

Research Briefing:

Petition number: P-05-735

Petition title: **Make Foundation Phase more Effective for our Children, Provide more Teachers and Abolish Year 2 SATs.**

Petition text:

I would like the Welsh Assembly to stop letting our children down in the Foundation Phase.

To follow the lead of the most successful education systems in Europe, such as Finland and throughout Scandinavia.

To provide schools with training and funding for appropriate child teacher ratios, to enable the effective delivery of the Foundation Phase pedagogy.

I call for the abolishment of Nationalised tests, SATS, in the Foundation Phase. They simply do not correspond with the Foundation Phase ethos.

We love the ethos of the Foundation Phase, the approach Welsh Assembly have taken is refreshing, and in line with the heaps of research that supports child-led play up to the age of seven. However, it is unfortunate, that the ethos of the Foundation Phase is lost in many schools across Wales. This is because of a lack of training in early years play provision; even if the teacher had the training, passion and knowledge to deliver the Foundation Phase pedagogy, the ratios of teachers to child makes it near impossible. How can any teacher follow a child's lead in play when there are up to 30 children in that class, with only one TA to support all of those children as they play, discover and learn?

We do not believe that nationalised tests, SATS, have any place in the Welsh foundation phase. The foundation phase is about supporting children in their Play: To develop gross motor skills through movement,

To develop finer motor skills needed for writing,

To take risks and learn responsibility,

To give them the time they need to develop solid building blocks for language and numeracy,

To have opportunities to revisit and learn as and when a child needs/chooses too,

To develop the skills to self access and discover,

To learn key social skills with their peers and adults.

This is a proven approach to fully prepare children ready for primary education at the age of seven. This is how Europe's most successful education systems do it, yet children of six and seven years old in year two are expected to sit and write in tests to compare our children to those in England. This forces teachers in the Foundation Phase to start drilling phonetics and numbers into our children when they start Reception and by Year-one to be expected to sit read and write, "readying" them for these tests which reflect on the on the school. Our children are being robbed of their childhoods, children who are starting school at just turned four years old in Wales, who are then forced into this system, six hours a day of classroom drilling. This is not the progressive foundation phase ethos that Welsh assembly put into play in 2006. I urge you all to consider the effectiveness of the foundation phase across Wales, with some more TAs and training we can become productive early years practitioners paving the way for all children in Wales to have positive, rewarding, Learning Journeys

Background

The three main points made in the petition are that:

- Wales should follow the Scandinavian model of early education;
- There should be funding and training for appropriate adult pupil ratios;
- Testing at Year 2 should be abolished.

The Foundation Phase for children aged 3–7 in Wales was introduced in 2004/05 and rolled out across Wales in September 2010. It is **based on early years approaches in Scandinavian countries**. It is the statutory curriculum for pupils aged 3 to 7 in maintained and non-maintained settings.

The Foundation Phase aims to meet the needs of children through developmental, experiential and active learning. Through engaging activities, children can practise and consolidate their skills, experiment with ideas, use their creativity and imagination, take

risks, solve problems, and make decisions individually, as well as in small and in large groups.

Welsh Government Action

The Welsh Government commissioned the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD) to evaluate the Foundation Phase. The [Final Report](#) was published in May 2015.

Training

As part of the Foundation Phase evaluation programme, a number of research summaries were published during 2014. Key findings on [Training, Support and Guidance](#) include:

- That the **vast majority** of leaders were **generally satisfied** with the training that they had received and that teachers who reported completing more of the eight Welsh Government Foundation Phase training modules had a better understanding and more positive views of the Foundation Phase;
- Of those who would change the training provided, it was felt that mixed messages from the Welsh Government – specifically the change of focus from play to literacy and numeracy – had led to misunderstanding among practitioners about how to deliver the Foundation Phase as it was intended.

The [Final Evaluation](#) made a number of recommendations with regard to training including:

- Specific attention (through training and guidance for practitioners) should be given on how to use Foundation Phase pedagogies in Year 1 and especially Year 2 classes;
- Foundation Phase training modules should be revised in order to improve practitioners' understanding of the approaches and pedagogies now being emphasised.
- Greater emphasis on the Foundation Phase should be given within Initial Teacher Education courses and other professional courses (including Masters' Level courses). This should include Foundation Phase curriculum and assessment, but particular attention needs to be given to Foundation Phase pedagogies.

The Welsh Government published the [Foundation Phase Action Plan](#) in November 2016. It sets out actions to support and share learning on effective practice and ongoing staff development. In relation to training, it includes short term action points (by September 2017):

- Welsh Government to work with regional consortia challenge advisers and local authorities (where appropriate) to ensure that settings and schools are adequately assessing the skill levels and requirements of those delivering the Foundation

Phase and including the appropriate access to professional learning within their development plans.

