

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question:

On 11th June 2007 the General Teaching Council (GTC) which is the watchdog for teaching in England, called for all national school tests before the age of 16 to be scrapped. Do you agree?

Answer: It is certainly my opinion too. Compulsory standard assessment tests (SATs) are taken in England at 7, 11 and 14. The tests are at best a blunt instrument and at worst a distraction which distorts the education of our children.

In January, 2007, there were some Pilot schemes which could lead ultimately to the tests being taken when pupils are ready, rather than at fixed points in the year, but ministers regard their existence as non-negotiable. This is a big mistake. I was very much opposed to the introduction of SATs back in the 1980s and I was astonished and disappointed when the new Labour Government failed to abolish them in 1997.

In evidence to the Commons Education Select Committee's inquiry on pupil assessment, the GTC says most children take an average of 70 different exams or tests before the age of 16, making English children the most tested in the world, an unenviable record!

The GTC wants "sampling" of standards, covering a few primary and secondary schools, to guide national policy, along with internal school exams held by teachers when they thought appropriate.

There have to be tests of course, as they are an essential tool in diagnosing progress and informing teaching strategies, but not narrow SATs, and especially not SATs when they are used to provide league tables for schools which are meaningless and misleading.

The move is significant because the GTC is notionally independent of both the government and the Teacher unions. It is responsible for registering teachers and has banned them from helping pupils in SATs exams.



Keith Bartley, chief executive of the GTC, said: "Of course there still needs to be a way of testing pupils when their standard education comes to a close. But placing added stress on pupils, teachers and parents on a regular basis before that time is not creating the best environment for learning. We need to...let them [teachers] do what they are trained for."

It is significant that in Wales, where SATs have been scrapped, there is no evidence of this harming the education of children, rather the other way round.



How did we get into this mess?

Politics, of course.

Education policy has always been controversial but in the 1980's, Education became a major political football with the main parties vying with

each other to demonstrate that they could produce better standards than the other side. How do you judge the standards? By SATs, of course. It was an easy option but a pedagogically unsatisfactory option. So many schools now narrow their educational focus, especially in Year 6, teaching to the tests and neglecting the broader curriculum. Nobody gains from this. Neither political parties, not schools, nor parents, nor teachers and especially not children.

Education is more than passing tests. It is about the whole person and how the whole person is taught to make sense of their own abilities and the amazing and wonderful world around them.

Forget SATs. Long live Education!

Neil Richardson