better without baseline

4 core reasons

Why you should support the Better without Baseline Campaign

From September 2016 the government intends that primary schools in England will be held accountable for the future progress of their pupils through assessing children entering reception classes using a commercial DfE-approved baseline assessment scheme. The scores generated for these 4-year-old children will be used for a judgement of progress when the children complete Key Stage 2 from 2022.

A wide coalition of education experts and teaching unions strongly oppose the introduction of these standardised on-entry assessments and have provided clear evidence to show that:

1. Baseline assessments are an invalid way of holding primary schools to account

a) The current baseline assessment schemes will not provide statistically valid or reliable information about children's starting points.

b) Standardised baseline assessment is not a valid predictor of children's future attainment.

c) The planned system will not provide a useful indicator of school quality for accountability purposes.

d) Schools have an on-going incentive to 'game' the system in order to show improved performance.

2. Baseline assessments are detrimental to children

a) Many children are already being wrongly labelled as achieving below typical standards, with harmful effects.

b) The assessments disrupt children's introduction into school during the vital settling-in period.

c) The new systems are undermining existing levels of communication about the child with early years settings and parents.

d) The narrow focus on attainment in prescribed subject areas is harmful to children's learning and development in the early years.

3. The commercialisation of the process is resulting in a considerable waste of time and money, which is unjustifiable in a time of austerity

a) The existing systems had been carefully developed over years and there is no evidence or justification for the current introduction.

b) Millions of pounds of public funds will go to commercial firms for these assessments, which are inferior to those already in use in schools.

4. It's been tried – and abandoned – before

They are children...
not robots,
not machines

The Introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment
ATL/NUT/IOE Research Report, February 2016

Arguments and evidence

1. Baseline assessments are an invalid way of holding primary schools to account

a) The current baseline assessment schemes will not provide statistically valid or reliable information about children's starting points.

Many children will not be able to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do in the unfamiliar context of a new class, with new adults, and using narrow computer-based tests.

A four-year-old is variable not only from day to day, 'knowing' something one day but not the next, but also will perform very differently in different contexts. Children need to feel safe and comfortable before engaging fully in opportunities offered, including being at ease with and trusting the adults. In school situations young children often show less advanced skill than in more familiar surroundings. [1]

They may also be able to use knowledge in practical play activities but unable to call an answer up to order when asked in a more abstract context. Those who are less confident or less familiar with the routines and activities used in school will be least likely to demonstrate their capabilities in the early weeks in a new class.

A reception teacher wrote: 'For some of my children this is their first experience of being in a class and others are being expected to speak English for the first time. In these first weeks as children struggle to communicate their basic needs and adapt to a new and strange environment, how can we possibly decide how well they will perform in their 2022 SATs?'[2]

The varied and complex picture of individual children's learning cannot be captured in a single point score as required in baseline assessment.

Reducing the entire assessment of a child to a single number hides the infinite variability of patterns of learning among children, discounting much of what children bring to their experiences and learning.

The design of the reception baseline assessment wrongly assumes that young children have fixed abilities and skills at school entry. Binary judgements are used in reporting how each child has performed on the reception baseline assessment. The teacher or computer program will either decide that 'Yes' a child can do a specific task or 'No' they cannot.

Given that four-year-old children are variable, a clearer picture of their learning would include "sometimes" or "not today but they could yesterday". This can be problematic with observational models that take place over time when 'sometimes' is not an option, while one-off tests can misrepresent children's learning.

The early years are a crucial time in a child's education, and a teacher's sensitive alertness to the infinite variety presented by individual children should not be dulled by formulaic point scores. The on-entry assessments which schools already make are for the primary purpose of getting to know each child in order to plan how best to support their on-going development and learning.

One teacher administering a baseline scheme commented:

'Surely you can't judge a child's development on 1 or 2 statements. I'm concerned about what this data is going to bring … I am also concerned that what gets tested gets taught and if these statements remain these will be focus for nurseries rather than working on the whole child.' [3]

The assessments must be completed in English, so the attainment of children learning English as an additional language will not be recognised.

Children whose home language is not English will be assessed as knowing less than they do. They will not be able to demonstrate their knowledge of mathematical ideas and concepts, for example, if they do not have the English vocabulary of number, space and shape although they may be very competent in these areas in their first language. Communication and language skills gained in the home language are transferred within the first years of school to English as an additional language, and so very rapid apparent progress will be made. Falsely low initial scores will not provide a basis for judging the contribution of schools to children's progress.

In England 18.7% of students in school have a first language other than English[4], and in many areas the proportion is much higher.

Teachers comment:

'Finalising data and we have a little boy arrive with virtually no English. Heard him talking today for first time in his native language. Has been with us for 3 weeks - his data is looking very low but am feeling we are doing him an injustice as we don't actually know what he can do!'

'I have a Polish girl with limited English. I have to judge her based on her ability to communicate in English. However I can tell she is very competent in Polish! It's unfair.'

'The baseline has to be done in English. It's unfair - go with it, she will make outstanding progress.'

b) Standardised baseline assessment is not a valid predictor of children's future attainment.

Attainment in curriculum content areas at age 4 is not a strong predictor of future success.

The 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.

It may seem apparent that testing what children know at age 4 in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics and then measuring the achievement by a specified end point will be a good measure of how well the primary school has performed. However, this simplistic view of children's learning is in error.

- The baseline tests reflect aspects of children's previous experience

1 Tizard, B. and Hughes, M. (1984) Young Children Learning: Talking and Thinking at home and School. London: Fontana
2 Reception teacher, letter to TES
3 Teachers' comments all from: EYFS Baseline Assessment, Facebook closed group, 11,780 members
4 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/410543/2014_SPC_SFR_Text_v102.pdf

rather than their capacity to learn in the period ahead. Just because a child has been 'schooled' in letters and numbers in the preschool period, for example, does not mean that he or she will become a more able reader than another child who has not yet had that instruction but may very readily master these areas when they are introduced.

- It is not valid to attempt to extrapolate progress expectations in a linear fashion from the early years to the end of Key Stage 2.

  Reading, for example, involves much more than just decoding letters, but depends on a broad base of comprehension and knowledge of language, vocabulary, and rich experiences of language and books. Oral language, built through imaginative play and discussion of ideas and life experience, underpins later reading and writing ability. A simple test of letter or word recognition is in no way predictive of later attainment in reading or in English.

