

## Government issues advice on handling LGBT school protests

**T**he Government has issued advice to local authorities on dealing with protests outside schools over LGBT-inclusive teaching. The 21-page document, seen by the BBC, lays out how councils should support teachers to minimise disruption following the continued protests outside schools in Birmingham against the teaching of LGBT relationships.

The Department for Education said it was trying to ensure that local authorities had information to support schools. The No Outsiders equality programme, which encouraged children to accept differences in religions, families and relationships, was suspended in March amid angry protests at the gates of Parkfield Community School in Birmingham. The protesters had argued that the subject matter contradicted the Islamic faith and that primary-age children were too young to be aware of same-sex relationships.

The DfE document suggested that councils could consider enforcement action if pupils were withdrawn from school because parents did not agree with what was being taught. It also suggested that if demonstrations were taking place outside school gates, head teachers should consider liaising with police in case protesters were breaking the law. Schools were also advised not to speak to the media about any demonstrations. The advice urged schools to encourage parents to talk to them about their concerns, rather than protest at the school gates.

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## Funding Baseline Assessment

**I**n pursuing its policy of supporting synthetic phonics as the only way to teach reading, the Government has spent a great deal of money on it and Baseline Assessment. Professor Margaret Clark writes in the research section of this issue a critique of the Phonics Screening Check which now dominates early years education in England.

Her article includes the use of statistics obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. The replies to two FoI requests are given in full here.

Last week, on 7 October 2019, the Department for Education replied to the following questions.

### Expenditure by the Department for Education on Baseline Assessment

1. How much was spent in 2018 on any aspect of Baseline Assessment, including research grants to NFER for the pilot assessment?
2. How much has been spent so far in 2019 and what further expenditure is estimated during 2019 and 2020 preparing for its national implementation?
3. What is the estimated cost of the Baseline Assessment each year following its implementation in 2020?
4. Has any company or institution been appointed to monitor the results and outcome of the implementation of reception Baseline Assessment or is any such oversight being considered by DfE?

The Department for Education gave the following answer:

“In the calendar year 2018, a total of £1,391,820 was spent on the reception baseline assessment (RBA). So far this calendar year, £1,132,756 has been spent on the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) RBA. Provided below is the estimated spend on the RBA for the financial years 2019-20 to 2023-24. Please note that these figures include the estimated spend for both the NFER RBA and for current future development plans for 2022-24:

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2019-20: £2.9 million (£772,443 so far this financial year)

- 2020-21: £3.6 million
- 2021-22: £3.4 million
- 2022-23: £0.4 million
- 2023-24: £0.4 million

As part of their contract with the Department, NFER are expected to monitor the pilot and provide a detailed report to STA following the pilot stage of the assessment. In addition to this, the Standards & Testing Agency's work on national assessments is regulated by Ofqual."

### **The Phonics Screening Check**

On 3 September 2019 the Department for Education replied to an earlier Freedom of Information Act request about the Phonics Screening Check as follows:

"You requested expenditure by Department for Education on The Phonics Screening Check since 2018:

1. During 2018.
2. So far in 2019 and projected spending for the remainder of 2019.
3. It has been reported that Capita has a contract with responsibility for the PSC from 2020 to 2024. How much is that contract, does it cover all expenditure on the PSC by DfE over that period and is there a penalty clause should the PSC cease during those years?
4. How much control over the PSC will be retained by DfE?

The phonics screening check (PSC) is developed and delivered by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA), an executive agency of the Department for Education. The following costs are those that can be directly attributed to the PSC. Many elements of the STA's test development and delivery resources and processes are centralised across the range of primary assessments to ensure efficiency and value for money and for this reason cannot be directly attributed to specific tests.

1. Expenditure on the PSC during 2018 was £758,147.
2. Expenditure on the PSC so far in 2019 was £301,328 and projected spending for the remainder of 2019 is £486,674.
3. Expenditure on the PSC under the Capita contract for the 2020 – 2024 Test Cycles is £1,513,155. Some expenditure on the PSC is not covered by the contract, such as test development activity and monitoring of the PSC administration in schools. STA has the right to terminate PSC during the term of the agreement and charges may apply.
4. The STA will be responsible for the governance and management of the Capita contract and will retain responsibility for test development and monitoring activity."

# The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2019: a critique

By Margaret M Clark OBE

**T**he Phonics Screening Check, introduced in 2012, now dominates early years education in England, constraining classroom practices as schools struggle to achieve a higher percentage pass each year. The check is administered to all children in state schools at the end of Year 1, when about six years of age, and should they fail to achieve a mark of 32 out of 40 it must be retaken at the end of Year 2.

