

## Why pupils benefit from assessment

- Rigorous tests throughout school are important. They help teachers, parents and the school know how pupils are doing and what they need to spend more time on. We should have more tests, not fewer.
- Tests do not need to be frightening. Tests in primary school make no difference to pupils' future – and no school should be loading stress on to pupils. In good schools, pupils often do not even know they are being examined.
- The only exams that do matter to pupils are done at 16 and 18. Those tests – GCSEs, A levels, and their vocational equivalents – should be as rigorous as any in the world. That way, we will know that students have learned enough to compete with the best.

What is the point of tests and exams? Media coverage often focuses on the downside – the tiny percentage of parents who will not let their kids sit the tests or the poorly performing schools who force their students to grind through practice tests all year and never teach them anything.

But we have exams and tests for a reason. This note explains why tests and exams are important and why they should be tough.

Some of the criticisms of exams have a grain of truth – but bad experiences can be avoided. In good primary schools, children often do not even realise they are sitting exams.

### Primary assessment

It can seem as though, in England, we are overwhelmed by tests – particularly in primary school. But the tests students do in primary school do not have any impact on the pupil's future. They are designed with one of two purposes in mind:

1. To give the teacher, the school, and the parent feedback on how the child is doing. Tests, in controlled conditions, are an effective way of checking a pupil's ability to do or know something. For example, if we do not pick up early that a child cannot decode text properly (phonics) then they are likely to have serious reading problems later in life, which will affect their ability to do any subject or function in a modern, text heavy world. There is a lot of evidence that tests are *more* reliable, and less biased, than other forms of checks.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To read more about the evidence that teacher assessment has bias, read <https://thewingtoheaven.wordpress.com/2015/11/01/why-is-teacher-assessment-biased/> and <https://thewingtoheaven.wordpress.com/2015/10/11/tests-are-inhuman-and-that-is-what-so-good-about-them/>

How often do families go to parents' evenings and hear that their child is doing "fine" or "well" without really knowing what that means? How often do parents feel truly confident that they are learning what their children need to get good grades at GCSE, to get a good job or to get into a University? The tests give parents advance notice so they can help their child improve.

2. To tell parents, and the government, how well a school is doing. Some schools are better than others – they take children from the same background and get better results, which in turn means those pupils have a better chance of going to university and getting a job with a top employer.

Of course, the quality of a school is not solely reflected in its ability to get results. But they do matter. School exists to give students the education to succeed in later life. No matter how nice the teachers are, or how happy the children seem, if they are not being taught to read and write properly then the school is not doing its job. When a student enters the adult world and is unemployable because they cannot write a CV or send a word-perfect email, they will stop being happy fast.

Sometimes schools seem to frighten parents about tests by making the results seem important to the pupils' future – when they are not. What is important to the pupil's future is learning what is being tested.

The table below lists the tests and exams in school and explains the point of each of them. The only exams that really make a difference to employability, university, and the future, are those taken at 16 and later.

<b>Year (Age)</b>	<b>Test/Exam</b>	<b>Is this to provide feedback to the teacher so they can help my child improve?</b>	<b>Is this used by the government to check how well the school is doing?</b>	<b>Does the published result impact my child's future in any way?</b>
KS1 (6)	Phonics Check <sup>2</sup>	Yes	No	No
(6)	Multiplication Check <sup>3</sup>	Yes	No	No

<sup>2</sup> Phonics is one of the most important elements of learning to read. It allows you to "decode" the words on a page. A range of studies show that teaching synthetic phonics properly is crucial in making sure all students read well. The phonics check is designed to make sure pupils have mastered decoding. If they have not, then teachers should be making sure they make progress in class to ensure their success in reading later.

<sup>3</sup> Learning your "times table" – multiplying numbers up to 12\*12 helps children with mathematics. It means that the most common tasks become automated so their mind is free for more complex problem

(7)	KS1 tests	Yes	Yes	No
KS2 (11)	KS2 tests ("Sats")	No	Yes	No
KS4 (16)	GCSEs	No	Yes	Yes
KS5 (18)	A levels/Technical qualifications	No	No	Yes

### Secondary assessment

All schools should follow the practice of the best schools and test pupils regularly. Not only does this give feedback to teachers, but there is good evidence that tests help you learn. Researchers have found a "testing effect": testing not only measures knowledge, but also changes it, often greatly improving retention of the tested knowledge. Taking a test on material can have a greater positive effect on future retention of that material than spending an equivalent amount of time restudying the material.<sup>4</sup> Many of the same researchers who have carried out studies into the testing effect have also carried out studies into the value of multiple-choice questions and have concluded that these are particularly effective ways to realise the benefits of the testing effect.<sup>5</sup> This may be why so many examinations for medical students are multiple choice.

At GCSE, it is crucial that students study the most rigorous subjects possible. We support the Ebacc – GCSEs in Maths, English, Science, a humanity and a language - because it expects pupils in state schools to take the same subjects that those in private schools study - and those in top school systems around the world. They are also subjects that top universities take seriously. In fact, researchers at Edinburgh found that the subjects you studied at school was much more important in later life than whether you went to a private school or not. If state schools offered the most rigorous subjects, they would close the gap with private schools.<sup>6</sup> Of course, offering the Ebacc does not mean that students should not also study the arts, music, and other subjects.

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solving. If when they are 11 or 16 they have to spend precious time working out 8\*6 in their head, they will have less time and energy to spend on more difficult questions.

<sup>4</sup> Roediger, Henry L., and Jeffrey D. Karpicke. "The power of testing memory: Basic research and implications for educational practice." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 1.3 (2006): 181-210, p.181.

<sup>5</sup> Little, Jeri L., et al. "Multiple-choice tests exonerated, at least of some charges fostering test-induced learning and avoiding test-induced forgetting." *Psychological Science* 23.11 (2012): 1337-1344; Bjork, Elizabeth Ligon, Jeri L. Little, and Benjamin C. Storm. "Multiple-choice testing as a desirable difficulty in the classroom." *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 3.3 (2014): 165-170.

<sup>6</sup> Iannelli, Cristina., ed al." Widening access to higher education: social inequalities in school subject choices matter., *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 2014"

<http://www.scotsman.com/news/education/subjects-key-to-success-not-private-school-1-3141476>