  Similarly, later maths attainment rests on a basis of understanding properties of shape and space built in block play, using symbols such as graphics used in role play, problem-solving in play and practical activities, and so on.[1] Attempting to capture outcomes of this complex learning process by matching numerals to a set of objects on a computer screen is simply not appropriate.

Young children need to develop their cultural knowledge of mathematics and the social and cultural uses of mathematical signs, symbols and texts (as they should do with writing), and this is best developed through play and real life activities rather than through formal tasks presented outside of meaningful context for the child. Studies show that an emphasis on teacher-directed early maths training hinders rather than promotes later maths learning.[2 3]

Longer term academic progress is predicted by qualities such as motivation, persistence, emotional well-being and social skills which are not reflected effectively or at all in the baseline assessment schemes.

There is considerable evidence that the development of young children's well-being and attributes as early learners, such as curiosity, motivation, perseverance and independent thinking, are far more important and reliable predictors of later academic achievement. Children in Finland, for example, begin formal schooling up to three years later than in England, following active, play-based provision in their early years; they go on to out-perform British children in later attainment.[4 5]

While early gains in narrow literacy and maths skills can be achieved through early training, these advantages are lost within a few years. This is likely to be attributed to a focus on teaching these skills to the exclusion of wider understanding of the social and cultural basis of literacy and mathematics, explored in meaningful contexts such as pretend play.

Children whose experience in the early years has instead supported emotional well-being, cognitive development and self-regulation during play may score less well on early academic tests, but evidence indicates that these children show higher achievement benefits in the longer term[6]. Such preschool provision, however, which has supported broader development rather than narrow early academic skills drilling, may be judged to be 'failing' children if only those narrow academic skills are assessed. This risks skewing practice away from what is known to be more effective for children's learning in the long term.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility recently published a 'Character and Resilience Manifesto' describing the key elements in closing the attainment gap as 'a belief in one's ability to achieve, an understanding of the relationship between effort and reward, the patience to pursue long-term goals, the perseverance to stick with the task at hand, and the ability to bounce back from life's inevitable setbacks'. The importance of these elements was confirmed in a recent longitudinal study showing that long-term academic success was predicted most strongly by the ability to maintain attention at age four, and this was not significantly mediated by reading skills at age seven.[7]

Baseline assessment schemes cannot show evidence of accurate prediction of future attainment.

There is no evidence of the ability of these newly devised schemes to predict future attainment. In fact, studies mapping previous early years scores to later attainment and of testing for older children have found that even the strongest correlations mean that no more than half the children will later attain the anticipated score, and the spread of later attainment is very wide.[8 9]

c) The planned system will not provide a useful indicator of school quality for accountability purposes.

There is a lack of comparability between the different schemes.

The Government has approved three very different reception baseline assessment schemes for schools to choose from for the reception baseline assessment. The scores for these schemes will be used to compare schools, and it remains unclear how the schemes can reliably be compared.

The differences have been summarised eloquently in the document which was devised by Early Education/TACTYC..

1 Carruthers, E. & Worthington, M. (Second Edition, August 2006) (Second Edition). Children's Mathematics: Making marks, making meaning. London: Sage Publications.
2 Ahlberg, A. and H. Lenz Taguchi. 2005. Listening as Pedagogical Tool: Ethics and Democracy in Education Work. Stockholm: Liber.
3 Pramling Samuelson, I., and U. aurit\on. 1997. To Learn as Six Year Old – A Systematic Review. Stockholm: Swedish National Agency for Education.
4 Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2007) Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education (2nd Ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
5 Ryan, R. M. and Deci, E. L. (2000) Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being. American Psychologist, 55, p.68–78.
6 Goswami, U. and Bryant, P. (2007) Children's Cognitive Development and Learning (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1a), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.
7 McClelland MM, Acock A, Piccinin A, Rhea SA, Stallings MC. (2012) Relations between preschool attention span-persistence and age 25 educational outcomes. Early Childhood Research Quarterly
8 http://www.educationdatalab.org.uk/getattachment/Blog/March-2015/Seven-things-you-might-not-know-about-our-schools/EduDataLab-7things.pdf.aspx
9 https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Baseline%20Assessment%20Guidance.pdf

As these schemes differ so greatly, will there need to have three different progress measures – each linked to a specific scheme? When will information from the Standards and Testing Agency's comparability study be available so that we can be assured that these schemes can be compared as intended?

The 10% school sign-up requirement – insufficient numbers for comparability?

Initially six schemes were approved by the DfE. Each of these schemes was required to sign up a minimum of 10% of primary schools by April 30th 2015. This target was set to ensure that each scheme would have enough participants to generate data that could be reliable when used to compare schools. The agreed target figure required for each school was 1638 primary schools.

Since one provider has gathered the great majority of the participating schools, the schemes cannot be compared fairly and reliably in line with the standards that the DfE set to ensure that comparisons between schemes and schools are robust.

Green MP Caroline Lucas and Labour MP Catherine West were sufficiently concerned about the lack of information on theissue to submit written independent questions in Parliament on 15 July 2015.

Q. To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many primary and infant schools have signed up to (a) the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University, (b) Early Excellence and (c) the National Foundation for Educational Research for provision of reception baseline assessment; how many primary or infant schools signed up to a provider which was unsuccessful in gaining approval as providers of such assessments; and how many primary and infant schools have not signed up to any provider. (Catherine West MP)

A. The Department for Education does not have final numbers of primary and infant schools signing up for the reception baseline. Schools are still able to sign up to their preferred choice form the list of three approved baselines ahead of the new academic year starting in September. (Nick Gibb MP)

Q. To ask the Secretary of State for Education, which schools opted not to do the Baseline Assessment tests in September and October 2015? (Caroline Lucas MP)

A. Schools are still able to sign up to their preferred choice from the list of three approved reception baselines. There is not yet a finalised list of schools that have not signed up to any of the providers. As of 30 April 2015, 2859 schools had not signed up to any reception baseline. (Nick Gibb MP)

Early Excellence have stated on numerous occasions that they have signed up over 11000 schools. If 2859 schools have not signed up and Early Excellence has signed up 11000 then it is not possible for both of the other providers to have signed up 10% of eligible schools:

16788 primary schools
– 11,000 (at least) signed to Early Excellence
– 2859 yet to choose
= 2929 primary schools.

