

The Rt Hon Ed Balls
Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

Dear Ed,

We are writing in response to your letter to all head teachers, dated 10th March, 2010. We appreciate and welcome your recognition of the overall significant improvement in primary schools and would like to comment on the specific issues that you raise.

We agree that we want to see a fairer, balanced and more rounded perspective on school performance and we thank you for referring to our Charter, which makes this very point. We also want to see every child making good progress. Our own Manifesto outlines our vision that ‘...every child achieves to the absolute best of their ability whilst retaining a love of learning that will stay with them into their adult lives.’ This is in accord with your analysis of the outcomes that show significant improvements in primary schools. However, our evidence indicates that current systems of assessment and accountability run directly counter to our shared vision and, in some cases, actively undermine progress.

As you know, we are wholly supportive of the desire to provide a broader, more balanced picture of school achievement and, as such, we are heavily involved in the design of the School Report Card. However, we do need to ensure that the fundamental purpose of the Report Card is not demeaned or even destroyed by the use of inappropriate data and a misleading single grade.

It is encouraging to read your assessment of the current league tables as being inherently unfair. We too want to see a fairer system in place and we too are determined to ‘get it right’. We also agree that there has to be an element of external accountability. The sampling approach you have adopted for science, in our view, could easily be implemented to allow the government to assess achievement in English and mathematics in primary education. We note that you will monitor the operation of the science sample test but we urge you to be more bold in your thinking on this matter.

We are very keen to work with you on ways in which teacher assessment can be further strengthened and developed. There are already resources in place, such as APP supported by the guidance agreed by all the teacher unions. These, used appropriately, can provide a suitable foundation for future developments. We have been pleased to contribute to the QCDA's initial consultation on the introduction of light-touch moderation in 2011, which we consider holds much promise.

Regrettably, we fundamentally disagree with your view that KS2 tests in English and mathematics should remain as the key accountability measure for primary schools at this time. This is at the heart of our dispute. The tests distort the curriculum and have flawed outcomes. This is reinforced by the research established by QCDA and Ofqual.

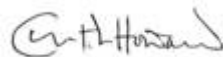
You have indicated that the current system is not set in stone. We would therefore urge you to advise our members of your time frame for the deregulation of the tests at KS2.

Deregulation would mean that tests can then be used by schools for their proper purpose which is to inform teacher assessment. We believe that this, accompanied by a system of light-touch moderation, would provide you with a robust process of external validation that is fairer, more balanced and more accurate than the system that you are currently maintaining.

We want to continue to work with you to develop a fairer system and welcome your invitation to do so.



Mick Brookes
General Secretary



Chris Howard
President NAHT