

## ATM RESPONSE TO ED BALLS ANOUNCEMENT LAST WEEK re KS3 NATIONAL TESTING

The Association of Teachers of Mathematics (ATM) warmly welcomes the Schools' Secretary Ed Balls' important announcement last week that the Government has ended schools' requirement to run National Tests for 14 year olds, regardless of the reasons for this sudden change of mind. When interviewed about his announcement, Ed Balls stated that the current system has become 'less relevant' and that this change is '... part of a wider overhaul of key stage 3 assessment'. He also stated that the change is a response to Head teachers who have repeatedly told him that a more flexible form of assessment is necessary at KS3, and that the current compulsory National Tests will be replaced by improved classroom assessment by teachers and frequent reporting to parents in years 7, 8 and 9. Yet whilst abandoning KS3 tests, he states that he is strengthening the role of Key Stage 2 national tests for 11 year olds.

We have three further points to make in relation to this and the current national testing system for 11 year-old pupils.

1 The statement that externally marked Key Stage 2 tests are 'essential to giving parents, teachers and the public the information they need the progress of each primary age child and of every primary school'<sup>1</sup> exposes a significant contradiction in the Government's current position regarding the role and purpose of assessment at KS3, and at Key Stages 1 and 2. Ed Balls stated that '... testing, assessment and accountability must encourage and reward the best teaching so that it properly supports pupils in their learning and development.'<sup>2</sup>

The problem with National Tests is that they are proven not to support the best teaching. The pressure on all schools from external assessment and high-stakes testing is huge, narrowing and skewing the curriculum that is offered all our learners. Jim Rose, the man invited by the present government to review the primary curriculum says 'Primary schools in England spend too much time "rehearsing tests"' <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7680895.stm>. This is a particular problem for mathematics. By their nature, National Tests have tested facts and skills, rather than conceptual understanding, general strategies and appreciation. Consequently, and not surprisingly, teachers concentrate at all levels of teaching on the former at the expense of the latter. This is not a neutral act: it is damaging horrifically the mathematical experiences of our youngest children. It is unacceptable that Ed Balls did not take the opportunity in his wider overhaul of assessment to review KS2 National Tests.

2 The current Rose Review into Primary teaching and the Williams' Review into Primary mathematics were not given assessment within their remit. A review of the

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons statement on national curriculum tests 14/Oct/2008

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

Primary curriculum not including assessment, which Ed Balls, Jim Rose and Peter Williams accept as an integral part of what happens in schools, brings the role of both reviews into disrepute. We would go so far as to say that the Rose Review of the National Curriculum is a complete waste of time when it is, in effect, National Tests that determine the curriculum rather than the National Curriculum. A golden opportunity to consider holistically the curriculum and its assessment will have been lost.

3 It is not only Secondary Head teachers who have been requesting 'more flexible' forms of assessment. Primary Head teachers have been one of the most vociferous groups in denouncing the National Tests. It is dishonest for Ed Balls to state that he has listened to Head teachers, when he only applies this to the secondary sector.

We ask when the current unsustainable system will be resolved. We call unreservedly for a rapid announcement with immediate effect from the Schools' Secretary, as part of his wider overhaul of assessment, to end schools' requirement to run National Tests for 11-year-olds.

On behalf of all teachers of mathematics, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss in greater detail the evidence and experience which leads us to hold these views so strongly.

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