Split equally between NFER and CEM, only 1464 schools each are available, far short of the DfE's original 1638 target. At least one if not two of the three approved reception baseline assessment providers have failed to come anywhere close to meeting the conditions set by the DfE.

Mobility of pupils during the primary years and other factors will make on-entry data irrelevant as a basis for school judgements.

	CEM	EARLY EXCELLENCE	NFER
How is the assessment administered?	Computer, laptop or tablet	Professional judgements evidence through observation of play, whole group sessions, and small group sessions	Real object for maths tasks, picture based resources for communication, language and literacy (CLL). An observational checklist is also used for CLL and "Foundations of Learning".
Is the assessment linear, adaptive or observational?	Adaptive	Observational	Linear/Observational
How long will the assessment take?	15-20 minutes	Within normal class time – difficult to say	30 minutes for set tasks + 10 minutes checklist per child
Does the assessment take place within the class or separately?	One-to-one	Within normal class activities	Both
How does the scoring system work?	Scaled scores in reading, maths and phonological awareness; score calculated by scheme provider	Uses Leuven scales; numerical scores issued covering Characteristics and five Areas of Learning	Scaled scores: single overall score with separate scores for maths, CLL and Foundation of learning available
Who can administer the assessment?	Teacher or teaching assistant	Reception class teacher	Any suitably trained and qualified person, under supervision of the reception teacher
What training is required to undertake the assessment?	None mentioned	One day free training for lead reception teacher	None required

This new baseline is undermined by the fact that a significant proportion of children (43%) change schools between starting year 1 and completing end of key stage tests in year 6. The following quotation from a DfE commissioned report highlights the issue:

Pupil mobility is in fact a substantial issue for all schools and its significance is often underplayed (Dobson, Henthorne & Lynas, 2000). Nationally, Goldstein, Burgess and McConnell (2007) report that 43 per cent of pupils who started Key Stage (KS) 1 in 2000 had moved schools by the subsequent KS2 test date. This high proportion does include changes of school between KS1 (perhaps an infant school) and KS2 (possibly a junior school). Importantly, however, they report that within-key stage mobility, where pupils move during a key stage, was also surprisingly high. They report that 15 per cent of pupils (about 1 in 7) who started KS2 in 2002 had changed school at least once by the end of the key stage. About 1 in 100 pupils moved schools at least twice during that KS2. Goldstein et al (2007) consider these figures, which some would regard as surprisingly high, to be underestimates. The underestimation has a number of explanations (for example, because the census data does not include pupils who move to private schools).. Furthermore, these national figures mask considerable variation between different local authorities. For example, Goldstein et al (2007) found that 39 per cent of pupils in Northamptonshire, 25 per cent of pupils in Staffordshire and 9 per cent in Hampshire moved schools during KS2.[1]

The fact that so many children will have changed schools between the reception baseline and the end of key stage 2 test in year 6 undermines the argument that it can be used to fairly and reliably measure pupil progress. Many schools face significant turbulence in their school population and have a very different group of children in front of them after 6 years. Should a school that receives a child mid-way through year 6 take full responsibility for the last 6 years of that child's education?

In a written answer on this subject on the 05.11.2015 Nick Gibb stated that scores will move will move with the child. The Bew Review of Key Stage 2 Assessment stated that a child's data should only be included in school accountability data if a child had been at school for the entirety of year 5 and year 6.[2]

Part time attendance

There is no accommodation made for children who attend part time or have a period of absence during the assessment period. Under an observational model a child who attends only in the mornings will have far less opportunity to demonstrate their ability and skills than those who attend full time. Teachers will have to make judgements with less information. It is not clear why a pro-rata system could not be put into place, or a scale applied to the score that took attendance into account.

d) Schools have an on-going incentive to 'game' the system in order to show improved performance.

There is a likelihood of 'gaming' the results in a high-stakes accountability system.

Research commissioned by the DfE[3] points to the possibility of 'gaming' when assessment is undertaken for high stakes accountability purposes, rather than for supporting children – teachers may underestimate children's achievements in order to show larger gains later.

A teacher comments: 'I feel like being harsher is better anyway because you can show better progress. It's all politics!'

Other reported efforts to distort the data include head teachers telling reception teachers to refrain from teaching the children until the baseline is complete in order to aim for low scores, and a reception teacher encouraging a preschool teacher to lower her expectations of children in order for the school to demonstrate progress later.

The non-statutory status also offers opportunities for schools to influence accountability judgements. The reception baseline assessment is optional. Schools that do not opt in will be assessed by attainment only – whether or not 85% of the cohort achieves the required standard in the end of key stage 2 tests. Schools in affluent areas with pupil intakes likely to attain well may opt out, thus not being accountable for progress. We know that as of the 30th April 2015 2859 schools did not opt in.

2. Baseline assessments are detrimental to children

a) Many children are already being wrongly labelled as achieving below typical standards, with harmful effects.

Children may have low scores on the assessment for many reasons, including being nearly a year younger than others, not having been formally taught the areas tested, learning English as an additional language, learning and developing in an individual pattern not recognised in the tests.

Summer born children

The scores that children are awarded through the reception baseline assessment will not be scaled to reflect the age of the child at the time of assessment. This is despite the known challenges that summer born children face. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has undertaken a significant amount of research on this matter and stated in 2013:

On average, pupils born later in the academic year perform significantly worse in school than those born at the start of the academic year. As well as achieving lower test scores and assessments from teachers, on average, children's confidence in their academic ability is also affected.[4]

Nick Gibb, Minister for Schools, also highlighted the challenges facing summer born children and their families in a letter which reveals a commitment to amend the school admissions code as follows:

We have, therefore, decided that it is necessary to amend the School Admissions Code further to ensure that summer born children can be

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/339984/managing-pupil-mobility-to-maximise-learning-full-report.pdf Managing pupil mobility to maximise Learning, 2011, page 6
2 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/176180/Review-KS2-Testing_final-report.pdf
3 DfE (2015) Reception baseline research: results of a randomised controlled trial, Research Brief, Reference: DFE-RB476
4 http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6856

admitted to the reception class at the age of five if it is in line with their parents' wishes, and to ensure that those children are able to remain with that cohort as they progress through school, including through to secondary school.[1]

Why scores will not be scaled for age remains unclear, especially as the differences will be exacerbated if some summer born children enter the year behind other summer born peers, which would extend the age range under comparison from 12 months to 17.

