

Britain: SATs fiasco highlights Labour's failed education policies

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On August 15, the British Labour government's regulatory body, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), terminated the contract of the company responsible for marking Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) school test papers (which are mandatory for all school children in England aged 11 and 14 years.)

The QCA had only signed the £156 million, five-year contract with ETS Europe (a branch of the US-based Educational Testing Service Global BV) in February 2007. However, a series of major problems with the administration and marking of the tests this year caused almost a month's delay in publishing the majority of results for key stage two (11-year-olds) and three (14-year-olds). Key stage three results were not released until August 12, although some were still incomplete.

Not only was the deadline missed, but the accuracy of marking was severely compromised, with many schools reporting that inexplicable results in some cases suggested that the markers either did not understand the questions themselves or that there was not adequate time to check.

When ETS was awarded the contract to administer the SATs, it had boasted of a new method to ensure marking accuracy. Markers would have to sit online tests every time they had assessed 80 exam papers, supposedly to ensure they were marking to the given criteria. In practice, however, the markers were given no feedback other than a pass or fail and could not adjust their marking accordingly.

Not only was the marker training inferior to previous years, but markers did not receive papers in sufficient time, as they were sent from schools to a central depot and then on. This meant the papers had to be marked under tremendous pressure during school term time, further undermining accuracy. Papers/scripts that were near the borderline of grades were not double-checked, as was the case in previous years. On top of this, some markers received no papers at all, while others received papers for the wrong subject. Unlike in previous years, pupil registers had to be checked online and marks for every single question submitted online—an extremely time-consuming if not futile exercise, exacerbated by crashed websites and helplines that went unanswered.

Following the virtual collapse of the test paper marking system, the QCA and ETS Europe agreed to dissolve the contract with immediate effect. Under the agreement, ETS Europe is expected to pay back £24.1 million of the nearly £40 million it received to run this year's testing process and is to be stripped of the five-year

deal. Government agencies will now oversee the delivery of the last 30,000 results and the appeal process. ETS has been banned from contacting schools directly.

ETS Europe had hoped to prove itself in the English school system so as to expand elsewhere in Europe. It won the SATs contract despite a catalogue of past failures to deliver on its commitments. In 2002, software errors by ETS led to serious failures, including giving the wrong marks, in the graduate management admission test (GMAT) in the US. According to the *New York Times*, in 2004, mismanagement by ETS led to more than 40,000 teachers taking a flawed exam and ETS paying out millions of dollars in compensation.

From the very start of its contract in England, there had been problems with the delivery and collection of test papers from schools, the electronic registration and moderating system crashed, and markers and schools could not log on. The helpline was constantly engaged. Thousands of teachers dropped out of the marking scheme, and many other markers resigned. A backlog grew, forcing ETS to set up 24-hour emergency marking centres. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, at one point, the National Assessment Agency went in and found 10,000 unopened emails from increasingly desperate schools.

Now, the exams regulator, Ofqual, has asked Lord Sutherland to head an inquiry into the delays. Ofqual head Kathleen Tattersall said that if there is a significant rise in schools appealing over results, then all 1 million SATs results should be annulled. The general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, Mick Brookes, said that such appeals "are set to rocket." He has urged the schools inspection body Ofsted to disregard SATs results when making a judgement on a school. Results that Ofsted deems poor could contribute to a school being placed in the failing category of "special measures," in some cases resulting in heads and teachers losing their jobs.

While no parent, teacher or child in England will shed a tear on the departure of such a clearly incompetent company from schools across the country, the more fundamental issue exposed by this latest crisis is not the marking but the actual tests themselves. But rather than replace the testing system, as most teachers, educationalists and parents have been arguing—well before the latest marking fiasco—the government intends to replace one company with another in order to continue with the whole flawed testing enterprise.

Teacher unions have already cast doubt on whether a new

contract could be awarded in time to deliver next year's SATs and called on ministers to overhaul the system. Schools secretary Ed Balls said he was "open to reform long-term." He floated "lower-intensity" testing but flatly ruled out suspending SATs for 2009.

