

## Written evidence submitted by More Than A Score

### **Education Committee Supplementary Briefing by More Than A Score** **The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's service: Primary Assessment in 2020/21**

#### **Introduction**

More Than A Score is a coalition of headteachers, teachers, parents, academics and education experts<sup>1</sup>. Earlier in the year, we called for the national roll out of the Reception Baseline Assessment to be dropped in 2020, and rightly, it has been. We are also calling for all statutory primary assessments to be dropped in 2020/21 and replaced by teacher- and school-led assessments. Requiring schools to administer statutory tests this year shows a lack of understanding of how these tests work, the data they produce and, crucially, what children need from school this year.

Currently the government plans to require schools to administer all statutory primary assessments in 2020/21 and to administer a past version of the phonics screening check to year 2 in the autumn term. Schools guidance says statutory test results *"will allow the department to measure the remaining impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on this cohort of pupils nationally and help target support to local areas, schools and pupils."*<sup>2</sup>

Statutory assessments will not measure the impact of coronavirus or help target support. Teacher- and school-led assessments will provide all the information required to understand where children are in their learning and what they need to catch up and progress and also allow schools to better support children's well-being and mental health.

**Parents do not want their children tested in this way this year.** Our independent You Gov research with parents over lockdown, released July 2020<sup>3</sup>, showed that only 8% of parents consider that preparing for government tests is important this year. 77% said that formal tests on return to school would add to their children's stress.

#### **Data from statutory primary assessments this year will not be useful because:**

- **The tests were designed for purposes of accountability, not to measure gaps in learning.** Teachers will use diagnostic individual pupil assessments to determine where learning gaps are. Data will be too late to inform school practice in 2020/21 in any event.
- **Children will start this term even further from a level playing field than usual.** Test results will not therefore reflect school performance.
- **Schools will be subject to local lockdowns.** Disruption will vary between and within areas, statutory tests are not designed to take this potential lost learning into account.

#### **Dropping statutory primary assessments in 2020/21 will help schools to:**

- **Introduce a recovery curriculum and re-engage children with learning.** Schools will need to consider the impact of the pandemic on all aspects of children's lives, particularly as school will look quite different this year. Preparing for and administering tests will waste time and resources and take teachers away from essential work to support children and

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<sup>1</sup> List of MTAS members: <https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/what-we-do/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools#section-4-assessment-and-accountability>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Parents-research.pdf>

reignite a love of learning. This is particularly the case in respect of the proposed extra phonics screening check for year 2.

- **Assess learning gaps.** National curriculum assessments are not designed to assess learning gaps. Skilled teacher assessment is the best way to do this. To ensure that teaching and learning objectives are appropriate, teachers will carry out low-pressure, teacher-led assessments. These will create a diagnostic picture of each child over time and will allow teachers to ascertain why and how some children are struggling, where learning gaps are and how best to bridge them.
- **Support children to learn.** Good well-being is a prerequisite for effective learning. It is critical that children's experiences are appropriate in meeting their needs socially, emotionally and academically. Many children will be anxious, some will have been bereaved and/or suffered trauma. Schools will need to focus on the well-being of the whole school community, particularly with the potential for future disruption. Teachers will need to equip children with the knowledge to cope with the current situation and the future, including addressing their wider concerns about the world.
- **Support children's mental health and well-being.** Emotional distress is caused when challenges are felt to be greater than our perceived ability to manage. By forcing children into a test situation when they feel ill-prepared (due to the lack of substantial teaching), feel unable to attend to the challenge (due to remaining issues of trauma or distress caused by the pandemic) or simply fear the outcome of being marked as 'below average', we knowingly place children in emotionally stressful situations. Also, by adding another factor to the chronic nature of stresses caused by coronavirus, we risk the deteriorating mental health of our children, as it is essential they have a substantial period of safety and security to rebuild resiliency, before facing any further challenges.
- **Support teacher well-being.** Many teachers will have suffered emotional traumas during the pandemic. Many will have lost loved ones, been ill, had their lives turned upside down and now feel immense pressure to 'catch up' on the many months lost due to lockdown. Children learn best when they feel safe, relaxed and have a connection with their teacher whom they trust and respect. If teachers are not given enough time to feel secure and content themselves, we risk causing a disconnection in this attachment bond which will have a knock-on effect on learning and psychological development of children.
- **Encourage a love of reading.** The requirement for an additional phonics screening check for year 2 in the autumn term – and to require those not meeting the expected standard to retake in summer– shows a lack of understanding of the learning and well-being needs of young children and of how they learn to read. Formal testing at this time will not support or encourage a love of reading. Support for children who struggle with reading relies on the class teacher diagnosing a range of reading skills, regardless of their phonics test score.
- **Ensure a broad and balanced curriculum.** We know that a narrowing of the curriculum and 'teaching to the test' are potential consequences of standardised testing<sup>4</sup>. Making sure this doesn't happen will be more important than ever this year when so much learning has been missed. When pupils return, teachers must be allowed to decide how and what they should be taught, to catch up on the range and depth of learning missed.

## Conclusion

Current policy does not take into account the potential unintended consequences of reintroducing statutory assessment this year.

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<sup>4</sup> See all our evidence here <https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/evidence/#case-against-testing>

Uncertainty around how the virus will continue to impact our lives makes what was an already flawed system unworkable and the data from statutory tests will not produce valuable information to support children's learning.

Lifting the burden of statutory tests in 2020/1 will enable schools to assess and teach what their children need to progress.

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