Driven by this policy a great deal of money is spent not only by government but also by schools, including on commercial materials recommended by government. Detailed tables of results for 2019 were published on September 26. A new six-year contract has been awarded to Capita to oversee this assessment. Yet there is little independent evidence that it has improved literacy, the claimed research basis for the government and Ofsted's insistence that synthetic phonics be the only way to teach reading is suspect and there has been no consultation with the teaching profession on its future. In a comprehensive article in *Forum* 61:3 2019 (<https://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.61.387>) I review the extensive published evidence on both this policy and Baseline Assessment. In that forthcoming article reference is cited from internationally recognised literacy researchers, eighteen of whom from UK, USA, Australia, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland contributed to one of my recent edited books (Clark, 2017, and Clark, 2018). In this current article I report new information but direct readers to my many publications on this issue for further references.

## Introduction

1. In a special issue of *Education Journal* in 2019 five of my more recent articles on synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check were republished. That special issue (together with one on Baseline Assessment) is accessible together with a report published in September 2018 on an independent survey we conducted on the views of headteachers, teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check (Clark and Glazzard, 2018). That report and the special issues can be read and downloaded from <https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>. We had responses from 230 head teachers, 1,348 teachers and 419 parents, most of whom thought there should be a consultation on the future of the check. Many thought it should either be abolished or at least cease to be mandatory.

2. My evidence has now been sent to members of the Education Select Committee and to Damian Hinds, (former Secretary of State for Education) and Nick Gibb (School Standards Minister). The only response I received from DfE was an unsigned letter from a member of the team at the Standards and Testing Agency pointing out that in 2011 a consultation with teachers did take place, something of which we were already aware. Indeed, there were criticisms even then of the proposed policy and check. No attempt was made to respond to my evidence.

In our survey we found that the views expressed by the teachers and parents indicate that the government should seriously consider either discontinuing the check or at least make it voluntary. Of concern, in particular were the inclusion of pseudo words, the pass/fail nature of the check, and many parents were concerned at adverse effect on children's learning experiences in school and their reading including those who could already read with understanding.

3. I sent two Freedom of Information Questions one on expenditure on the Baseline Assessment currently being piloted by NFER, the other on the Phonics Screening Check. The response to the latter I report briefly here. (Both are reported fully in the news section on pages 10 and 11 above.)

4. In 2012 Sir Michael Wilshaw, then HMCI, stated that Ofsted would start a series of unannounced inspections solely on the training of phonics teaching in providers of primary initial teacher education, and that Ofsted would sharpen its focus on phonics in routine inspections of all initial teacher education provision (see Clark, 2016: 127). Together with colleagues I am currently investigating the effect of this

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policy by means of an independent survey of courses for initial teacher education in England. We are currently analysing the results of this survey and I will report them in a future article.

### **Results of the check in 2019**

The results of the Phonics Screening Check and key stage 1 assessments for 2019 were released on 26 September. The percentage of year 1 pupils who met the expected standard in phonics fell slightly (82%); however, 91% met the standard by the end of year 2. Over a four-year-period these results have been broadly stable. As in previous years detailed tables are provided by school and pupil characteristics, by local authority, by special educational needs, by disadvantage and by ethnicity. The pattern is relatively similar to previous years and as in previous years there is a sex difference with girls scoring higher than boys (85% of girls and 78% of boys pass in year 1), and again no difference between those whose first language is English and those with a first language other than English.

However, as in previous years one major discrepancy is between the oldest and the youngest pupils and yet again no comment is made concerning this and it is a discrepancy that might be overlooked by anyone looking merely at the table by month of birth. The children born in September are a year older than the children born in August. The percentage pass for September born children is 88% in year 1 (86% boys and 91% girls). For those born in August the percentage pass is 74% (70% for boys and 78% for girls). It is disturbing that no comment is ever made by DfE or any ministers on this important educationally significant finding. I have each year drawn attention to this important fact that means that at the end of year 1, 27% of boys and 20% of girls will have been recorded as failures! Surely this is an important and disturbing finding that should not have been overlooked.

