

JOINT PRESS RELEASE

Early Years experts unite in the call to block Baseline Assessment

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England's leading early years organisations have united with teaching unions in opposing the September 2015 introduction of Baseline Assessment.

In response to the government's announcement on approved Baseline Assessment providers leading organisations, including the Save Childhood Movement, the Pre-school Learning Alliance, The British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education), TACTYC: The Association for Professional Development in Early Years and the National Association for Primary Education (NAPE) have launched a new joint campaign, Better without Baseline, opposing the introduction. They have been joined by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) – which between them represent the majority of primary teachers in England.

The campaign is also supported by leading academics, including Dr David Whitebread, Senior Lecturer in the Psychology of Education, University of Cambridge, and Dr Pam Jarvis, Senior Lecturer, Institute of Childhood and Education, Leeds Trinity University. Other high-profile figures who have voiced their opposition to the plans include: Wendy Scott, OBE, President of TACTYC; Professor Cathy Nutbrown [Chair of The Nutbrown Review into Qualifications for Early Years workers]; Sue Palmer, literacy expert and author of Toxic Childhood; Dr Richard House, Founding Fellow of The Critical Institute and children's authors Philip Pullman and Michael Rosen.

A Change.org petition against the tests has already attracted more than 6,500 signatures.

Despite considerable expert opposition, and against the recommendations of the government's own consultation process, the schemes are being introduced as an accountability measure to 'help school effectiveness' by scoring each pupil at the start of reception.

Schools were initially asked to choose from a list of six approved commercial providers, which have now been reduced to three. Although the tests will remain optional, the campaign is concerned that there has been significant pressure on headteachers to adopt a baseline scheme to mitigate against the risk of punitive measures if their schools do not reach the government's raised floor standards when the Reception cohort reaches the end of Key Stage 2. It also queries the statistical comparability and validity of such different approaches.

Although some schemes take a more observational approach, the joint alliance fundamentally disagrees with their use as tools of school accountability.

The DfE requires that the assessments be carried out for all children within six weeks of starting Reception, on a "pass/fail" basis for each scoring item, and with a narrow set of results being condensed to a single score. The alliance questions the validity and predictive value of the results, and is concerned about teacher time being diverted away from helping children with settling in and learning. Opponents of baseline assessment also question the value for money of the scheme, which is expected to cost around £4 million.

Similar baseline tests were introduced by the Labour government in 1997 and abandoned in 2002 because it was an "ineffective and damaging policy" (Cathy Nutbrown, The Conversation, Jan, 2015). 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)

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. Members of the alliance 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 campaign now has a new website www.betterwithoutbaseline.org.uk and petition, and is calling for the support of parents and teachers in challenging government policymaking that fails to respond to the recommendations of democratic consultation, and that continues to prioritise school accountability over the best interests of the child.

QUOTES

"Baseline Assessment is a bad policy, badly implemented. The DfE promised schools that by 3rd June they would know who their providers were, so that on 1st September they could begin assessments. Schools have only just been told. At the same time, the TES reports that the DfE is considering changing the way in which 'progress' is measured. Out would go baseline assessment at ages 4/5. In would come a new baseline – in the form of the restoration of SATs at key Stage 1. Amid such incoherence and uncertainty the case for baseline assessment gets weaker by the day."

National Union of Teachers (NUT)

"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 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, Leeds Trinity University, Too Much Too Soon Campaign

"The Association of Teachers and Lecturers is very worried that the new baseline testing of four and five year olds will undermine these children's transition to school, by reducing our children to data points on spreadsheets. Of course teachers will assess children as they start school, in order to plan learning that supports and challenges each individual child. However, this new national baseline system has been designed to provide numerical scores rather than useful information for teaching. Nicky Morgan assured teachers before the election that she would give 'more notice' of any changes to assessment and accountability measures. Fewer than four weeks before the end of term is surely not enough time for teachers to prepare for tests which will be the first experience of school for many children, the results of which will define their journeys through school. Baseline is a bad policy, poorly implemented."

Nansi Ellis (Assistant General Secretary), ATL

"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

Ends –

Find out more about the campaign

Website: www.betterwithoutbaseline.org.uk

Petition: <https://www.change.org/p/nicky-morgan-mp-scrap-baseline-assessment-in-reception-classes-and-keep-the-eyfs-profile-as-the-measure-of-children-s-progress-at-the-end-of-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs>

Twitter

#betterwithoutbaseline
#tooyoungtotest

Notes to Editors

1.0 Organisations opposing Baseline Assessment currently include

TACTYC: Association for Professional Development in Early Years
British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education)
Pre-school Learning Alliance
The Primary Charter
Save Childhood Movement (SCM) 'Too Much Too Soon' Campaign
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
Cambridge Primary Review Trust
The Government's own 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)

2.0 The Department for Education consulted on the introduction of baseline assessments in 2013. Of those that responded to the 'Reforming assessment and accountability for primary schools' consultation:

- 51% answered 'No' to the question: "Should we introduce a baseline check at the start of reception?" (compared to 34% who responded 'Yes')
- 73% answered 'No' to the question: "Should we allow schools to choose from a range of commercially available assessments?" (compared to 15% who responded 'Yes')
- 68% answered 'No' to the question: "Should we make the baseline check optional?" (compared to 19% who responded 'Yes')
- 57% answered 'No' to the question: "Will these principles [of the consultation as a whole] underpin an effective curriculum and assessment system?" (compared to 18% who responded 'Yes')

3.0 The alliance is 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 or 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 – Most of the approved 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. Schools choosing among several possible assessments 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 summer-born 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. Children in the reception year have an entitlement to such practice within the Early Years Foundation Stage. There is a further risk that the academic pressure will extend backwards into pre-school years in an effort to prepare children for the assessments.

Harmful to the home-learning environment, parent partnerships and relationships with early years providers – Parents and early years 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 early years providers send on to school will be devalued.