The transformation of
education assessment in Wales

Children and teachers in Wales have been spared the tyranny of tests and league tables for several years now. The experiences and opinions of teachers, heads and parents in Wales show how much England has to gain if the NUT/NAHT campaign to abolish SATs is successful.

Some NUT primary school teachers don’t have to worry about SATs. Statutory end-of-key-stage tests were phased out in Wales between 2001 and 2006. Now pupils there are monitored using teacher assessment instead – a move that Julie Edwards, ethnic minority achievement service teacher at Kitchener primary school in Cardiff, describes as “wonderful” and “very motivating”.

“We’re more flexible, we’re freer to deliver a better curriculum, I believe. And the teachers have gained so much more confidence,” says Anne Roberts, headteacher of Penygarn primary in Pontypool. “In our school vision we talk about getting the children to love learning and making them independent, making them happy. That becomes so much easier to do without the constraints of the SATs.”

Kitchener headteacher Jane Evans has seen similar benefits. “The difference is that teachers can be much more creative with the curriculum they’re delivering, giving children richer and more varied learning opportunities. There is a holistic approach to teacher assessment, which is an integral part of the planning and teaching process,” she enthuses. “The whole process of teacher assessment is far more effective than SATs ever were.”

Making the change

For teachers in England used to taking their pupils through SATs every year – especially younger members of the profession who did SATs themselves at school – getting rid of the tests might seem scary. But the experience of teachers in Wales shows that a gradual transition to teacher assessment, accompanied by plenty of advice and support from the government and local authorities, helped to smooth the way.

“It was quite daunting to begin with, but we had an awful lot of support,” says Sarah Harwood, Year 6 teacher and assessment coordinator at Alltwen primary school in Swansea. Although some teachers noticed an initial increase in workload, this was eased by all the help available. “From the summer term, we’d started having lots of information from the Welsh Assembly Government and also from our education authority to give us guidance as to how we could implement teacher assessment,” Sarah explains.

In 2005 Key Stage 2 SATs became optional in Wales, with external marking available to schools that wanted it. The following year optional test papers were published again, but this time without the option of external marking. And from 2007, 11 year olds in Wales have been monitored solely through teacher assessment.

The change to teacher assessment has proved popular with teachers in Wales. “It’s the observations that you note every day –
whether it’s through incidental observation, whether it’s through marking a pupil’s book or the dialogue that happens between teacher and pupil, or pupil and pupil — that actually gives you the rounded picture of the pupil,” explains Sarah.

We over-ruled on the SATs — on one day — and taught sometimes, if I’m honest, directly to the SATs,” admits Annie Roberts. “I’m a big believer in assessment for learning,” she adds.

Not only does Wales have no SATs; it also has no league tables. The NUT and NAHT have long argued against league tables, as they put pressure on teachers to narrow the curriculum, teach to the test, and focus their attentions on ‘borderline’ pupils. The tables also encourage schools to compete rather than collaborate. Yet, as the fiascos of recent years have shown, they are often based on unreliable data, and tend to reveal little about a school other than whether it serves an affluent or deprived community.

**Support from parents**

One argument the British government repeatedly gives for retaining SATs in England is that parents want the results — even though the tests have been abolished in Wales and Scotland without any outcry. In Wales, parents we spoke to were full of praise for teacher assessment.

Leah Morris says her daughters used to get “stressed out and scared about doing exams”. As the tests loomed, she found the girls “not being able to sleep and getting really nervous”. In contrast, she says her younger son “doesn’t even know he’s being assessed. He’s got no worries about being stressed out with exams and things.”

Charlotte Jones agrees: “My children enjoy school better and they seem a lot freer and a lot more involved in things which they weren’t before, like drama and sports clubs and things after school. They like school a lot better because it’s less stressful for them.”

