

# Open Letter – March 2015

## Saying No to Baseline Assessment

**We, the undersigned, are deeply concerned about the intended introduction of standardised baseline tests which, from September, will be administered to young children in their first six weeks of starting school.**

This is going ahead despite considerable opposition and advice from a wide number of expert bodies. The Baseline assessment introduced by the Labour party in 1997 was withdrawn in 2002 as it proved unworkable. It also proved unworkable in Wales, where it was withdrawn in 2012.

The tests are being primarily 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. Schools will be able to choose from a list of approved commercial providers and, although the tests will remain optional, 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 was only introduced in 2012, is not a test but a rounded assessment of children’s development based on observation over time, is to become optional from September 2016.

**We strongly oppose this introduction, together with the impending optional nature of the EYFSP, on the grounds that the new tests 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.

**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.

Any loss of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile data **will undermine the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) project**, introduced by this government to track children’s progress, and 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. **It will also compromise the longitudinal data** needed for the government to assess the impact of the Early Years Pupil Premium.

The letter signatories are now joining forces to combat such an introduction and to make the subject an increasingly high profile pre-election issue. We call on the current government to urgently re-think the introduction, and on all political parties to follow true democratic process, especially with regards to the developmental rights and wellbeing of our youngest citizens.

## LETTER SIGNATORIES

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Chair, **Association for Professional Development in Early Years (TACTYC)**

**Wendy Scott, OBE**  
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Chief Executive, **Save Childhood Movement (SCM)**

**Melian Mansfield**  
Chair, **Early Childhood Form (ECF)**

**Cathy Nutbrown**  
Professor of Education, **The University of Sheffield**

**Lynn Hannay**  
Chair, **National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)**

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

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

**Neil Leitch**  
**Chief Executive, Pre-School Learning Alliance (PSLA)**

**Purnima Tanuku OBE**  
**Chief Executive, National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)**

**Liz Bayram**  
**Chief Executive, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY)**

**Dr Richard House**  
**Chair, Early Childhood Action (ECA)**

**Marie Peacock**  
**Chair, Mothers at Home Matter (MAHM)**

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**Chair, What about the Children? (WATCH)**

**Dr David Whitebread**  
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