Schools may have a significant difference in the number of summer born children within their reception cohorts. Whilst the national average 41% (summer term entry includes birthdays in five months of the year, April-August), within individual schools can vary greatly. For example within the borough of Nottingham the Southglade Primary School has 28% summer born in reception in 2014/2015, whereas the Springfield Primary School had 53%.[2] It is likely that the school with a greater number of summer born children in their reception cohort will receive lower scores than schools admitting fewer summer born children.. It has been argued that achieving a lower baseline score is favourable as it will be easier to show "added value" or "progress" in the key stage 2 tests.

Special Educational Needs
Since the baseline scores cannot differentiate between the many reasons children may have a low score, real risk that children who do have additional needs or who need extra support will 'get lost' in the sea of children who are going to be scored as underperforming.

Negative messages to parents, children and teachers can cause immediate distress and longer term harm through lowered expectations of children's potential.

A mother wrote to the Better Without Baseline campaign:

'Henry, my 4 year old, is one of the most determined, resourceful and imaginative children I know. He runs rings around his 7 year old brother, and he runs rings around us too! He's an active, physical learner who is inquisitive, always exploring and investigating. He takes things apart (with screwdriver) to see how they work. And yes, he can put them together again!

Henry can count and recognise his numbers. He can't recognise his letters (aside from "H") and he has speech difficulties. He can only write "H".

This week he was baseline tested by his school. He was given a number, a rank, a group and he was placed in "orange" which is the bottom of five. Because Henry can't write his name or recognise/ pronounce his sounds correctly he will be a low achiever throughout his remaining school days. This, we are told, will likely be born out in his SATS at both KS1 and KS2. He'll probably also fail his GCSEs.

… I am just a parent and I don't have a background in teaching or education yet every single fibre of my being knows these tests are wrong. I know this has harmed my son.'

Unfortunately, baseline scores which do not reflect a child's potential are likely to result in harm through the well-established fact that teachers' perceptions of children's ability become self-fulfilling prophecies. 'It is inevitable that schools and teachers will make judgements about individual pupils based on their baseline scores. In the present context schools will inevitably use these results to track pupils on an individual basis. Teachers will use the results for practices such as "ability grouping", and make assumptions about a child's ability and potential.

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/458797/Nick-Gibb-open-letter-summer-born-children-admissions.pdf
2 Figures taken from the 'school pupils and their characteristics: January 2015' statistical release.

Indeed, it is highly likely that Ofsted inspectors will look at scores for sample children and question whether or not the school has added the expected quantity of "value". This has very serious consequences for children, and could have a serious impact on their opportunities and development… baseline assessment is fantasy dressed up as science. But it is a dangerous fantasy. It leads to misleading assumptions about each child's "ability" or "potential", and will do untold damage.'[3]

While the assessments are not intended to be used to plan for teaching individual children, 'The big danger is that teachers will believe they are accurate and useful. Admittedly some of these companies advise schools to complement them with other data, but the scientific appearance of statistical correlation, along with the marketing claim of "excellent predictive validity", will convince many overworked teachers that they've found the holy grail. They will genuinely believe –not surprisingly – that they now have an accurate scientific measure of each child's "ability" and "potential". Furthermore, when they start to teach accordingly or place children in "ability groups", the baseline assessments of 4 year olds will become a self-fulfilling prophecy… Thanks to government policy, schools are again being pushed down the old track of determinism which has blighted English schools for over a century. The test scores of thousands of 4-year-olds will severely restrict their future achievement. The least confident four-year-olds, often children growing up in poverty, will be labelled "low ability" and "limited potential" from the start.'[4]

b) The assessments disrupt children's introduction into school during the vital settling-in period.

The first priority when children enter the reception year is to help each child become a settled and confident member of the class. Only when a young child feels safe, secure and able to trust and depend on others will they be able to engage in learning with confidence, competence and curiosity. Teachers are rightly concerned with forming relationships, socialisation and establishing trust, focusing on the prime areas of learning and development, and understanding and supporting each child as an individual. A focus on high stakes assessment of children at this time undermines the settling-in process, and causes unnecessary stress for children, worry for their parents and unacceptable pressure for their teachers, diverting teachers' time away from the essential task of helping children to settle happily in their new classroom environment.

Standardised tests will necessarily be conducted on a one-to-one basis according to a set routine, with children individually withdrawn from the group. This procedure is highly disruptive to attempts to establish a sense of community in the class, and will occupy the teacher who needs instead to be aware of and responsive to all children in the class in order to build relationships of trust on which young children's learning depends. For the child the test may be a very uncomfortable

3 Wrigley, T: http://reclaimingschools.org/2015/06/11/predicting-childrens-potential-baseline-tests/#more-680
4 Figures taken from the 'school pupils and their characteristics: January 2015' statistical release.

experience. However dressed up as 'developmentally appropriate' and 'motivating', the test activities will require the child to participate in an adult-dictated sequence, far removed from the reciprocal interactions in an informal atmosphere with familiar and trusted adults that enable a child to relax and participate freely to the best of his/her ability.

While one scheme is not a test, it requires teachers in a typical class of 30 children to make over a thousand separate judgements within the first few weeks, which is likely to add considerable pressure and workload as teachers attempt to cover the ground specified in the descriptors.

One reception teacher commented on the effect on the children: 'I have just input all my baseline data ahead of this weeks' deadline. I am, at the same time, completing my Best Fit data, which will then have to be uploaded onto Pupil Asset. Didn't realise this would be so much work and, obviously, all done during my weekends. We have a thought-provoking final moderation one evening this week - it'll take HOURS. I feel the poor lambs in my class have been neglected whilst I observe and assess instead of chat and play… it's been a struggle and I feel very tired! Thank goodness for my resoundingly fabulous teaching assistant! Now that this is all drawing to a close, I can finally get on with my job.' [1]

c) The new systems are undermining existing levels of communication about the child with parents and with early years settings.

