

The Rt. Hon. Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT
Dear Secretary of State,

An open letter regarding the ‘phonics check’ for six year olds in English primary schools

On Monday 19th September Nick Gibb, Schools Minister, released the independent report regarding the pilot of the phonics test for six year olds which is to be imposed on English primary schools in June 2012. Mr. Gibb said ‘This study finds that the check will be of real benefit to pupils but takes just a few minutes to carry out and is a positive experience for most children.’

However this statement is at variance with several of the report’s findings. Many of our original fears have been confirmed by the evaluation report and the undersigned remain deeply concerned about the imposition of this test on all schools in England.

The reports finds, for example, that 54% of respondents disagreed that the check accurately assessed the decoding ability of pupils with EAL, 65% disagreed with regard to pupils with speech difficulties, 67% disagreed with regard to pupils with special educational needs and 72% disagreed with regard to pupils with language difficulties. Yet these categories of children are the very ones who are in most need of identification. Thus the test fails in its main purpose.

The results will be ‘high stakes’ as they will be collated centrally through RAISEonline and used by Ofsted when inspecting schools. Research shows that high stakes tests have a narrowing affect on the curriculum and in this case is likely to have a detrimental effect on areas such as enjoyment, comprehension and wider reading.

The claim that the test will only take a few minutes is flatly contradicted by the report which states that the average time for preparation and administration was 15.5 hours and even longer in large schools. This is equivalent to three days teaching. How will 6 year olds benefit if their teacher is otherwise engaged with the check and may also be out of class for this time or more?

If the intention of the check is to encourage primary teachers in England to teach phonics systematically the pilot informs us that almost all already do so.

Finally, the evaluation of the pilot informs us that 72% of schools experienced difficulties in relation to the use of pseudo words and that some able readers were confused. This confirms our previously expressed worry that the use of a test of only the decoding aspect of reading could actually harm standards in the longer term, with able readers mistakenly identified as needing further teaching of phonics and being held back as a result.

The government is proposing to spend millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money every year on a test which will increase workload, undermine teaching time, fail in its core purpose of accurately identifying children’s needs in reading and is unnecessary in promoting the already present teaching of phonics.

In the light of the findings from the evaluation of the pilot we are sure that ministers will be reconsidering the need for the phonics test for 6 year olds. The signatories of this letter would welcome an opportunity to discuss how teacher assessment of reading would identify and help young readers who are slow to start.

In the meantime we would appreciate any clarification you can give on the questions and issues outlined in this letter.

Yours sincerely



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United Kingdom Literacy Association

and

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Chairman, National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)

Professor Robin Alexander
Director, Cambridge Primary Review

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