

## DfE Primary Assessment Consultation

Written evidence submitted by Wendy Ellyatt  
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**“We have introduced a number of changes to primary education in recent years to raise standards so that every child, whatever their background, is prepared to go on to succeed at secondary school. The new national curriculum, introduced in 2014, and new statutory assessments have raised expectations of what pupils should know and be able to do by the time they leave primary school. Recognising the scale of the changes that we have asked primary schools to deal with, this consultation represents a significant step towards establishing a settled, stable primary assessment system that is trusted by teachers and parents.”**

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The Save Childhood Movement is a relative newcomer to educational policymaking, but in the short time that we have been involved we have become aware that until now the English approach has been inherently flawed, in that it has failed to balance school accountability with the ‘best interests of the child’ principle. There has also been a focus on ‘international benchmarking’, which has equated test scores with what we now know is a very limited spectrum of human learning. This is very worrying as it means that serious consideration has been given to potentially damaging policies that we know compromise child wellbeing and children’s life chances of becoming joyful lifelong learners. Over the last two decades there have been considerable advances in our understanding of how and why children learn and we believe that it is irresponsible of any government to not fully acknowledge these and take them into account. We therefore welcome the current Minister’s interest in addressing the situation.

Given the focus of the movement, we have been particularly concerned at the lack of evidence-based policymaking in the early years, together with the DfE’s consistent negation of expert opinion and advice, to the point where many high profile individuals and organisations have felt compelled to unite in opposition. Examples of this include the Too Much Too Soon Campaign [www.toomuchtoosoon.org](http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org), the Better without Baseline Campaign [www.betterwithoutbaseline.org.uk](http://www.betterwithoutbaseline.org.uk) and the More than a Score Campaign [www.morethanascore.co.uk](http://www.morethanascore.co.uk). In all cases we believe that the members of the campaigns would have preferred to work collaboratively with the government through open and constructive dialogue, but this option was sadly not offered and instead in 2013 many eminent and highly experienced individuals were labelled by the DfE as ‘the blob’ – a situation that was manifestly not conducive to mature and effective consultation. It is clear that over the last decade the downward pressures of the larger schooling system have increasingly impacted early years settings. A prime example of the accountability system taking priority over child wellbeing is that of the introduction of Baseline Assessment and we detail our concerns about this later on.

Over the past thirty years, successive governments have moved towards an earlier and earlier start to formal instruction, and an erosion of learning through play. However the ‘earlier is better’ argument, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, is entirely unsupported by the body of research. In fact, evidence from international comparisons and psychological research of young children’s development as learners indicates that a slow trajectory into formal education, with the early years period being spent in child-led play based learning produces better long-term results. The term school ‘readiness’ is also dangerous as it implies that real learning only starts at school, whereas we know that the richest and most creative period of human learning and development actually takes place in the early years.

It is important for decision-makers to acknowledge that it is the physical, neurological and psychological patterns and mind-sets that are created in the early years that set the foundation for all later development. All young children have the human right to have their natural developmental capacities and potentials fully protected by adult decision-makers. The

introduction of developmentally inappropriate pressures at this stage can be deeply damaging to later achievement, but more importantly can impact on how the child feels about his or her self. It is simply unacceptable for any nation to implement a system where four and five year olds feel that they are somehow not good enough and we know that very young children do not only see that they have failed at something, but internalise it though a diminished sense of self-worth.

Of course we all want to see children succeeding, but there are enormous variations in children's life experiences and developmental capacities, especially so in the early years, and what really matters is that every child can become the 'best version' of him or her self, rather than experience a sense of failure at an ever earlier stage. Children are clearly not all the same and although we obviously need to identify developmental norms we feel that there should be much more emphasis on developing happy, confident and socially engaged individuals, rather than simply what they 'should know and can do' when they leave school. In fact this sentence itself reveals the major flaw in the current system. We need to move away from simply thinking about 'what' children learn to 'how and why' they learn. And this is particularly so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the growing impact of globalisation and the challenges of a sustainable future. Other more forward-thinking countries are already responding to this need and we ignore this at our children's peril.