Children demonstrate different aspects of their learning and capacities in different contexts, and accurate assessment must include the insights of parents who know their children best, as well as practitioners from other settings children have attended. Early years settings all hold detailed information about individual children which is commonly shared through passing on records and sometimes discussion. Parents' insights are gained in introductory meetings and shared records before starting school, and continued through on-going partnership which develops over time as relationships grow.

Baseline assessment hinders successful partnership between parents and teachers when the insights and judgement of parents and carers are not included in the assessment of potential for learning. The baseline schemes which are test-based ignore the wealth of reliable information parents and other professionals can contribute. For all the schemes, the requirement to produce definitive scores within a brief period limits the opportunities for discussion and inclusion of parents' views.

It is concerning that, far from being involved, parents are in many cases are not being informed that the baseline assessments are taking place, nor that data about their child will be kept and referred to in the future.

d) The narrow focus on attainment in prescribed subject areas is harmful to children's learning and development in the early years.

1 https://community.tes.com/threads/eexba-r-thoughts.723368/

Practitioners will feel pressured to 'teach to the test', detracting from the exploratory, playful, creative and intellectual experiences which benefit children in the early years.

A baseline assessment with its focus on a narrow range of knowledge and skills is likely to lead to a narrow range of experiences for children at even earlier ages. Practitioners in nurseries and preschools will be under pressure to demonstrate that their children are 'ready for school' and so may 'teach to the test'. Reception teachers will be expected to show progress in these narrow measures within children's final year of the EYFS. In consequence, children would be increasingly subjected to inappropriate and unnecessary formal teaching that would detract from the rich exploratory, playful, creative, and intellectual experiences which we know from research benefit children in the early years.[2]

A reception teacher wrote: 'We are asked to assess whether four year olds can write 'for different purposes', 'use past, present and future tenses accurately' and add and subtract using single digit numbers. This is developmentally inappropriate: children entering reception with this level of academic skill have usually been exposed to an unhealthy degree of formal teaching in their nurseries and missed out on play.' [3]

Research provides clear messages about practices which best support effective learners, in early childhood and for their futures. The central issue is that the critical attributes of being a confident, resilient learner cannot be directly taught; they must be learned through consistent experiences which enable children to use the characteristics of effective learners. In the early years play and playful experiences offer the richest context for children to meet challenges, take risks, make decisions, solve problems, re-group and bounce back when intentions are not met, build concentration and intrinsic motivation, and think creatively and critically. Alongside secure attachments with key adults, playful interactions are also the context in which children experience and learn about the emotions and perspectives of themselves and others which underpin their progress through life.

Skilful adults who focus on supporting and encouraging children's well-being and capacities as self-regulating learners are essential. Effective support for character and resilience cannot be provided through a narrow focus on curricular targets, but requires the knowledge and understanding of expert practitioners who can establish the conditions for children's growth and respond optimally to individual children moment to moment. These will include rich play and other meaningful learning contexts where children are making choices, solving real problems, and engaging in stretching conversations about their thoughts, feelings, and activities.[4]

'In this paper, we have reviewed the now extensive evidence that the curriculum-centred approach and the idea that rushing young children into formal learning of literacy, mathematics etc. as young as possible is misguided. This leads to a situation where children's basic emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and the opportunity to develop their metacognitive and self-regulation skills, are not being met.'[5]

Parents will be misdirected to give priority to the narrow measures, rather than engaging in the responsive, playful interactions which best support children's well-being and learning.

2 Moyles, J. (2015) The Excellence of Play (4edn). Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill
3 letter to TES
4 Marcon, R (2002) Moving up the Grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success, Early Childhood Research and Practice, Vol 4 No 1.

5 Whitebread, D., and Sue Bingham (2012) TACTYC's Occasional Paper No. 2: School Readiness; a critical review of perspectives and evidence, http://tactyc.org.uk/occasional-paper/occasional-paper2.pdsf.

Early years settings often report that parents are concerned about whether their child is learning what is required to successfully make the transition into school. Partnership discussions between parents and professionals include helping parents to understand how children learn through play, and to recognise the kind of activities and conversations at home that will best benefit their child. Parents who engage with their child in a contingent, supportive and stimulating way in play and real life activities have a profound and lasting positive influence on their child's learning and development.[1 2] On the other hand, a strongly directive approach to learning can limit children's confidence and motivation and suppress self-regulation and metacognition.

There is a danger that rather than feeling confident to support the unfolding of early literacy and numeracy learning within rich parent-child interactions, parents will feel that they should buy into the narrow skills agenda and push formal learning at home. This risks demotivating children.

3.The commercialisation of the process is resulting in a considerable waste of time and money, which is unjustifiable in a time of austerity.

a) The existing systems had been carefully developed over years and there is no evidence or justification for the current introduction.

Teachers already assess children's starting points in order to plan for their learning, and schools use this information to track children's progress. Hard-pressed teachers are doing the baseline assessments in addition to their existing systems of tracking.

Schools already have on-entry assessment systems in place, which enable them to support learning and teaching, and to track progress – 100% of schools surveyed in research commissioned by the DfE reported that they currently use observation alongside other sources of information to find out where new reception children are in their learning and development. Good teachers are able to assess children as they work with them, tailoring the assessment to each individual child, at no additional cost.

Most schools already make a summative assessment within the first term of school, to provide information for their planning. This is usually based on the EYFS, with reference to Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DM). Most schools already have developed tracking systems to understand children's progress, whether from earlier points in the EYFS for those schools with nursery provision or from the start of the reception year. Teachers already track their pupils' progress termly in relation to the EYFS, differentiating their teaching and approaches to ensure that the children succeed to the best of their abilities and levels of development.

The EYFS Profile continues the approach widely employed in early years settings, using the age-stage bands of Development Matters in the EYFS to provide best-fit guidance on whether children's learning and development is typical for their age.

This approach has several advantages over a baseline test, in that the assessment:

- is developed from on-going observational assessment across contexts and over time;
- is contributed to by parents and others who know the child well;

1 National Literacy Trust (Robin Close) (2001) Parental Involvement and Literacy. London: NLT.
2 Hughes, C (2015) The transition to school, The Psychologist, Vol 28, 714-717.

