

Kirsty Williams AC/AM
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-891
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/06215/19

Janet Finch-Saunders AM
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Dear Janet

Thank for your letter of 23 May seeking my views on the issues outlined in the petition received from Tanya Beer titled *National Reading and Numeracy Tests for children from as young as age 6 need to be discontinued with immediate effect*.

The National Reading and Numeracy Tests for learners in years 2 to 9 were introduced in 2013 in order to bring about a consistent approach of assessing reading and numeracy skills within schools across Wales. Testing had always been a part of the school year but research showed that the frequency and quality of the tests used, and reporting to parents, was highly variable from school to school. The implementation of national, standardised, annual tests ensured that all teachers have the same type of information on the reading and numeracy skills of their learners, and that all teachers have a common understanding of their learners' skills and areas to develop next. Reading and numeracy are skills that open the doors to learning across the curriculum. It is therefore essential for schools to have this information on their learners from an early age so that they can plan appropriate support and challenge, and ensure that all learners can thrive as they move up through school.

National tests are for formative use so that teachers can gain information on learners' skills. I have always been clear that their focus is on understanding learner progress, not on school performance or accountability. Welsh Government does not make judgements on schools based on test results. The tests give a snapshot of how a learner has performed at a particular point in time and the outcome is one piece of evidence that teachers use to gain an overall picture of a learner's skills and progress.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

The national tests are developed by specialists, and a robust process is in place to ensure they are fit for purpose. They are trialled with learners in schools across Wales; and teacher panels are held both before and after trialling to ensure that the content is set at the appropriate level for each curriculum year group.

The petition makes reference to schools taking up time to prepare for the national tests. Welsh Government guidance is very clear that tests should not be a source of worry or anxiety for learners and emphasises the importance of schools paying attention to how the tests are presented. Any 'practising' with past test questions and the use of test questions for homework is inappropriate in the context of formative tests and can also cause anxiety for learners, particularly the youngest. I expect all schools to follow our guidance and to maintain a broad and balanced curriculum throughout the school year.

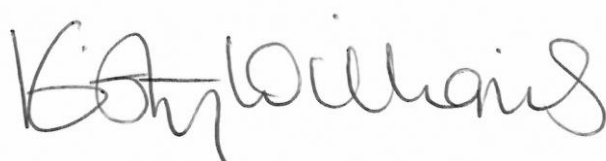
The petition also refers to the recommendations of Professor Donaldson's 2015 *Successful Futures* review. Amongst the recommendations were that 'assessment arrangements should give priority to their formative role in teaching and learning' (recommendation 37), and that 'innovative approaches to assessment, including interactive approaches, should be developed drawing on the increasing potential contribution of digital technology' (43). I have already acted on these recommendations ahead of the introduction of the new curriculum by initiating a transition from paper-based tests to online personalised assessments. Numeracy (Procedural) assessments went live during autumn term 2018, and will be followed by reading next academic year (2019/20) and numerical reasoning in 2020/21. Paper tests are being phased out as the online personalised assessments are phased in.

By moving online, we are taking advantage of the latest technology to provide a tailored assessment experience that adjusts the level of challenge for each learner. We are also ensuring that schools can use these assessments more flexibly, giving priority to their formative role. Teachers can schedule them at any point during the school year that they judge would be most beneficial to inform teaching and learning. Learners can view feedback which helps them build an understanding of what they can do and the skills they may need to work on, giving them greater ownership of their own learning.

Personalised assessments have been developed and designed with learners' wellbeing in mind; they provide a more flexible and less formal approach than the paper-based tests to assessing learners' skills. The assessments can be taken on a pc, laptop or tablet, in accordance with what learners use everyday in the classroom. Teachers can choose to assess learners individually or in small groups, timing assessments to take into account individual learners' ages and needs. The assessments do not have a time limit so learners can work through the questions at their own pace and teachers are also able to pause assessments to give breaks to learners at any point. All these features are particularly relevant to provide an assessment experience suited for younger learners.

The use of personalised assessments is, I believe, the right way forward to support our children to develop their reading and numeracy skills from an early age.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams', written in a cursive style.

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