (47%), with high-quality teaching and love of learning also scoring highly. Heads voted for a broad curriculum (70%), children's engagement with learning (57%) and high quality teaching (40%).

Which of the following do you think would be the BEST measure of high standards in primary schools?
(Please select up to three options)



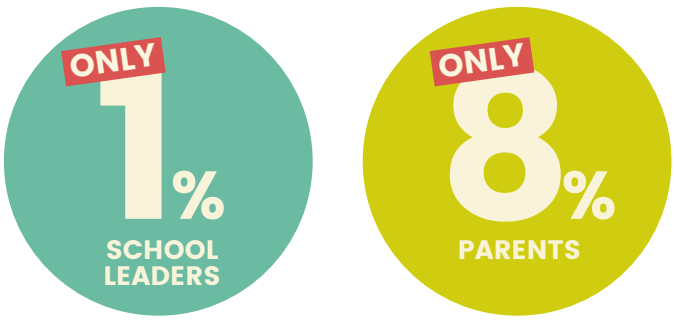
School leaders were also asked about the importance of children gaining maths mastery and understanding obscure technical aspects of grammar – the basis for much of the content of the Key Stage 2 curriculum and SATs. These two aspects scored lowest amongst school leaders, coming below SATs results.

Which of the following do you think would be the BEST measure of high standards in primary schools?



ARE SATS THE BEST INDICATOR OF HIGH STANDARDS IN PRIMARY?

There is unanimity on this point: only 1% of school leaders and 8% of parents strongly agree that SATs results are the best indicator of overall high standards in primary schools.



STRONGLY AGREE THAT SATS RESULTS ARE THE BEST INDICATOR OF OVERALL HIGH STANDARDS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

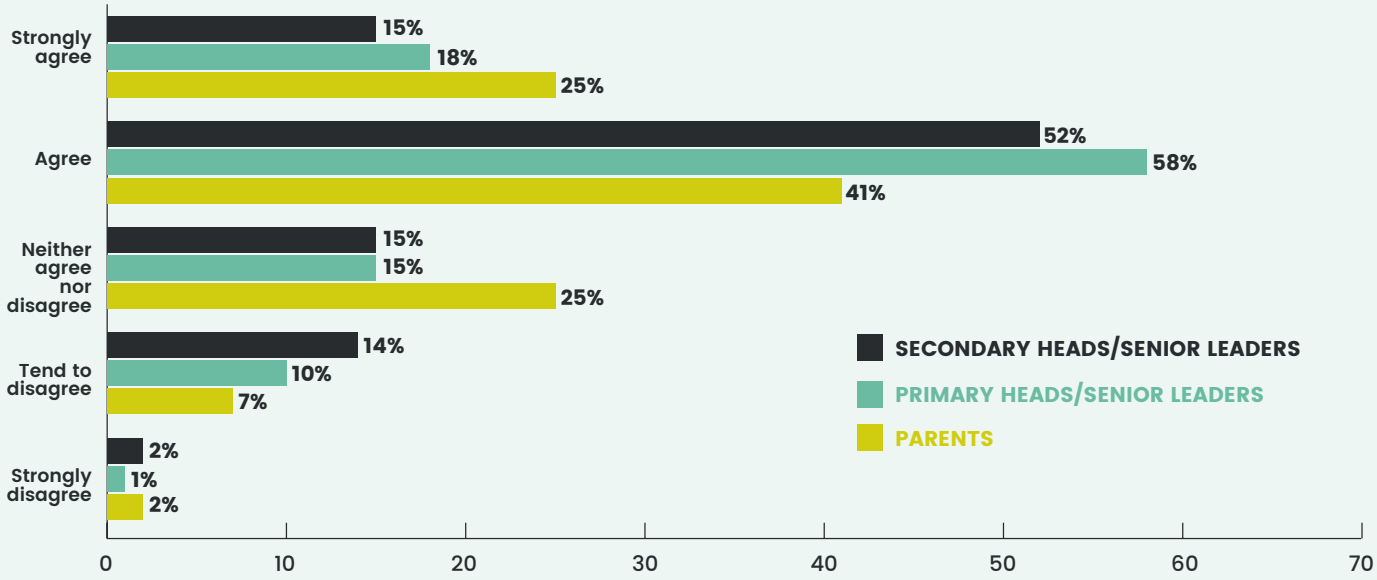
WHAT DO SATS RESULTS MEAN?

Do SATs results indicate whether children have the academic skills necessary to start secondary school? Many MPs refer to SATs as a test of "basic skills in English and maths". However, as school leaders' responses to the previous question shows, the reality of the test material is far from this - including, in maths, fractional equations and ratio and proportion and, in English, fronted adverbials and subordinating conjunctions.

No wonder, when media, parents, MPs and peers tried sample papers for themselves, only 50% achieved the expected standard.

The majority of parents and school leaders understand that how well a child does in a SATs paper taken under exam conditions does not indicate whether they have the academic knowledge required to start secondary school.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "A child may not meet the 'expected standard' in SATs, but still have the standard of maths and English needed to start secondary school."



CONCLUSION

It is wrong to use SATs results as shorthand for high standards in primary education. While test data may generate easy headlines, parents and school leaders understand that an 11-year-old's tests results cannot provide an accurate picture of their overall academic abilities and should not be used as a blunt tool to measure standards.

These views — held by an overwhelming majority — are not reflected in current policy. Everyone who values children's education believes in high standards, but it is time to change the language and shift the debate so that children's learning, not data, is prioritised.

Research details:
YouGov: 2124 GB parents of children aged 18 and under, February 2023. The survey was carried out online.
The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Teacher Tapp: 1,490 headteachers and senior leadership team members. The survey was carried out online, February 2023.