

## JOINT PRESS RELEASE

### Early Years Sector unites in the call to oppose the introduction of baseline assessment

**embargoed until 0.01am, Thursday 19th March, 2015**

In an unprecedented stand against what is seen as a potentially damaging policy the leaders of England's key early years organisations have united in the call to oppose the September 2015 introduction of standardised baseline assessment. Many associations and unions are now backing the call, with the National Union of Teachers (NUT) intending to debate next steps at its forthcoming Easter Conference.

Despite considerable expert opposition, and against the recommendations of its own consultation process, the tests are being introduced as an accountability measure to 'help school effectiveness' by providing a score for each pupil at the start of reception which reflects their attainment against a pre-determined content domain. From 2022, this will be used as the starting point to measure progress at the end of Year 6.

- *Of 1,063 responses to the DfE's question, in its July "consultation" as to whether the principles of that paper were right, 57 per cent said no, with only 18 per cent in favour. Yet the thrust of the proposals are unchanged.*
- *Some 51 per cent replied that there should not be a baseline check at the start of reception, against 34 per cent in favour, with the detailed concerns of expert groups not even mentioned. Yet it is happening.*
- *Similarly, 73 per cent of consultees came out against allowing schools to choose from commercially available baseline assessments, compared to 12 per cent in favour. Again, it is happening.*
- *And 68 per cent said that if the baseline assessments were to happen, they should not be made optional, against 19 per cent who said they should. They are being made optional.*

#### **Warwick Mansell - NAHT Blog on the Primary Assessment and Accountability Consultation**

Similar baseline tests were introduced by the Labour government in 1997 and abandoned in 2002 because it was an ineffective and damaging policy. They were also introduced by Wales in 2011 and withdrawn in 2012 as "time consuming, ill-thought through and denied children and teachers essential teaching time" (NUT comment 2012)

Schools are being asked to choose from a list of six approved commercial providers. Although the tests will remain optional, the signatories warn that there is likely to be significant pressure on headteachers to adopt a baseline scheme to mitigate against the risk of punitive measures if the school does not reach the government's raised floor standards when the Reception cohort reaches the end of Key Stage 2. There will also be considerable pressure from the commercial providers who are required to demonstrate their ability to serve 10% of the total market.

The use of the currently statutory Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), which is not a test but a rounded assessment of children's development based on observation over time, is to become optional from September 2016. The signatories believe that the loss of this data will:

- 1) undermine the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) project, introduced by this government to assess the longer term impact of early years experiences
- 2) damage current work with colleagues in the health and social services who make use of the EYFS Profile in bringing together services for children and families
- 3) compromise the longitudinal data needed for the government to assess the impact of the Early Years Pupil Premium, and
- 4) remove one of the few available indicators used by Ofsted to measure the effectiveness of children's centres

*"The baseline assessment schemes approved by government, insofar as they meet the government's own narrow requirements, will not help teachers to know their children better or plan for their learning – they will be a distraction. They will not contribute to school accountability, as they are not designed to be predictive of educational progress. They are out of keeping with the tried and tested principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage, which is focused on age-appropriate learning and development of the whole child. Government must rethink before the changes distort how the EYFS is offered both before and during the Reception year."*

**Beatrice Merrick, Chief Executive, British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education)**

*"Children in England already start formal schooling far earlier than children in most other countries, including those that do best in international measures of attainment. Introducing a narrow, academic assessment of four-year-olds with high stakes for schools will further add to pressures for a restricted, less effective approach to supporting young children's learning and development."*

**Dr Jane Payler, Chair, TACTYC**

*"We must call for policymaking that puts the best interests of the child above school performance and accountability. It simply is not acceptable to sacrifice child and parent wellbeing for the sake of statistics that lack meaningful validity and that encourage assessor manipulation to achieve desired ends."*

**Wendy Ellyatt, Chief Executive, Save Childhood Movement (SCM)**

*"Baseline assessment does not support learning, in fact, it takes teachers away from teaching and so wastes learning time. It is not in the interests of young children, whose learning and other developmental needs are better identified – over time – by well-qualified early years practitioners who observe and interact with young children as they play."*