- reflects a child's responses to challenges and embedded skills and knowledge which the child uses independently in a range of situations;
- is holistic in focusing on prime areas (personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; physical development) as well as the specific areas (literacy; mathematics; knowledge of the world; expressive arts and design) and the characteristics of effective learning (playing and exploring, active learning, creating and thinking critically) – therefore building an accurate and useful picture of a child's abilities, interests, dispositions and ways of learning.

In the pilots of the baseline schemes, teachers have reported spending many hours completing the assessments, only to need to begin again with their more meaningful existing systems.

Teachers commented:
"What made me laugh was the 'tip' at the bottom of the CEM data - 'use your own judgements' - we could all have done that anyway!!"

'It sounds like a nightmare, especially with 62 children, and can't believe you have to delete and start again if you make mistakes, what a bad design! I only work 3 days a week, but we have parent's evenings next week, and it's my daughter's 1st birthday and party, and my chances of getting anything done while I'm at home with her are zero! This is if the children ever get transferred onto the system! No idea when it's going to get done! We haven't filled in the optional bit as we will be doing our assessments on our tracker anyway and will work from that."

"I think the issue I am wrestling with is that we need to show progress within year. So whatever happens, and whichever baseline we use, surely we need to do a DM type baseline too… Based on the fact that

the baseline is no use to tracking, and based on the fact the world will (hopefully) be different in 7 years, I'm going to stick with what's easiest. A lot of my children would have found 1:1 at a PC stressful. Not sure what my early learners of English would have done. Testing a 4 year old is wrong. My baseline scores (by DM and eexba) are already not representing where the children are heading to by the end of term 1 and will show a difference by the year end. Remember, that's part if the reason baseline was abandoned in the first place - it was unreliable."

"I am using the DM data to track progress etc; the EExBA has been useful for me and I feel on the whole the data is accurate of our cohort. A few odd bits but possibly our fault when using a new assessment system!

I think we need to think of the baseline in the bigger picture and that it will be used to show the whole school progress not EY's progress! Therefore the baseline is a piece of work we have to complete and the DM is the individual tracking and the to way show progress within EY's. ??? Its crazy the work load!"

"Am I wrong in thinking that we have completed baseline assessments purely to drive government statistics? If I'm right why is everyone getting so frustrated with it? We've done it now so move on and teach what you know the kids actually need!'"

b) Millions of pounds of public funds will go to commercial firms for these assessments, which are inferior to those already in use in schools.

The costs are to be reimbursed by the DfE in academic years 2015/2016 and 2016/2017. It remains unclear who will pay for the policy thereafter.

"Basic" costs of running reception baseline assessment are as follows:

CEM:

£3.50 plus VAT per pupil

NFER:

Online delivery: access cost £225 per school. Postage costs for teacher guide, resource pack.

Paper delivery: The access cost to the online system is £225 per school. Pupil packs at £10 per pack of 10. Postage costs as above.

Early Excellence (EExBA):

£85 plus VAT registration fee, £3.10 plus VAT per pupil.

Based on 2014-15 numbers (16,788 primary schools, 636,761 children in reception), the cost to the public purse if every child were assessed with the same scheme would be:

- Early Excellence £4,081,126
- CEM £2,674,396
- NFER online only £3,777,300
- NFER paper version £4,414,061

The costs of the various schemes vary significantly. It is interesting that the most popular scheme is also the most expensive for schools with more than one class entry. It is unclear why each scheme is priced so differently.

4. It's been tried – and abandoned – before!

First introduced in England in 1997, the compulsory baseline policy was abandoned in 2002 because it was not effective in supporting individual children's learning and development and it did not give a measure of school effectiveness. In Wales baseline assessment was introduced in 2011 and withdrawn in 2012 as "time consuming, ill-thought through and denied children and teachers essential teaching time" (NUT comment 2012).

School cost					
Scheme/cohort size	30	60	90	120	150
CEM	£126	£252	£378	£504	£630
NFER Paper	£255	£285	£310	£340	£370
NFER Online	£225	£225	£225	£225	£225
EExBA	£213.60	£325.20	£436.80	£548	£660

Pupil Cost					
Scheme/cohort size	30	60	90	120	150
CEM	£4.20	£4.20	£4.20	£4.20	£4.20
NFER Paper	£8.50	£4.75	£3.44	£2.83	£2.47
NFER Online	£7.50	£3.75	£2.50	£1.88	£1.50
EExBA	£7.12	£5.42	£4.85	£4.57	£4.40

Professor Cathy Nutbrown writes:

'The baseline assessment system was replaced in 2002 because it did not (and could not) yield the data on school performance that it was introduced to provide. This was because as is planned now, there was a choice about which "baseline" to use and so it was not a case of comparing like with like. Issues of reliability and validity over the different tests meant that the value-added element could not be calculated. At the same time, the tests offered little information that teachers did not already know about children in their classes.

The National Framework of Baseline Assessment was introduced in September 1998, requiring all schools to carry out a baseline assessment of children within the first half-term of their beginning compulsory schooling – regardless of whether or not the children were, themselves, of compulsory school age.

Strong protests and professional dissatisfaction eventually led to its withdrawal in favour of a more holistic and formative assessment process for three to five-year-olds. This was introduced in the form of the Foundation Stage Profile in 2002, which was revised in 2008 and again in 2012. Considerable effort and investment has gone into the assessment of children under five since 1997 – and we are now about to return to a system that was agreed to be flawed and ineffective in 2002.' [1]

The new reception baseline assessment has been introduced to act as a school accountability measure for primary schools. While measuring pupil progress during the primary years could be seen as an attempt to find a fairer way of comparing schools than merely using pupil attainment data, the lack of statistical reliability and validity of baseline measures makes this logical-sounding approach ill-founded.

The following extract from a government policy paper explains how this new school accountability measure will work:

We will collect a score for each child following the assessment, but we will not use it to track individual pupil progress. The purpose of

1 https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/nr/baseline-tests-primary-school-sheffield-university-1.433907

the reception baseline is to provide a score for each pupil at the start of reception. When pupils reach the end of key stage 2, we will use the reception baseline score to calculate how much progress they have made compared to others with the same starting point. A school's measure of progress will be the average progress made by its pupils.[1]

The government's July 2014 consultation on the baseline proposals resulted in a majority opposing the plan for a baseline check at the start of reception, including responses from expert groups representing hundreds of members. Yet the decision was made to move ahead with the plans regardless of detailed concerns.