The government has hinted that the data-handling firm Capita may be contracted to run next year's SATs. Ken Boston, chief executive of the QCA, said it would launch an urgent tendering process and that he expected organisations that previously expressed an interest to bid again. ETS was one of five companies short-listed two years ago. According to the *Guardian*, two of the three other major exam boards have already ruled themselves out of the contract, on the basis that they did not believe there was a strong enough educational rationale for the SATs tests. Greg Watson, head of the OCR exam board, said it did not bid because the tests were used to measure schools against one another, rather than qualifying a child at a certain level and diagnosing skills. A second exam board, AQA, also said it had not bid because of concerns about the purpose of the tests.

One unnamed senior examiner said that the process was so educationally "vacuous" that it would actually be more suited to a company such as Capita, which is used to dealing with large-scale public sector data projects rather than educational examinations. So indefensible have the SATs now become that a former aide of Tony Blair admitted recently that they risked turning schools into "drab, joyless assessment factories" where preparation for tests crowds out real learning.

The disparity between the overblown election promises the Labour government made on education policy and the subsequent mess that it has made in the school system has been widely acknowledged. But the government and the media are seeking to conceal how and why this has happened.

The cash-starved and moribund education system that emerged after 18 years of Conservative-rule was the one of the most glaring examples of the socially regressive policies of the Thatcher and Major administrations.

In the absence of a mass socialist alternative to address this, the right-wing "new" Labour Party under Blair successfully capitalised on popular support for a radical break with the pro-market policies of the past and for a reduction in the levels of social inequality that rocketed following the speculative boom of the 1980s.

On taking office in 1997, Blair and then-chancellor Gordon Brown kept rigorously to Tory spending limits while introducing cosmetic changes in education—such as more classroom assistants and the introduction of learning mentors. Most significantly, however, the Labour government sought to introduce the most pro-business agenda in education for a generation. Virtually every area of education was opened up to corporate profit making; from the building of school infrastructure, the development of business-friendly "specialist schools," the increase of "faith schools" and to the setting up of private "academies."

State schools have become testing grounds for ever-more uninspired ways to narrow the already prescriptive national curriculum and force children through a selective testing system. The effects of teaching to the tests—as in the present SATs—on especially young children is to squeeze out the joy of learning that

should be inherent in an imaginative, widely scoped, generously resourced syllabus. This contributes significantly to the growing levels of disaffection amongst pupils that has been confirmed by international reports on the levels of unhappiness amongst children in the UK.

Furthermore, teachers have been demoralised as they are turned into part-time administrators of prescribed curriculum, while being scapegoated and even publicly hounded by the government for its own policy failures. Many well-meaning teachers have found themselves grubbing for each test paper point instead of being free to open young minds to the exploration and discovery of the world around them. Crowning it all, each school faces the constant threat of government inspection whereby they are monitored, praised or punished on the basis of fulfilling increasingly arbitrary targets. Schools are encouraged to compete against one another—via league tables—in a desperate bid for decreasing resources. At the end of this process, parents are thrown into a scramble to get a place at the "best" school for their children.

The end result of the corporate-inspired curriculum and the assessment system—the implementation of which has been the mainstay of the Labour government's education policy since taking office in 1997—is the straitjacketing of the intellectual and imaginative capacities of children in order to provide for the demands of big-business and industry.

The government's education policies have long since alienated millions of parents, but such is the damage it has caused, the very corporate interests that it sought to serve have signalled their dismay at the results of the school system. After complaining about the low literacy and numeracy levels of school leavers, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) announced recently that it was withdrawing its support for the government's new diplomas, which were intended to replace the current A-Levels (taken at 18 years of age). Whatever new schemes Labour devises in response to such criticisms, its continued drive to redistribute wealth away from working people to big business and the super-rich, further fuelling social inequality, means it is incapable of arriving at a "better," or more just education policy.



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