**Professor Cathy Nutbrown, The Conversation, Jan 2015**

*"The baseline assessment of four year olds resulting in the identification of children as failures at such an early stage in their lives would be the most destructive action ever implemented by government."*

**John Coe, National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)**

*"All good teachers assess children as they begin in the reception class so they can support and challenge them in ways appropriate to their age and stage of development. The problem comes when the government turns assessment information into yet another way of measuring children, teachers and schools and finding them wanting. If baseline assessment is used to measure the effectiveness of pre-school provision, or if Ofsted expects to see baseline data used to demonstrate children's progress from year to year, then its primary purpose for teaching is immediately distorted."*

**Dr Mary Bousted, General Secretary, Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL)**

*"The Union believes passionately that a policy which is so harmful to the interests of children should not be imposed upon schools. Baseline Assessment has everything to do with holding schools to account for pupils' progress in a limited number of topics, and nothing to do with developing motivated, creative, adaptable learners."*

**Christine Blower, General Secretary, National Union of Teachers (NUT)**

*Unlike the existing early years assessment – the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile – the majority of the baseline tests that have been approved by government have a narrow focus on language, literacy and mathematics, with little or no reference to other fundamental skills such as physical development, and personal, social and emotional development. Equally concerning is the fact that most of the tests are computer- or tablet-based, and rely heavily on a 'tick-box' approach*

*to assessment. Early learning should be about much more than just those skills that are easy to measure. To introduce an assessment that is more concerned with collecting data to compare and rank schools than it is with supporting child development is to do our children a grave disservice.*

**Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance**

*“The difference between 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds as a percentage of life experience is one fifth – which equates to testing a 10 year old against an 8 year old and finding the 8 year old ‘wanting’ in some way. Or even finding a 20 year old lacking in adult life skills as compared to a 25 year old, or, at the other end of the scale, expecting a healthy 80 year old to be no different in any way to a healthy 64 year old.”*

**Dr Pam Jarvis, Too Much Too Soon Campaign**

## **Notes to Editors**

The signatories are opposed to such an introduction on the grounds that it will be:

**Unreliable** – Most children at such a young age will not be able to show their true abilities in a test (assessment) taken out of the context of familiar relationships and practical experiences. Baseline assessment introduced in 1997 was withdrawn in 2002 as it proved unworkable.

**Disruptive** – We know that young children need smooth transitions and supportive relationships. By taking teachers away from their class group in the crucial early days in the reception year, the time taken to assess up to 30 children will compromise vital early teacher-child relationships and result in a focus on the tests (assessments) rather than the individual children starting school.

**Statistically Invalid** - Some assessments are based on narrow checklists of basic skills and knowledge which do not take account of the different ways and rates at which children learn and develop, nor of the ability of children to build conceptual understanding and apply their knowledge. The proposed choice for schools about which of several possible assessments to use makes meaningful comparisons impossible. Value-added judgements, which are seven years away, will be unreliable and invalid.

**Harmful to child wellbeing** – Children’s ages on entering the English schooling system can vary by as much as 12 months. Boys and the summerborn are likely to be particularly disadvantaged. Annual entry to school means that a large number of children with very varied prior experience will lose crucial attention to their immediate social, psychological and personal needs as they adjust to a new and challenging experience in their reception class.

**Harmful to effective practice and therefore to children’s learning and development** - The assessments will result in pressure on practitioners to ‘teach to the test’, distorting the curriculum and detracting from the rich physical, exploratory, playful, creative, and intellectual experiences which research shows benefit children in the early years.

**Harmful to the home-learning environment, parent partnerships and relationships with nurseries** - Parents and nursery staff will be misdirected in terms of the most important markers of their children’s progress and attainment, toward supporting narrow measures rather than engaging in the responsive, playful interactions which best support children’s learning and development. The careful records linked to the EYFS that nurseries send on to school will be devalued.

- Ends -

**To access the joint letter (from the 19<sup>th</sup>) please go to**  
<http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org/say-no-to-baseline-assessment.html>

**For further information or to request interviews, please contact**

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