

## EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

### Standardised Assessments

#### SUBMISSION FROM James McEnaney

I am a current FE lecturer and former secondary school teacher. I am also a journalist specialising in Scottish education and, over the last three years, have investigated issues such as standardised testing, Teach First and the use of Pupil Equity Funding in schools. I am happy to appear in person in front of the committee.

In 2015 I produced a paper for RISE which dealt directly with the introduction of national standardised testing in Scotland. It covers much of what the committee seems to be investigating. Although I am no longer a member of this group, and some aspects of the policy have changed since publication, I am happy to make the paper itself available to committee members. It can be accessed here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVdjMwWkp6ZGs1SUE>

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#### **The evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, S3**

I believe that it is useful to break this issue down into 2 component parts:

- The evidence for the introduction of standardised testing
- The shift from the SSLN to SNSA

#### **Evidence for the introduction of standardised testing**

- When Nicola Sturgeon first announced that standardised testing would be reintroduced I submitted an FOI request to the Scottish Government. I asked them to release the 'details of the advice provided to the Scottish Government which resulted in the announcement of national standardised tests'. Given that the reintroduction of such tests represented a huge shift in Scottish education policy, it seemed reasonable to me to assume that the government would have done its homework on the issue and gathered at least some formal advice.
- In response to my request the Scottish Government eventually conceded that the written advice for this policy amounted to 4 emails. They also referenced two OECD papers (neither of which were focused on or arguing for a system of standardised testing) and a series of unminuted meetings.
- The government's responses to my FOI can be accessed here <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVcWV5a0lia1JMN3loZVBRWHVpcU5EQjRZeUIN> (the initial response) and here <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVMU1OR3ILOThvUE12c0RtUk82MUpWRDFRTU1F> (review response).
- This story was reported by CommonSpace on 17/11/16 (<https://www.commonspace.scot/articles/2925/exclusive-the-four-emails-that-led-to-scotgov-s-controversial-standardised-testing-plan>). Particular attention should be paid to the government's admission that ***"the formal consultation period on the***

**framework itself did not begin until after the first minister's announcement**" that the tests were to be introduced. This, I would contend, strongly suggests that the decision to introduce the tests was made at a political level, with the educational details to be worked out later.

- As the government refused to release the content of the emails I was forced to appeal to the Scottish Information Commissioner. Eventually the SIC ruled in my favour and the contents of the emails were made available to me. I subsequently published the material. Thanks to the SIC judgement I also found out that the emails (3 of them from Sue Ellis and 1 from Louise Hayward) were **"unsolicited"**. They are, however, clearly in response to at least one meeting.
- The emails can be read here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVNnRSNXVWbmFQa1pybHJiZDJ6STYxWGxET0JN>
- The SIC judgement can be read here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVZFhUQ0VvdHMTaXVURFZ2Z1J2OVJhT3FVbDF3>
- Point 22 of the SIC judgement is particularly relevant in this context. While attempting to withhold information from me, the government argued that the tests, as part of the National Improvement Framework, would allow government ministers **"to know more, on a consistent and systematic basis, about the performance of the education system."** The Ministers also **"stated that the NIF would provide the evidence to make substantial progress in eliminating the attainment gap within a decade."** These arguments were made as part of a legal process and should, I would argue, form at least part of the basis for reviewing the government's policy and, ultimately, its relative success in achieving its goals.

### The shift from SSLN to SNSA

- Put simply, the data from SNSA is incapable of replacing that which was produced by the SSLN.
- The reason for this is actually relatively simple: the two assessment systems were designed to do completely different jobs. While SNSA is designed to offer student-level information to teachers (which, at least according to government, informs planning, teaching and reporting of progress), the SSLN was designed to generate objective, national level data about overall attainment. It is not only unhelpful, but actually quite damaging, to conflate these two distinct purposes.
- It is important to understand the history of the SNSA policy to fully understand the current situation. Initially, government policy was for the full test data to be published, a point made clear by Nicola Sturgeon following the speech in which the new policy was announced. All students would also take the tests at the same time. Both of these aspects of the new policy were abandoned relatively quickly (for good, educationally-driven reasons and following pressure from, most notably, the EIS) and the government's defence of SNSA has, consequently, shifted over time.
- The government's defence of SNSA now hinges on the assertion that they are necessary in order to inform teachers' judgements about their students - they are no longer framed as a tool for providing measurement data (despite the original claims to

the SIC). The real 'data shift' has in fact been from the SSLN to the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL), with the SNSA theoretically contributing to the latter. There are, however, numerous problems with relying on ACEL in order to measure the Scottish education system as a whole.