### **Current evidence and continuing claims**

Nick Gibb, School Standards Minister, continues to claim that government policy is evidence-based, and that the phonics policy has resulted in improvement in attainment in reading in England's primary schools. However, SATs for Key Stage 2 published on 9 July 2019 show a slight fall in reading attainment of two points from 2018 to 73% in 2019. Nick Gibb has cited the rising percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) each year since 2012 as evidence for the success of the policy. Such a result is not unsurprising in view of the current high stakes nature of a school's percentage pass on the check. This year the results just released have shown no further rise and he was able only to cite that yet again Free Schools continued to have a slightly higher percentage pass than state schools. We have no way of knowing how similar the children are in these schools.

As recently as 1 July 2019 in an education debate in parliament Gibb was complimented by Robert Halfon, chairman of the Education Select Committee: "I pay tribute to the work of the Minister for School Standards. And particularly the work he has done to improve literacy in our schools which will be remembered for years to come and will have a huge influence on thousands of children across our schools." (*Hansard*, 1 July 2019, Volume 662.)

The other evidence to which Nick Gibb has referred on numerous occasions is England's improvement on the Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS) in 2016 where the country's ten-year-olds rose from joint 10th to joint 8th since the previous assessment in 2011. These claims citing PIRLS were made by Nick Gibb in France at the recent G7 meeting on 5 July 2019.

The following quotations are from the DfE Press release ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)). "Speaking at a G7 meeting of education ministers in France this week, Minister Gibb reaffirmed his commitment to drawing on best practice and evidence from across the world when looking to improve the education system. Many of the government's reforms introduced since 2010 have been based on world-leading successful practices identified in other countries..."

At no time has Nick Gibb referred to lessons that England might learn from either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. Both these countries ranked statistically higher than England in PIRLS, yet they take a very different approach to reading-pedagogy and to collaboration with teachers. Nor does he acknowledge possible alternative explanations for this rise in ranking (See Part II Evidence from PIRLS 2016

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in Clark, 2018).

The Department for Education has not consulted either teachers or parents as to whether they regard the PSC as providing valuable information, or about whether the PSC should remain statutory (see Appendix I in Clark and Glazzard, 2018). Yet there is now considerable research evidence that preparation for the check is increasingly prevalent in the early years in primary schools, even as early as nursery, with frequent practice of pseudo words (which form half the words in the check) and even setting for phonics-teaching.

### **Literacy Learning in the Twenty-first Century: what the focus on decoding neglects**

In an article in FORUM 59(3) in 2017 I stressed how important it is that teaching initial literacy should commence with an analysis of the skills and knowledge that young children bring to the learning situation when they start school. Brought up in a print-filled environment, some children are already on their way to appreciating that written language is a meaningful communication. I cited insights that should influence policy and practice. Yet many politicians ignore such evidence and misrepresent or even ridicule academics who challenge their policies.

Decoding is now stressed as the way to teach reading by the government and by Ofsted, including in reception classes. By contrast, little attention is paid to high frequency words and their value for young children learning to read.

I acknowledge that while high frequency words account for about half the total words in written English, to read it is essential to be able to recognise speedily also the words that appear much less frequently. These words account for over 90 per cent of the different words in written language. Children, if they are to read with understanding, need to develop strategies for speedy recognition of words they have not met before. Thus, like most academics I do not deny the importance of phonics in learning to read. However, the evidence is that this approach is better practised within context rather than in isolation. Time spent decoding words in isolation, or as in many schools in England on practising pseudo words to enable schools to achieve a high percentage pass on the PSC, would be better spent studying the features of real written English.

### **Ideology rather than evidence - whose ideology?**

Synthetic phonics 'first, fast and only' is not the evidence-based policy claimed by the government. Until recently the research cited by Nick Gibb in support of the synthetic phonics policy for initial teaching of reading was that conducted in Clackmannanshire in Scotland around 2005 and this is still cited also by Ofsted. Clackmannanshire is a small rural county in Scotland with 18 primary schools.

In an interview in 2018 Nick Gibb added a reference to research conducted earlier in the USA by the National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000). Readers are referred to an edited book by Allington in 2002 (see Clark 2016:118-121 and 147-156). He includes a critical appraisal of the phonics aspect of the National Reading Panel Research by members of the panel who raised concerns about claims made in and for that report. See my forthcoming article for further evidence.

According to Nick Gibb in 2017: "[The PIRLS results for England] are a vindication of the government's boldness in pursuing the evidence in the face of ideological criticism. And they are a reminder of the damage that can be caused when dogma flies in the face of evidence."