- Local authorities and their regional consortia to ensure that they have appropriate staffing expertise in place to lead on professional learning within the Foundation Phase.
- Regional consortia and local authorities to review the training resources and other professional learning opportunities available to practitioners, including those in leadership roles, and share current good practice and materials, developing revised materials and approaches where needed. This will include professional learning in child development, leadership, environment experiences and pedagogy of Foundation Phase.

It also includes the long-term action points (by September 2019)

- Higher education institutions to ensure that all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes awarding qualified teacher status must include delivery of child development following revalidation of courses. Where courses have recently been through this process, opportunities for incorporating child development into existing courses should be considered.

Adult child ratios

In the Foundation Phase, adult to pupil ratios are 1:8 for three–five year olds and 1:15 for five–seven year olds. The *Final Evaluation report* found on average, the staff to child ratio for three to five–year–olds (i.e. Nursery and Reception) was **not being met**, whereas the staff to child ratio for five to seven–year–olds (i.e. Year 1 and Year 2) was, on average, **being exceeded**.

The evaluation found that:

- In 2013/14 the Welsh Government allocated just over £92 million for the employment of additional practitioners to help schools meet the recommended adult:child ratios. This revenue was allocated to local authorities based on their pupil population who then distributed it to schools using their own funding formulae.
- Of those surveyed, 72 per cent of head teachers and 79 per cent of funded non-maintained setting lead practitioners said they did not have any difficulties in meeting the recommended adult:child ratios. Nine out of every ten head teachers who reported that they had experienced obstacles in meeting the recommended adult:child ratios also cited funding issues as a major obstacle to the successful implementation of the Foundation Phase.

Welsh Government funding for maintaining adult to child ratios is made through the Education Improvement Grant (EIG). The grant's terms and conditions stipulate that the

funding must be used to support the requirement to work towards Foundation Phase staff to pupil ratios as part of a high quality and effective Foundation Phase curriculum. In evidence to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee on 10 November 2016](#), Kirsty Williams, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, said:

“most of our education improvement grant goes in supporting, for instance, settings to meet the ratios between children and adults.”

From 2015–16, there has been a single EIG to support the activities and intended outcomes from previous 11 separate (ring-fenced) grants¹. In the Children, Young People and Education Committee’s [draft budget scrutiny](#), the Cabinet Secretary for Education said that £133 million has been allocated to the EIG in 2017–18. This compares to a total of £153 million for the 11 individual grants in 2014–15. The amount of money to be spent on each individual purpose of the EIG is **not ring-fenced** and local authorities and consortia spend their allocations as they consider appropriate

Testing

The Minister for Lifelong learning and Welsh Language states in his response to the Committee that children in Year 2 do not sit SATS (standard attainment tests) and that the National Reading and Numeracy Tests taken by learners in years 2 to 9 are not the same as the SATs tests that are taken by learners in England . ‘SATS’ is generally a term for the tests or assessment taken at the end of a Key Stage.

National Reading and Numeracy tests were introduced on a statutory basis in May 2013 for all pupils in Years 2 to 9. Previously, many schools used commercially produced reading and numeracy tests as well as cognitive ability tests. The introduction of the National Reading and Numeracy tests was intended to provide uniformity of practice. The tests complement the Welsh Government’s National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) and aim to track pupils’ progress in reading and numeracy skills from Year 2 (the end of Foundation Phase) through to Year 9 (the end of Key Stage 3). The tests are designed to give teachers a clearer insight into a learner’s development and ensure that all schools are identifying the needs of their pupils in order to progress their ability in reading and numeracy. This will allow them to identify strengths and areas for improvement and to intervene at an earlier stage if learners are falling behind.

Both the OECD review, [Improving Schools in Wales](#) (2014) and Professor Donaldson’s [Independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales](#) (2015) recommended that the Welsh Government use assessment primarily to inform teaching and

¹ The 11 grants amalgamated were the Foundation Phase Revenue Grant; School Effectiveness Grant; 14-19 Learning Pathways; Minority Ethnic Achievement Grant; Welsh in Education Grant; Gypsy Children, and Traveller Children Education Grant; Lead and Emerging Practitioner Grant; Reading and Numeracy Test Support Grant; Additional funding for Band 4 and 5 schools; Teacher Induction; and the Higher Level Teaching Assistant Grant

learning rather than for accountability purposes. In [a paper to the Children, Young People and Education Committee on 12 January 2017](#), the Cabinet Secretary for Education said:

“Crucially future assessment arrangements will give priority to using assessment as a means to inform better teaching and learning. This will be a move away from the Welsh Government gathering information about children and young people’s performance on a school-by-school basis for accountability purposes.”

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.