

POLICY WATCH

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The Government responds to the Select Committee Inquiry into testing and assessment

According to Estelle Morris, the former Education Secretary who knows a thing or two about the tribulations of assessment systems, the Government should use the current SATs difficulties as an opportunity to take a fresh look at the whole assessment regime. *"My conclusion is that it gives the Government the opportunity to look at testing again,"* she wrote in the *Education Guardian* recently.

The trouble is that the Government is showing little inclination to want to do this. It has recently released its response to the important Inquiry into [Testing and Assessment by the DCSF Select Committee](#) and has played a very straight bat on all its recommendations. Here's a good example on that emotive question of teaching to the test; *"The Committee raises 'teaching to the test' as a key concern but the Government does not accept that increases in national test results are the result of teaching to the test."* Straight and to the point.

It's no wonder that the Committee has expressed disappointment at the Government's response. *"It is a pity"* their website reports echoing the comments of Estelle Morris, *"that the Government has not taken this opportunity to make a commitment to reform the national testing system."* Others have been less charitable; *"what comes across is that this department and minister are blindly committed to a centralised, rigid, outdated, unsuccessful approach to preparing people for the rest of their lives"* another Guardian writer fumed this week. Testing and assessment have always raised the hackles but arguably an Inquiry which ran for six months, heard from some of the leading experts of the day and provoked sufficient headlines to warrant a Panorama programme dedicated to the whole question, deserved a bit more than a series of rebuttals.

In all, the Committee who completed their Inquiry in May, came up with 30 recommendations. Not all were critical - for a start they supported the principle of national testing, *"we are content that the principle of national testing is sound,"* but they did raise some important points about assessment and testing generally.

First the issue of national tests being expected to serve too many purposes. This provoked a lot of debate in the Inquiry and came to be symbolised by the notorious Swiss army knife metaphor of one instrument with a multiplicity of functions. The Committee concluded *"we are persuaded that the current system of national tests should be reformed in order to decouple the multiple purposes of measuring pupil attainment, school and teacher accountability, and national monitoring."* The Government remained unconvinced. *"The Government does not believe that there is any necessary or pre-determined limit on the number of uses that can be made of this (test) information."* Instead it went on to spell out how important the various uses of the national tests were, arguing that the chief purpose of national testing was to help teachers measure pupil progress while the other two functions

of accountability and national monitoring *"exist to support this vital work."* So multi - functional then.

Second the business of teaching to the test and whether this has any detrimental effect on the nature of learning or the curriculum as a whole, squeezing out any excitement of learning and so on. As indicated above, the Government did not accept that there was widespread teaching to the test suggesting instead that practices such as working on learning techniques and skill reinforcement were being misinterpreted as 'exam' techniques. Maybe, but it did feel strongly enough to suggest that further guidance should be given to schools to encourage them not to spend too much time on test preparation while the Secretary of State himself was said to be irritated by reports that some schools were making pupils anxious by over egging of the importance of tests.

As to tests crushing the excitement out of learning, the Government was not convinced here either despite some evidence to the contrary from [Ofsted](#). In all fairness the Government is trying to create some space in the curriculum for more innovative approaches to teaching and learning, the [new Key Stage 3 curriculum](#) being a case in point, but the issue seems to be that 'good' schools find it easier to balance innovative teaching with the demands of testing while 'weaker' schools do not. Ofsted has cited a number of Reports to support this argument such as its [2005/6 Annual Report](#) which identified for example that *"weaker teaching in maths was too narrowly focused on proficiency in exam techniques at the expense of building understanding of concepts and their relationships."* It seems things haven't changed a great deal. Many people see targets as the villain with teachers naturally keen to perform well against them but here again the Government stuck with its guns, *"it does not accept that the current system of targets puts the system out of balance."*

Third, sample testing which the Committee had proposed as an alternative to national testing and which was another recommendation that the Government batted straight back; *we believe that high quality annual tests that reflect the evolution of the curriculum provide a more accurate measurement of performance"* (than sample testing.) Part of the issue here is teacher assessment and how far the Government is prepared to allow this to be used. In his evidence to the Committee, the Schools Minister argued that one of the problems with teacher assessment was that it would preclude the use of comparable data - being able to measure pupil progress against a national comparator. He, and the Government in its response, were however more sympathetic to extending the use of [Assessment for Learning \(AfL\)](#) and its more recent cousin, [Assessing Pupils Progress \(APP.\)](#) The Government is investing £150m over the next three years into developing staff use of AfL while APP materials are gradually being introduced at Key Stages 2 and 3. It's here where teacher practice may yet gain recognition but the monitoring and reporting of pupil progress, increasingly via new technologies, and in a way that is easily accessed by parents and teachers alike remains one of the big future questions for testing and assessment and one that deserved some Government comment.

Finally, that old battleground of 'performance' tables where the Committee urged the Government *"to include a wider range of measures"* rather than just that which is measurable. Here at least there was some recognition of the problem with the Government confirming that it is *'developing school - level indicators of wellbeing on which it planned to consult.'* Wonder if this includes anxiety?

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