The School Standards Minister predicts there will be an even higher performance in five years with the full implementation of the phonics policy and rise in percentage pass on the PSC year on year. There is a possibility that the effect may not be as he predicts; furthermore, there are many other literacy initiatives currently which might be entitled to some credit should reading attainment indeed improve. According to the international report 'good readers had an early start in literacy learning' and students whose parents engaged them in early literacy activities had higher reading achievement than students whose parents engaged them less frequently in early literacy experiences. Unfortunately, as England was one of only two countries of 50 participating which declined to administer the parental questionnaire, we have no way of knowing the influence of the parents in England on both the children's results on the PSC and PIRLS.

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As recruitment and retention of primary school teachers is currently a problem in England, further lessons might have been learnt from the PIRLS reports had politicians, or at least their advisers, studied the actual documents. For example, in the Republic of Ireland teaching is regarded as a highly valued and respected career. The literacy policy, the way it was developed, and the autonomy granted to teachers may have contributed not only to their high ranking in international studies, but also to the high regard for the profession and the career satisfaction of the teachers.

### **Expenditure and future management of the Phonics Screening Check**

Responsibility for the check is now being transferred to Capita and there is planned expenditure on the check until at least 2024. On July 26, 2019 it was reported: "Capita was awarded a £109 million in July 2018 to deliver the key stage 1 tests, the key stage 2 tests and the phonics screening check from 2020 to 2024." (<https://schoolsImprovement.net/significant-weaknesses-in-dfe-oversight-of-sats/>)

The Capita website states that Capita has been selected by the Department for Education Standards and Testing Agency to manage the administration, processing and support for all primary national curriculum assessment tests in England. This is a six-year contract starting in September 2019. "The award of this contract will see STA moving to a single-supplier model to oversee the delivery of NCA test operations". This involves the printing, distribution and collation of over 9 million test papers annually.... On 7 August 2019 I sent a series of Freedom of Information Questions to the Department for Education. The following are the answers I received on 3 September:

1. Expenditure on the PSC during 2018 was £758,147.
2. Expenditure on the PSC so far in 2019 was £301,328 and projected spending for the remainder of 2019 is £486,674.
3. Expenditure on the PSC under the Capita contract is £1,513,155. Some expenditure on the PSC is not covered by the contract, such as test development activity and monitoring of the PSC administration in schools. STA has the right to terminate PSC during the term of the agreement and charges may apply.
4. The STA will be responsible for the governance and management of the Capita contract and will retain responsibility for test development and monitoring activity.

This clearly is not the full expenditure on the check by DfE and does not give any idea of the cost to schools.

Even following the first nationwide administration of the check in June 2012 concerns were expressed about among other aspects the pass/fail nature of the check; the inclusion of pseudo words; and its lack of diagnostic features (see Clark 2016: 140). We now have research showing the effects of this high stakes test on the literacy experiences of young children in the early years in school. Furthermore, there is little evidence that it has indeed improved literacy attainment. Surely it is time to reconsider this as a mandatory assessment of all children at the end of year 1 and to consider whether funding allocated to it each year could be better spent?

**References** (See my forthcoming article in Forum 61:3 for a more detailed discussion and an extensive reference list)

Clark, M.M. (2016) *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice*. Abingdon: Routledge. Revised edition.

Clark, M.M. (2017) *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning*. (editor and contributor) Birmingham: Glendale Education. Ebook downloadable from Amazon.co.uk and paperback. (This has contributors from the UK and Australia).

Clark, M.M. (2018) *The Teaching of Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology* (editor and contributor). Birmingham: Glendale Education. Ebook and paperback from Amazon.co.uk. (This has contributors from the USA, Australia, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK).

Clark, M.M. (2019) 'Literacy policy, synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check' *Education Journal*. 379. Special Issue. Downloadable from <https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>

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the sector to greater competition.

The OfS has formally adopted the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) as its scheme for assessing the quality of HE provision in England. Participation in the TEF is a condition of registration for English HE providers with more than 500 undergraduates. Participation is voluntary for smaller HE providers and for those in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The TEF encourages excellent teaching to flourish by rebalancing the priority given to teaching and learning compared to research. The TEF will provide strong incentives to HE providers to prioritise the student learning experience. In due course we will lay before Parliament the report of the independent review of the TEF, which has been conducted by Dame Shirley Pearce.

In August 2019, my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, announced a new fast-track immigration route aimed at allowing a wider pool of scientific talent to come to the UK. This route will ensure that those with specialist skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects can come to the UK and make an important contribution to our leading science and research sectors, significantly enhancing the intellectual and knowledge base of the UK. The route will be uncapped, ensuring that those with the required skill set can secure places. The UK is a great place for research, accounting for 4% of the world's researchers, 11% of all citations, 14% of the world's most highly cited articles and 4 of the world's top 10 universities.