- The government's own publications go some way to explaining why the ACEL data is nothing like as robust as the SSLN data that it is supposed to have replaced, but the key points are:
  1. There is still, even now, no properly agreed standard for what the 'achievement' of a level looks like
  2. Councils themselves have expressed concerns about the reliability of the data submitted to the government  
(<https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0054/00543891.pdf>)
  3. To fully understand points 1 and 2, it is crucial to remember that CfE levels were never, ever intended to be used as an external measure of achievement and attempts to retrofit them for this purpose are doomed to failure
  4. ACEL data, unlike the SSLN, is inevitably influenced by political pressures. In simple terms, with politicians exerting pressure on the schools system to show that the 'attainment gap' is closing, it becomes more and more likely that teachers' judgements will be affected. It is worth noting at this stage that some teachers have already privately reported coming under pressure to declare a pupil as having 'achieved a level' when they do not necessarily believe this to be the case. In reality, this is hardly surprising when the First Minister has previously said that the new system will mean that her government will "be able to take action if any particular school or if any particular area is not performing in the way we think necessary." (<https://www.thenational.scot/politics/14892973.sturgeon-pledges-detailed-data-on-schools-and-pupils-as-davidson-accuses-snp-of-backtracking>)
- So we have moved from having robust, objective, well-designed, national-level data for Scottish education to depending upon a deeply flawed alternative which cannot hope to replicate the quality of the system it replaced.
- (NB: This should **not** be taken to mean that teachers' judgement about their own pupils cannot be trusted – this would be a simplistic interpretation of the situation. The issue is not with teachers' professional abilities, but rather with the application of unreasonable expectations of what different data sources can offer us.)

## Conclusion

- There was no genuine educational case for ditching the SSLN - it was a political decision to bolster the government's case for reintroducing standardised testing in Scotland.
- The information that has theoretically replaced the SSLN - the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels - is extremely problematic (at best) and lacks the robust objectivity of the SSLN.
- There was no **need** to cancel the SSLN, even allowing for the introduction of standardised testing of all pupils and the reporting of ACEL for all schools. The two

approaches, as shown above, perform separate functions - but significant problems have been caused by the conflation of the two systems.

- There may well have been a case for expanding the SSLN (it could, for example, have been adjusted to give both national and local authority level data) and indeed this idea was put to the Scottish Government in a 2012 report from the University of Glasgow entitled 'Assessment at Transition' (a report which the Scottish Government funded).
- As a consequence of the Scottish Government's decisions we have been left in a position where we have less, and less useful, data about Scottish education at precisely the time when the First Minister claims that she wishes to be judged on her record for improving education.

### **Additional thoughts / information**

- A particularly frustrating part of this debate, and one which has caused significant problems, is the repeated assertion – most notably from the First Minister – that the 'sample-based' methodology of the SSLN is part of the reason that it should be replaced. The implication was that the data was either not sufficiently reliable/useful, or at least that having data on every single child would make national data more useful/reliable.
- The SSLN operated on a sample basis for good reason - sample-based approaches avoid a situation where the tests influence the teaching that takes place in schools (ie teaching to the test). As a consequence, there is a good argument for this approach actually being a more reliable method of than attempting to gather data on every single child.
- It is also worth noting that the government gathers numerous sample-based data sets without issue. In response to an FOI request asking for a list of these surveys, I was directed to this page on the government's own website: <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/About/Surveys> .
- It is worth asking why the sample-based approach of the SSLN was viewed as a problem by the FM when her government makes extensive use of sample-based methods. One may also wish to ask why was the SSLN data reliable enough to justify a massive practical and philosophical change in Scottish education, but not reliable enough to measure the relative success of those changes?
- I have previously written about this issue for TESS Scotland and a copy of the piece can be read here: <https://jmcemedia.wordpress.com/2018/05/02/the-sslN-can-still-create-material-gain-for-teachers-tess/>
- Finally, please note that nothing in this submission should be taken as support for the assertion that SNSA are a necessary feature of schooling or that teachers require such a system to support their work. This matter is still very much disputed, but I am - as ever – inclined to listen to teachers, not politicians, when coming to a conclusion about the value of a learning and teaching 'tool'.