The competencies required of young people today are fundamentally different from those of their parents and grandparents and we need to adopt educational approaches that honour these differences and that equip our children for the world of the future and not that of the past. We also urgently need new definitions of success that encompass lives of meaning and purpose, rather than only what grades we can achieve. When talking about the desire that 'all children can fulfil their potential' we therefore need to look much more closely at what the world potential actually *means* in terms of each child's unique genetic, biological and emotional pre-dispositions and capacities.

When looking at the primary curriculum we should, therefore, seek for it to reflect our best understanding of humanity, society and learning, with successful learning competencies seen as more important than subject contents and where academic achievement is balanced with student welfare. We should see schools more as learning communities, re-think the relationship between schools and local communities and review the roles, goals and content of school subjects to better serve a sustainable world.

What we most need is a courageous educational vision, rather than a re-running of the past, and we hope that the current Minister and government will rise to the challenge.

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## Baseline Assessment

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**10. Any form of progress measure requires a starting point. Do you agree that it is best to move to a baseline assessment in reception to cover the time a child is in primary school (reception to key stage 2)? If you agree, then please tell us what you think the key characteristics of a baseline assessment in reception should be. If you do not agree, then please explain why.**

We see little point in yet again listing the carefully evidenced arguments already put forward by TACTYC, BERA, NAPE, the CPRT, the NUT, the Better without Baseline Campaign and the More than a Score Campaign. Baseline assessment was abandoned as unworkable when it was tried in 1997-2003 and the plans for re-introducing it in 2017 were withdrawn when the pilot proved that the results between different schemes were not comparable.

Along with many others we believe it to be a statistically invalid and potentially damaging policy, not only through the use of multiple providers who have a financial interest in baseline testing, but also in that its own data demonstrates poor predictive capacity and invalidity with regard to pupils with SEN and EAL. While children's progress must clearly be taken into account in establishing school accountability, their early developmental backgrounds and

experiences are profoundly different and it is not possible, or indeed logical, to develop an accurate or reliable measurement for comparing children's later attainment with a starting point. As far as we are aware there is no evidence that it is possible to accurately predict children's later attainment from the reception year and we contest the consultation document's claim that 'the case for a baseline in reception is strong' and that 'we know from research evidence that it is possible to create an assessment of reception age children which is suitable for that age group, sufficiently granular and well correlated with later outcomes.' These claims appear to have been made on the basis of a single reference – i.e. the work of the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) at Durham University, with critics pointing out that the research lacks peer group validation and that there were a number of fundamental weaknesses in the conclusions drawn. We would therefore encourage the committee to examine this claim in some detail.

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### **Tacking the needs of the future, rather than the past**

One of the core aims of the movement is to help raise awareness about the issues that are impacting child wellbeing, but we also champion bodies of work that have a holistic and future-focused approach to learning and development. I would therefore like to draw the Minister and committee's attention to the work of the following people and organisations in the hope that you will fully appreciate the dangers of yet again trying to re-invent the wheel, rather than celebrate the great work that has already been done in the area. We believe that educational policymaking is critical for the wellbeing of children, families and society and that the current lack of vision, short-termism of approach and enforcement of policies against expert opinion and advice, is hugely detrimental to a forward-thinking country. Our children are going to need to compete on a global stage and the failure to understand that the new competences are more about happiness, self-confidence, resilience, thinking on your feet and getting on with others, than the old fashioned 'what exam grades did you get?' is going to profoundly disadvantage them.