Journalist Warwick Mansell described the government's response to the consultation:

"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, as argued above, I think the thrust of the proposals are unchanged.

The July paper also said the DfE was "seeking views on the most appropriate point for baseline assessment", having tentatively suggested its use in reception. Some 51 per cent replied that there should not be a baseline check at the start of reception, Thursday's paper conceded, 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." [2]

The DfE approved six providers of schemes, from which schools were encouraged to select for the pilot year 2015-16. Only those schemes enrolling 10% of the total in summer 2015 were to be accredited to continue. Although it appears that the 10% target is unlikely to have been met by those remaining, three providers were approved for the pilot year: Early Excellence, CEM, and NFER. The majority of schools opted in for the pilot year, while some thousands did not.

Baseline assessment will not be compulsory, but from September 2016 using one of the approved schemes with reception children is intended to be the only measure that will be accepted in 2022 as a progress measure. Schools who opt out, tracking their children's progress in other ways, will be judged only on the challenging floor targets of 85% of children reaching expected levels of attainment.

There may be no ultimate advantage in opting for baseline, as it is not clear how stringent the progress measure will be and no reason to think that it will be particularly lenient. The DfE has published draft illustrative regulations which indicate how the question of what constitutes acceptable levels of progress will be determined by the DfE, after pupils have taken their SATs.[3]

Under current plans, the 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, will become optional from September 2016. The loss of this national data set will:

- undermine the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) project, introduced by this government to assess the longer term impact of early years experiences
- 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
- compromise the longitudinal data needed for the government to assess the impact of the Early Years Pupil Premium, and
- remove one of the few available indicators used by Ofsted to measure the effectiveness of children's centres.

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-school-and-college-funding-and-accountability/2010-to-2015-government-policy-school-and-college-funding-and-accountability#appendix-2-reception-baseline-assessment (appendix 2)

2 http://www.naht.org.uk/welcome/news-and-media/blogs/warwick-mansell/primary-and-accountability-proposals-what-weve-learned/

3 ["For 2014 and 2015 a school will fall below the coasting level if fewer than 85% of its pupils achieve level 4 or above in reading, writing and mathematics and below the median percentage of pupils make expected progress. We propose a school will fall below the coasting standard in 2016 where fewer than 85% of pupils achieve the expected standard across reading, writing and mathematics and pupils do not make sufficient progress. The same progress measure will be used in both the floor and the coasting criteria, but a higher progress bar will be set for the coasting criteria. We will announce the exact levels of progress for both the floor and the coasting criteria once tests have been taken in 2016."]

What baseline assessment means for children, parents, teachers/teaching assistants, head teachers, school governors and government

Children

Stress affects well-being

Baseline assessment is not intended to have any effect on children since it is geared solely toward judging school effectiveness, but unfortunately this denies the many ways the system impinges on children. Children in the UK are already the most tested in the world, and consistently rank far down the list on international comparisons of child well-being. [1 2 3] With test-based assessments, however dressed up as 'hands on' and motivating, children know when they are being judged. They are also acutely aware of their relative standing in any ability-grouped teaching. The stress caused and harm done to self-image at this early point in life can have far-reaching effects.

Youngest children

The long-term relatively lower levels of achievement of summer-born children children is well documented, and can only be exacerbated by a system which judges all children on the same scale. The youngest in the class may be a year younger than the oldest. With schools pressured to show strong progress from the baseline, those children who are not falling behind but are simply younger will face inappropriate and stressful focus on formal learning that they are not ready for. Without the sound foundation for learning through play which develops confidence, motivation, and self-regulation, children pushed into formal learning will not develop the resilience and skills to avoid being disadvantaged in the future.

Special needs

There is also a risk of children who have particular needs being missed, since the single score assessments are not able to distinguish between children who will need specialist support and those who are simply younger, less mature, have less experience, or whose first language is not English.

Settling in

Children will miss the security of a teacher focussed on building warm relationships in the early weeks, since the requirement to complete the assessments quickly will take priority.

Inappropriate practice

A baseline assessment with its focus on a narrow range of knowledge and skills is likely to lead to a narrow range of experiences for children at even earlier ages. Mapping baseline attainment to later scores in reading, writing and maths brings a risk that children's entitlement to their final year of the EYFS – a curriculum and approach built on play, supporting children as learners, and a holistic view of learning and development – will be hijacked in the push to show rapid gains. Children can learn what they are taught in formal ways, but the early gains are soon lost and come at a cost to their later learning.[4]

Parents

Some parents are naturally concerned about the possible negative effects on their child, and have objected to their child being unfairly labelled in a way that cannot capture the qualities of a four-year-old. It is unclear whether parents will have a right to opt out of their child being assessed in this way. Though a school may have decided to opt in, it

1 http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf
2 http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc11_eng.pdf
3 http://www.oecd.org/els/family/43570328.pdf

4 Goswami, U. and Bryant, P. (2007) Children's Cognitive Development and Learning (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1a), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

is a non-statutory assessment of children who in almost all cases are not yet of statutory school age. Parents have reported their negative experiences of being told that their child is 'behind'. The detailed knowledge that parents have of their children is ignored by two of the assessment schemes, and given only a nod by the third while in practice the rapid completion of the assessments generally leaves parents out of the process.

Research shows that parents play the most important role in children's outcomes through what they do at home with their children, not through worksheets on letters and numbers but through conversation and playful experiences. There is a risk that the baseline assessment will give parents the wrong idea of what matters in their child's early learning and detract from the rich experiences of play and discovery, following children's lead, that support learning.

Teachers/teaching assistants

The primary effect is likely to be the increased workload of completing and reporting the assessments at the beginning of the year. Because the assessments are not adequate to guide teaching and learning nor to show progress within the reception year, teachers also have to maintain their own existing formative assessment systems and often a separate school tracking system.

Teachers have also reported frustration with

- being removed from the job they are there to do – relating to, getting to know, and supporting the learning of a new group of children – by having to complete the assessments.
- knowing the assessments are not accurate for individual children.

Some teachers have influenced the school's decision of whether to opt into baseline assessment and/or choice of baseline assessment scheme, while others have found themselves having to implement a scheme decided on by the head teacher and governors which they feel is not in the best interests of children.