**A balanced curriculum**

Teachers feel freer too, able to deliver a broader, more balanced curriculum that meets pupils’ needs. “When we were teaching SATs you were really focusing on the three core subjects — science, English and maths,” remembers Nick Wilson, Year 6 teacher at Kitchener. “It did become very repetitive because you were going over the same things, week in, week out.”

Since the abolition of SATs, the school has moved from a subject-based curriculum to a skills-based one. Nick explains this enables teachers to “teach skills in a whole range of different subjects, so you could have English skills being taught in history, you could have mathematical skills being crossed over into science. The children found the learning more relevant and you could be much more creative.” He adds: “It’s also much more fun!”

His colleague Julie Edwards agrees: “For many years I was quite demoralised. I found it quite difficult to come into school and teach a curriculum that I didn’t really think was appropriate. But now I come to school and I feel very excited about what I do.”

Jane Evans is delighted with the impact the changes have had on her staff. “What’s been really exciting is harnessing the expertise and professionalism of teachers, to sit together, look at children’s work, moderate, standardise, work with colleagues.” She explains that Kitchener is now part of a local cluster of schools, linked with the nearby comprehensive, and says this “has opened lots of doors and made lots of contacts for teachers to develop their teaching and learning styles”.

A further change is that, unlike the Early Years Foundation Stage in England, the Foundation Phase in Wales is replacing Key Stage 1, so that by 2011 it will cover all children aged three to seven. Sophie Evans, a Year 2 teacher at Kitchener, welcomes this change. “It’s a lot more of a holistic approach to the child, as we get to see their personal and social journey as well as their mathematical development and their language development,” she explains.

**No turning back**

None of the teachers we spoke to in Wales had any desire to return to the bad old days of SATs. Many recalled with horror the pressure and stress the tests placed on staff and pupils, and the negative impact they had on the whole school. Pupils were “getting anxious even before they came into Year 6,” recalls Colin Jones, additional learning needs co-ordinator at Kitchener.

Welsh teachers are keen to see their colleagues in England follow them into SATs-free schooling. “Teachers in England need to be brave to take this step in abolishing the SATs,” says Lindsay Bowen, Foundation Phase team leader at Kitchener. “We’ve done it in Wales and we have the evidence to show that it’s made a great impact on the children’s learning, and on our lives as teachers and practitioners.”

Helen Robbins, Year 3 and 4 teacher at Penygarn, can’t imagine going back to the tests. “I think that if the Welsh Assembly Government wanted to reintroduce SATs in Wales there would just be an absolute uproar, because we’ve seen just how different education can be without SATs.”

Look out for a short film featuring the teachers, headteachers and parents in this article — and many more — on the NUT website later this term.

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*I’m delighted with the huge amount of support that our campaign against SATs is gaining among teachers, parents and children. Every day we’re being contacted by people who want to show their support — from schoolchildren to world famous authors. It seems that the government are the only ones that think SATs should stay!*

I was particularly interested recently to read the views of Mick Waters, recently retired director of curriculum at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, who said the system of government targets and league tables is too “demanding” and “pitched schools against each other”.

He added: “The danger is that the children become a ‘currency’ that can bring us ‘scores’. Children should go places, make things, build things, sing, play, look closely at their world, meet fascinating people and learn about themselves. We risk preparing for the future to the extent we overlook the present that all children deserve – a joyful childhood.”

The NUT couldn’t agree more. We are holding an indicative ballot this term in which we will ask members if they will support a boycott if, once all other avenues to achieve a change to the assessment arrangements have been exhausted. SATs remain. We will obviously be encouraging a ‘yes’ vote in this ballot.

Please return your ballot paper promptly when it arrives in November, and urge your colleagues to do so too. You can also support the campaign by signing our petition to have SATs abolished, contacting your MP to let them know how strongly you feel, holding a meeting for teachers and parents at your school, or getting involved in our SATs Saturday events – turn the page to find out more.

Together we can end the misery of SATs and make 2010 a great, SATS-free year for education.