### **Related Reading**

**1. Robin Alexander: The Cambridge Primary Review: Towards a New Primary Curriculum**

[http://cpctrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/CURRICULUM\\_BRIEFING\\_REVISIED\\_2\\_11.pdf](http://cpctrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/CURRICULUM_BRIEFING_REVISIED_2_11.pdf)

**2. The Compass: 'Big Education' Inquiry, 2015**

<http://www.compassonline.org.uk/education-inquiry/the-final-report>

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**3. John Abbot: Parliamentary Paper, 2009**

[http://www.21learn.org/wp-content/uploads/parliamentary\\_paper.pdf](http://www.21learn.org/wp-content/uploads/parliamentary_paper.pdf)

**4. Improving Schools, vol 19, number 2, 2016** Special issue on early education: Bringing the Child Back In

<http://journals.sagepub.com/toc/impa/19/2>

**5. Wendy Ellyatt The Unique Child, the Impact of Culture and how we foster Human Wellbeing, WATCH Paper, March 2016**

<http://www.savechildhood.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-Unique-Child-Wendy-Ellyatt-WATCH-paper-March-2016.pdf>

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**6. Save Childhood Movement: Consultation Submission School Starting Age**

[http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org/uploads/2/0/3/8/20381265/school\\_starting\\_age\\_-\\_final.pdf](http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org/uploads/2/0/3/8/20381265/school_starting_age_-_final.pdf)

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**7. Save Childhood Movement: Consultation Submission - DfE Use of Evidence**

[http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org/uploads/2/0/3/8/20381265/scm\\_submission\\_-\\_](http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org/uploads/2/0/3/8/20381265/scm_submission_-_)

[dfc use of evidence .pdf](#)

- 8. Save Childhood Movement: Seven Priorities for Early Years Policymaking, Sept 2015**  
[http://www.savechildhood.net/uploads/1/8/4/9/1849450/seven\\_priorities\\_for\\_early\\_years\\_policymaking\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.savechildhood.net/uploads/1/8/4/9/1849450/seven_priorities_for_early_years_policymaking_2_.pdf)
- 9. Save Childhood Movement: Putting Children First Manifesto, March 2014**  
<http://www.savechildhood.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PUTTING-CHILDREN-FIRST.pdf>
- 10. Pasi Sahlberg – How can we tackle inequality in English Education?**  
*Slideshow, RSA, 2014*  
<http://pasisahlberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/RSA-Talk-2014.pdf>
- 11. Carla Rinaldi – South Australia Thinker in Residence, 2012-2013 Re-Imagining Childhood**  
[http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/aboutdept/files/links/reimagining\\_childhood.pdf](http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/aboutdept/files/links/reimagining_childhood.pdf)
- 12. Robin Alexander - Moral Panic, Miracle Cures and Educational Policy: what can we really learn from international comparison?** The 2011 SERA Lecture, delivered at the annual conference  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/76276>
- 13. Charles Leadbeater – Rethinking innovation in Education**, Innovation Unit, January 2011 draft  
<http://www.innovationunit.org/sites/default/files/Leadbeater%20Rethinking%20Innovation%20in%20Education.pdf>
- 14. Wendy Ellyatt, The Democratisation of Learning** - Chapter in the book ‘Too, Much, Too Soon?’ Hawthorn Press – Sept 2011
- 15. Children, Their World, Their Education** Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review, 2010  
<https://www.routledge.com/products/9780415548717>
- 16. Wendy Ellyatt, A Science of Learning: New approaches to thinking about creativity** - Demos collection on Creativity and education ‘Born Creative’ - October 2010
- 17. Ken Robinson – Do Schools Kill Creativity?**  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity?language=en)
- 18. Innovation Unit – Ten Schools for the 21st Century**  
[http://www.innovationunit.org/sites/default/files/10%20Schools%20for%20the%2021st%20Century\\_0.pdf](http://www.innovationunit.org/sites/default/files/10%20Schools%20for%20the%2021st%20Century_0.pdf)
- 19. The Great Education Debate**  
<http://www.greateducationdebate.org.uk/debate/debate.the-curriculum.html>
- 20. Save Childhood Movement, Children’s Charter of Developmental Rights**  
<http://www.savechildhood.net/pdf/Childrens-Charter-2016.pdf>