

NATIONAL TESTING AND LEAGUE TABLES

OPINION PIECE –

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It's worth stating the obvious from the outset. I don't know of any teacher or any school opposed to testing. We all need to know what young people have understood and we all need to recognise how we can modify and adjust our practice accordingly. But exposing children to national testing and putting their results into public league tables has nothing to do with sensible assessment of their progress

Watching what is happening in Australia is like watching the re-run of a slasher movie – only this time it's real life and the disaster affects real people and real schools. When testing and league tables were introduced in England in the early 90s, a campaign by teachers, supported by parent groups, managed to stem the initial tide. Even at that early stage, teachers could see that a high-stakes testing regime was certain to impact upon what happened in classrooms with an inevitable drive towards 'teaching to the test' eventually taking place. Teachers were ready to strike, not about pay and conditions, but about the damage the government was doing to children.

The Conservative government of the time and, shamefully, its New Labour successor, was determined to see its education project through. Both administrations saw the implementation of market forces as the cure for all our schools' ills. Central to this approach was the idea that schools needed to be ranked against each other so that parents could make "informed" choices about where to send their children. The fact that this choice was only ever, in practice, going to be exercised by the middle class made the whole enterprise even more grotesque, but in order for this ranking to take place, data was required – and the tests were the mechanism to generate this.

In such a situation, it's critical that teachers, along with all other interested parties, continue to oppose the principle of such one-size-fits-all testing. Parents, whether in Australia or the UK, are perfectly capable of understanding the damage that constant assessment of their children does – and they get very angry when they witness it at first hand. We mustn't shy away from spelling out the dangers of a curriculum that is dominated by testing and the diminishing effect that this has for all concerned. And we mustn't be blinded by sanctimonious talk from governments who tell us from on high that they are acting as the sole guardians of educational standards.

In England the whole system has collapsed under its own weight, aided by greedy private companies who failed to deliver the right tests to the right places, failed to have them marked by the deadlines and then produced final papers so riddled with marking errors that returning whole bundles of scripts to them became a completely routine matter.

Despite something of step-down on national testing, the minister responsible (his name is Balls – and I'm not making that up) has reaffirmed that whatever developments occur, it is non-negotiable that schools must supply information that needs to go into the public domain about their academic profile. So, for national tests, read the school report card – a system that some government advisers fell in love with on a trip to New York where, in daily practice, it is an unmitigated disaster.

What is there to be learned from all of this? Parents and teachers in Australia must oppose these proposals - and never be deterred by the fact that complete nonsense is often presented as common-sense by government 'experts'. National, high-stakes testing diminishes our curriculum, can change teachers into technicians, can make our schools testing hot-houses and can turn children off learning. That's a pretty good set of reasons to oppose them.

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