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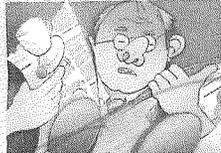
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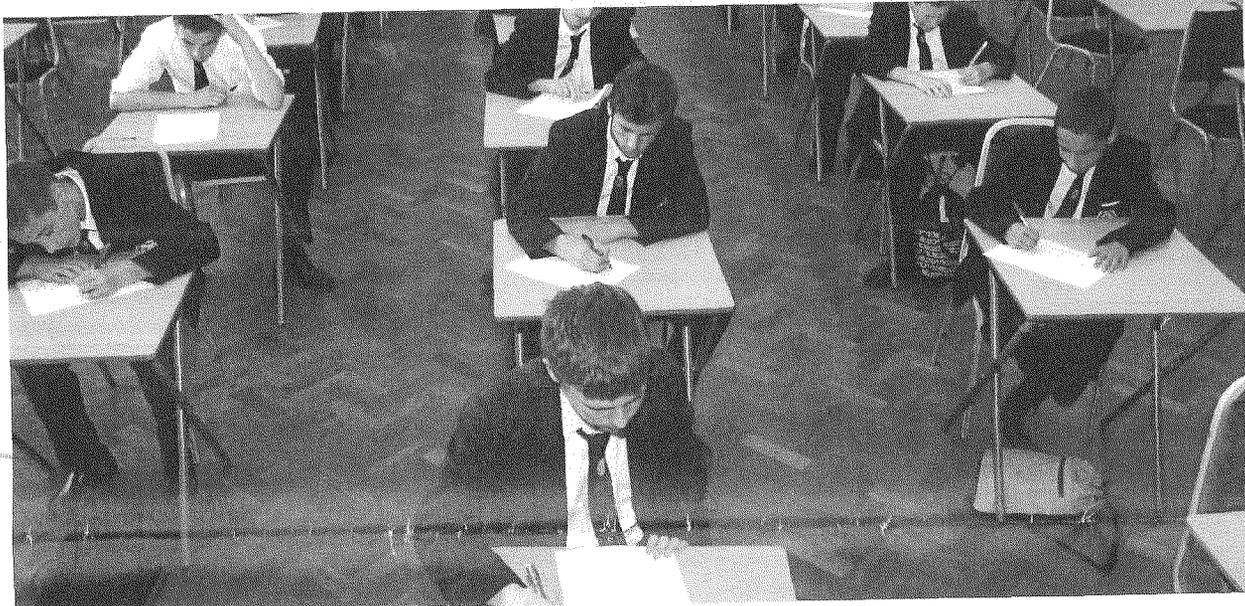


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Testing times: Educationalists have backed calls this week for the end of key stage exams to be scrapped for children aged under 16

Debate rages over call to scrap tests

by Pete Henshaw

Despite strong support from teachers and parents, both the Labour and Conservative parties have emphatically rejected calls to scrap end of key stage tests for under-16s.

The week has been dominated by a row between educationalists and the government, which started when Keith Bartley, chief executive of the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE), called for the tests, which are sat at age seven, 11 and 14, to go.

Education secretary Alan Johnson rejected the calls immediately, while the Conservatives labelled the tests as "crucial".

However, education unions backed Mr Bartley's stance and on Monday the GTCE released new evidence showing that some parents think the key stage test results and league tables are merely "promotional tools" for schools and "do not help children achieve their potential".

Mr Bartley originally made his

call as part of the GTCE's evidence to an inquiry being held by the Education Select Committee on testing and assessment.

In his submission, Mr Bartley told the committee: "England's pupils are among the most frequently tested in the world, but tests in themselves do not raise standards. Tests are used for too many purposes and this compromises their reliability and validity."

He recommended that the committee should consider replacing key stage tests with a "nationally-devised bank of tests/tasks to be used when the teacher judges that the pupil or pupils are ready."

He said he wanted to see an increasing degree of teacher professionalism, and increased government investment in teachers' assessment skills.

The call was backed by unions, including the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, whose deputy general secretary Martin Johnson said: "We need to give teachers the freedom to inspire youngsters so they want to learn,

not just pass tests, and give pupils the space to develop as rounded people.

"The most successful school systems test latest and least often which is why we agree that the time for national assessment is at school leaving age," he added.

The Association of School and College Leaders said that the review of testing and assessment is "urgently needed".

However, the education secretary hit back, saying that the tests helped parents to know what their schools are like. Mr Johnson added: "They like to know what the educational attainment is in each of the schools in their locality. They want transparency, they want openness and they want accountability."

"I don't think, incidentally, that any government of any political persuasion is going to go back to those days (when schools were closed institutions); certainly we have no intention of doing that."

Conservative education spokesman, David Willetts, was equally blunt saying the tests are "crucial" for improving standards. He added: "If it weren't for testing we wouldn't know that 40 per cent of 11-year-olds leave primary schools without reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and arithmetic."

However, there was support from the Lib Dems, whose education spokesman Sarah Teather said that teachers should be able to concentrate on what is best for their pupils and should not feel "compelled" to teach to national tests.

She added: "The current system of testing and targets perverts the true purpose of education - children get drilled on how to pass tests, not educated. Now is the time to abolish this stressful and bureaucratic process and make a positive change for our children."

And as the row developed this week, a new study carried out by the British Market Research Bureau for the GTCE said that some parents also think too much time is being spent on preparing pupils for external tests, sometimes to the detriment of their academic achievement.

The parents from London and Birmingham, who took part in discussion sessions in March, said they felt that teachers are in the best position to carry out a pupil assessment because they have "detailed knowledge about the curriculum, the work that has been covered and each child's progress".

Mr Bartley added: "The tests can depress pupils' motivation and increase anxiety. They do not adequately serve the interests of parents or pupils and they lead to a narrowed curriculum and encourage 'teaching to the test'."

"The system diminishes teachers' professional judgements because summative outcomes reached by the teacher carry less public weight than the outcomes from end of key stage tests," he said.

The GTCE suggested that monitoring could still take place, but by using only small samples of pupils.

The Education Select Committee will be making its recommendation to government later this year.

