

STRESS TEST

Experiences in the UK and US show governments more interested in statutory testing than schools, teachers, students or parents. Lesley Parker reports.

Opposition to statutory testing is growing internationally, as teachers, schools and students register the negative impacts of such assessments. In the United States, teachers are increasingly concerned about elements of the Bush administration's 'No Child Left Behind' initiative, a federal policy that significantly extends existing state-based student testing.

And in the United Kingdom, where teachers have had a decade's experience of statutory tests, the National Union of Teachers has decided to ballot its members on a boycott of next year's 'key stages' tests of seven, 11 and 14-year-olds.

In Wales, education authorities have abolished the key stages test for seven-year-olds and recently announced that the tests for older students were under review.

Scotland and Northern Ireland did not introduce the tests, which were announced as part of the then Conservative government's education reform package in 1988.

John Bangs, the head of the education department of the National Union of Teachers, which covers England and Wales, says members "loathe" the centrally set key stages tests in English, maths and science.

The tests are linked with government targets for learning, with those conducted on students at ages 11 and 14 feeding into league tables that supposedly rank schools' performance.

Bangs says the tests put young children under pressure, remove the teacher's initiative, and indirectly threaten schools' funding.

Teachers and students are forced to concentrate only on what is tested, not on other vital aspects of learning, he says.

"You end up with teachers teaching to the tests. It removes any initiative, it removes any creativity; you feel you can't move on to something else."

Bangs says the tests also put pressure on children, and at a very young age in the case of the stage-one tests. "There

are plenty of examples of parents getting additional tuition for children to get them better 'levels'," he says.

"The tests have come to be seen—and this is one of the problems with them—as 'exams', as if they determine a child's future. They don't.

"What they do is label the child as having achieved a level one or level five and that doesn't tell anybody anything. It is the teachers' assessment that tells teachers and parents about a child's strengths and weaknesses."

Schools themselves are concerned about the indirect impact on funding. While no direct link is made between performance and funding, the fact is that UK schools are funded on a per capita basis.

"Parents are going to judge your school on the league table position which is compiled from these test results,"

UK TEACHERS SAY

A survey of more than 3,000 teachers in England, carried out by Warwick University researchers on behalf of the National Union of Teachers, found overwhelming opposition to statutory testing.

A massive **94.5 per cent** said they believed the 'key stages' tests had adverse effects.

More than **86 per cent** said they narrowed the curriculum, and two-thirds said they were not educationally worthwhile.

More than **80 per cent** said the tests put too much pressure on students, and nearly **75 per cent** said parents opposed the tests.

Fewer than **one in 10** believed the tests provided an accurate picture of their pupils' achievements.

Eighty per cent said they took up too much classroom time—**30 per cent** said preparation took between half and one term, and **26 per cent** said it required between one and two terms' teaching time.

Bangs says. “And because you have to attract pupils to the school in order to get the funding to run the school, the pressure is on teachers to try to get absolutely maximum results—despite the fact that this means they are constraining the curriculum, constraining children’s learning by saying, ‘You haven’t learnt this, do it again, and again, and again...’”

In the US, the Bush administration has given state education authorities two years to start administering standardised tests in reading and maths in grades 3 to 8 and at least once more in the subsequent school years. These tests will be linked to prescribed academic standards.

In many cases, this annual testing will be on top of existing state and school district testing schedules.

What’s more, schools that do not make “adequate yearly progress” face a range of consequences. After missing targets for two years, a school will have to provide transport for students who choose to attend other district schools; after three years, it will have to pay for supplementary education services chosen by parents, such as private tutoring; after five years, school management will be restructured.

National Education Association spokesman Michael Pons says teachers support testing that helps them to determine how well students are doing, “but the focus of the new federal requirement is not on individual student achievement”.

“Instead, the focus is on reporting, such as school-wide averages and average scores within certain demographic groups,” he says.

Standardised tests should be just one component of student assessment and school assessment, Pons says. And when problems are found, the focus should be on remedies—not punishments.

“Testing should be used as a stethoscope, not a hammer,” he says. “In other words, tests are a useful diagnostic tool to help teachers get a sense of what students know, but standardised tests should not be used to rate schools or prompt punishments.”

Pons says over-reliance on standardised tests changes many of the things that are most successful about the American system of public education, “including the ability to learn how to analyse information, solve problems, and think creatively”.

“Increasingly, teachers are bound to a prescribed system that treats them less like professionals and more like people reading a script. While many teachers support the idea of clarity of expectations, others feel that the new emphasis on standardised testing has taken away the love of teaching and learning.

“The system is set up for all students to learn the same

AT A GLANCE

■ UK teachers, who have had a decade’s experience of statutory tests, are considering a boycott of next year’s assessments

■ In the US, teachers are concerned about punitive elements in the Bush administration’s ‘No Child Left Behind’ program

■ Teachers in these countries believe such tests put children under unnecessary pressure and narrow the curriculum

information at the same time and be able to perform on tests in the same way, all of which tends to undermine the ability to treat each student as an individual and help them succeed in their own way.”

The NEA is also concerned about performance reports on schools that are part of the reforms.

“A school can be listed as ‘in need of improvement’ even when it is doing well,” Pons says. “There may be a high number of high-performing students who are not making the prescribed progress, or a small number of low-performing students in certain demographic categories and the school would be rated as ‘in need of improvement’.

“The danger is that parents and others in the community will misread the results.”

Pons says one of the key frustrations for teachers and schools is that the No Child Left Behind Act requires the same outcomes, regardless whether students attend a well-resourced school in an affluent area or a school in a poorer area that has inadequate funding.

“For schools to improve to meet the federal standards, additional resources are needed for programs that work,” he says. ■

LESLEY PARKER is a freelance writer.

SAD BUT TRUE

Incoming National Union of Teachers president Lesley Augur recounted this story to delegates at the UK group’s national conference in April:

“A friend of mine, a teacher of a class of five-year-olds, was met by a tearful child one morning; the child’s grandfather had died the previous day. The child was inconsolable and the rest of the class wanted to know what was happening. It was soon clear many of them had a similar story to tell.

“My friend looked at the targets for the first lesson lying on her desk: should she abandon the lesson and discuss the important event with the children?

“She did, but later she was mortified that she had even contemplated continuing with the lesson. This is symptomatic of the pressures teachers feel to get through the prescribed targets at the expense of the immediate needs of the children.”

SOURCE: THE TEACHER, NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS.

W For more information on schools testing overseas, see www.teachers.org.uk (National Union of Teachers), www.nea.org (National Education Association), and www.aft.org (American Federation of Teachers).