Head Teachers

Many head teachers are not expert in early child development and the pedagogy of early years. To those in leadership roles, it may seem apparent that testing what children know in the 3 R's at age 4 and measuring the achievement by a specified end point will be a a good indicator of how well the primary school has performed. However, this simplistic view of children's learning is in error.

Head teachers feel under strong pressure to sign up for baseline assessment, with the threat that their school will be disadvantaged in the future if they cannot use a progress measure for school accountability. Some head teachers have remained under the mistaken impression that the baseline is compulsory. Others have opted out based on the strongly principled view that it is not in the interests of children and that their existing assessment systems are better at supporting children's learning and at demonstrating progress.

In order to minimise the negative effects of baseline assessment, some head teachers have chosen to use the quickest model, implemented by teaching assistants to allow the teacher to remain with the class, and then to put the results away and not refer to them until 2022. Others have opted out, with the view that the policy lasting until 2022 is unlikely.

Government

In aiming for a method of assessing school effectiveness, the government has created a system that will be rife with difficulties. The schemes are not comparable, none has statistical validity, progress measures cannot yet be specified, and the logic of the entire approach is flawed in that attainment cannot be accurately predicted in this linear way. The government will be left with an expensive scheme that is not fit for purpose. In a time of austerity, the money that could far better be spent on improving teaching and learning will be wasted on this harmful white elephant.

Why an introduction at age 5 will still not be acceptable

The UK already has an exceptionally low school starting age combined with a content-heavy curriculum and over-formalised expectations at Key Stage 1. Baseline Assessment cannot bring anything useful to that situation. All the arguments about this approach being unreliable, unfit for purpose, an unhelpful distraction for teachers and a waste of public money still apply. It is a flawed flawed concept that puts accountability to a system before the welfare of children. Postponing it for another year does not alter that.

Organisations opposing the implementation of Baseline Assessment

TACTYC – Association for Professional Development in Early Years
Save Childhood Movement (SCM)
Early Education – British Association for Early Childhood Education
Pre-School Learning Alliance (PSLA)
The Primary Charter
Early Childhood Forum (ECF)
The National Union of Teachers (NUT)
Association of Teacher and Lecturers (ATL)
Professional Association for Childcare and the Early Years (PACEY)
National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)
London Early Years Foundation (LEYF)
Unison Education and Children's Services
University of Sheffield School of Education
Cambridge Primary Review Trust (CPRT)
The UK Assessment Reform Group
The Association of Teachers of Mathematics (ATM)
The Mathematical Association (MA)
The British Educational Research Association (BERA)
National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)
Mothers at Home Matter (MAHM)
What about the Children? (WATCH)

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Quotations

Professor Cathy Nutbrown, University of Sheffield:

Testing children's knowledge when they are only just becoming accustomed to the school routine is not a reliable way to identify learning and development. Baseline assessment does not support learning; it takes teachers away from working with children. Time that could have been spent playing and learning is lost while a teacher carries out 30 or so individual assessments. 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. Foundations of effective early education will be side-lined with the requirement to assess particular things (and not others) in particular ways for purposes of school management and accountability.

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

The Government would be wrong to push ahead with baseline assessments in the light of recent research. It is questionable how far any form of assessment can accurately show the knowledge and skills of a four-year-old. Children are not robots and do not develop at a regular rate, so we have grave concerns about the reliability of measuring their progress from age four to 11.

Christine Blower, General Secretary, NUT

Our members are extremely concerned by the impact that baseline assessment is having on children, teachers and schools. Children's education and wellbeing are being treated as less valuable and important than accountability measures. Baseline is part of a punitive system used to de-professionalise and demoralise teachers and punish schools. Baseline is not about supporting education and has no place in our schools.

Independent research commissioned by the NUT and ATL has revealed teachers' concerns over the negative impact that the baseline assessment has had on children's start to school and the relationships that they develop with their teachers. The research also shows that teachers have no confidence in baseline as something that will produce fair and accurate results.

We continue to oppose baseline assessment and call on the Department for Education to withdraw it.

Neil Leitch, Chief Executive, Pre-School Learning Alliance

An early assessment that does not place children's learning at its centre can be nothing but deeply flawed – and that is the case with baseline assessments. Instead of focusing on supporting early development, its primary aim is the production of data that makes it easier to compare and rank schools. As a result, instead of an assessment system that seeks to check and support children's progress in all areas of learning through observation, we have one that focuses predominantly on the narrow skills or literacy and numeracy over and above broader skills like physical and personal, social and emotional development; one that requires teachers to make a 'binary decision' as to whether a child is right or wrong when assessing them; and one that has to demonstrate 'value for money' to the government. We continue to oppose such an approach, and to call for the reinstatement of the Early Years Foundation Status Profile'sstatutory status.

Dr Guy Roberts-Holmes, UCL Institute of Education

Reception teachers already carry out thorough and meaningful baseline assessments in authentic and meaningful play based contexts. They use these detailed and careful observational assessments for tracking and development. So, reception teachers are frustrated that their professional expertise in assessing young children is not respected by this new baseline. They also resent having to pay private companies for accountability training and analysis.

Sacha Powell, Chair, TACTYC: the Association for Professional Development in Early Years

Early years teachers are expert at getting to know children when they enter the reception year. By observing and interacting with the children and sharing information with their parents and nursery settings, they are able to make increasingly knowledgeable and meaningful assessments. The goal of these assessments is to support learning through understanding each child including their interests, how they feel and engage in activities, their previous experience and what they know and can do. Baseline assessment which reduces each child to a single number score is an insult to the complexity of learning and development, to the growing relationships in the early days of school experience, and to the professionalism of teachers. It is good for neither children nor teachers. Since it cannot predict what children will learn in the next six years, it has no use for schools' accountability and is a costly waste of time and resources. It should be abandoned.

John Coe, National Association for Primary Education

The National Association for Primary Education is totally opposed to the introduction of baseline assessment. Assessment by the state demonstrates a profound lack of confidence in the work of teachers as they settle the children into the beginning of primary school life.

Teachers are already assessing the children's learning and development needs and they do this in partnership with parents. There is absolutely no need for official intervention. More than anything else the assessment is of parenting and not schooling. Partnership with parents is essential to success in education and for too many families baseline assessment will identify failure at the very moment when parental hopes and optimism for the future should be at their highest.