

New testing regime to be imposed on British schoolchildren

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30 July 2013

British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has announced a consultation paper on proposals for a new testing regime for five- and eleven-year-olds in England.

The new consultation detailed by the Liberal Democrat leader follows the announcement this June of the new curriculum to be implemented from September 2014. The tests are designed to ensure that the rote learning, memorisation of spelling lists and times tables by heart and emphasis on “facts and rules” approach to teaching is enshrined from the moment a child starts primary school.

Early years and preschool teachers are told that their sole role is to make young children “school ready”, while primary teachers have the task of ensuring that 11-year-olds are “secondary school ready”.

Behind these empty, meaningless and deeply uninspiring phrases lay plans to rip the heart out of childhood teaching. All positive and progressive approaches to teaching based on producing well-rounded children who are able to respond critically to the world around them, develop problem-solving skills, independence and emotional well-being—already severely undermined over the past two decades—are to be ruled out.

Following the announcement of the consultation, Clegg was widely denounced by teachers, the teaching unions and some press as seeking to turn schools into “exam sausage factories”.

The baseline assessments for five-year-olds will be based on formal tests in which children would be sat in front of a computer for 15 minutes and asked a series of questions on what is on the screen. These tests will then be assessed externally by an exam board. The results will then be used to determine the performance of teachers in reaching the new target levels before

children enter secondary school.

Under the changes, 85 percent of pupils will have to reach a “good level of attainment” by 2016 in updated key stage 2 tests. The current level 4—the indicator used to predict a child’s future prospects of success—will be replaced by a new “scaled score” in line with the new national curriculum covering maths, reading, spelling, punctuation and grammar. If fewer than 65 percent of its pupils achieve level 4 or above in reading, writing and maths, this will trigger an Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspection of a school.

The government plans to produce the results and give the information to parents in some form. Parents will be able to compare their child against other children within the school and more broadly. This will escalate the exodus out of so-called low-performing “sink schools” to better performing schools, leading to closures and further privatisations.

Children in England are already the most heavily-tested of all the advanced nations. This testing is extremely narrow in focus, with the aim of enforcing selection and a class-based education system. League tables ensure that schools in areas of high social disadvantage struggle to attract pupils and face closure or a massive reduction in funds, as funding is pegged to the number of pupils enrolled. The new testing proposals will only escalate this process and have nothing to do with raising standards.

Christine Blower, the general secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), said, “It is difficult to see how a 25 percent increase in the primary floor standard between 2010 and 2016 could be realistically achieved without wide-scale teaching to the test and other inappropriate drilling techniques. Given that approximately 20 percent of children have some form of special needs, this new target will doom many of

them to ‘failure’”.

Chris Keates, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), said, “The tests at 11, which will determine if pupils are ‘secondary school ready’, could risk establishing a modern-day version of the discredited and deeply damaging 11-plus system.

“Producing performance tables which rank individual pupils against their peers nationally could also result in children being labelled as failures at an early age. The government should consider carefully whether this sensitive information should be made available to other schools given the risk of a return to an 11-plus system of selection. The deputy prime minister may inadvertently be heralding the expansion of selective education so favoured by the Conservative party”.

There is nothing “inadvertent” in the coalition government’s agenda and the union leaders know it. What is being prepared is the wholesale privatisation of education, the dismantling of working conditions and the slashing of funds, which the teaching unions have collaborated in implementing.

Blower also commented, “Considering that half of all secondary schools are now academy status, often through coercion or force, an increase in floor targets for the primary sector is surely nothing more than a further land-grab for the academies programme”.

The academies agenda, which has seen thousands of schools become independent of local authority control, able to set their own wages and conditions and become ripe for privatisation, has only been able to proceed due to the refusal of the unions to mobilise any opposition.

Clegg also announced an increase—from £900 this year to £1,300 next year—in the pupil premium for disadvantaged primary school children. This will be targeted at children who have had free school meals in the past six years as well as those in care, one of the election pledges that the Liberal Democrats made in 2010.

The increase in the Pupil Premium compared with the massive cuts that have been implemented in education will not have any significant impact. Many schools, having to make ends meet and balance their budgets, will have used this additional money in order to plug funding shortfalls created by the deterioration or wholesale abolition of central services traditionally supplied by the local authority.



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