The government recognises the important contribution of our universities to research, innovation and working with business. This contribution is critical to achieving the ambitions of our modern Industrial Strategy, including delivering 2.4% spend of GDP on research and development by 2027. In the autumn, the government will set out plans to significantly boost public funding on research and development, provide greater long-term certainty to our scientific and research community and accelerate our ambition to reach 2.4% of GDP.

Additionally, on 11 September, my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, announced a new graduate immigration route that provides an opportunity for international students who have been awarded their degree to stay and work in the UK at any skill level for 2 years. This represents a significant improvement in our offer to international students and will help ensure that our world-leading HE sector remains competitive internationally.

*Tuesday 8 October 2019*

## Literacy

**Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to encourage children to read. [HL18030]

**Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they intend to take to ensure that everybody living in the UK is able to read and write English to a competent standard. [HL18031]

**Lord Agnew of Oulton:** Ensuring children are taught to read well is vital to spreading opportunity. There is a substantial body of evidence that shows that systematic phonics is a highly effective method for teaching early reading. This answer refers to education in England, as education is a devolved issue. Our phonics performance is improving. In 2019, 82% of pupils met the expected standard in the phonics screening check, compared to just 58% when the check was introduced in 2012.

We are also investing £26.3 million in a national network of English hubs. We have appointed 34 primary schools across England as English hubs, who are taking a leading role in supporting nearly 3000 schools to improve their teaching of reading through systematic synthetic phonics, early language development, and reading for pleasure. The national curriculum aims to ensure that all pupils develop the habit of reading widely and often, becoming independent, fluent and enthusiastic readers who read for pleasure and for information. Reading aloud is a part of this, and teachers are encouraged to read poetry, stories and non-fiction to younger pupils, as well as longer books to older pupils.

This government recognises the importance of strong literacy skills both in work and everyday life, which is why we provide full funding through the Adult Education Budget for people who need English skills to undertake a range of courses in GCSEs, functional skills and stepping stone qualifications from entry level to Level 2. To ensure as many people as possible have developed these skills by 19, the government requires students who have not yet achieved a Grade 4 in English to study it as part of the 16- 19 study programme. Students taking Level 3 apprenticeships and T-Levels need to achieve a grade 4 at GCSE or pass functional skills. In 2018, nearly 80% of 19-year-olds held a Level 2 English qualification.

*Tuesday 8 October 2019*

### Local Government Finance

**Lord Bradshaw:** To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Baroness Vere of Norbiton on 9 September (HL17590), whether the 2019–20 local government finance settlement was higher than the 2018–19 settlement. [HL17897]

**Viscount Younger of Leckie:** I can confirm that the 2019-20 local government finance settlement was higher than the 2018-19 settlement. Core Spending Power increased from £45.1 billion in 2018-19 to £46.2 billion in 2019-20, a cash-increase of 2.5% and a real-terms increase in resources available to local authorities.

*Tuesday 8 October 2019*

### Music: Education

**Lord Black of Brentwood:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what provision is being made for the future of music education hubs; and when plans for the (1) future funding of, and (2) a longterm strategy for, such hubs will be published. [HL17890]

**Lord Black of Brentwood:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to increase annual funding for music education hubs to £100 million. [HL17891]

**Lord Black of Brentwood:** To ask Her Majesty's Government whether future funding for music education hubs will take account of inflation as well as changes to teachers' pay and pension contributions. [HL17892]

**Lord Agnew of Oulton:** The government believes that music is an important subject and that all pupils should receive a high-quality music education, at least up to the age of 14. The subject is compulsory in the national curriculum, and the government is providing funding of over £300 million for music education hubs between 2016 and 2020. Music education hubs have done excellent work to ensure there is more equitable access to music education.

Funding for music education hubs beyond March 2021 will be subject to the 2020 Spending Review. The department is proud of our National Plan for Music Education, setting an ambitious vision for music education for every child, regardless of their background. We are working to refresh the plan and an announcement on this will be made in due course.

*Tuesday 8 October 2019*



## Pupil Premium: Sixth Form Education

**The Lord Bishop of Winchester:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to extend the pupil premium to post-16 education. [HL17941]

**Lord Agnew of Oulton:** The government is determined to ensure that disadvantaged students are supported in their post-16 education. The national funding formula for 16 to 19-year-olds and the funding through the Adult Education Budget both include a disadvantage uplift. This provides extra funding for disadvantaged students (specifically for those with low prior attainment or those who live in the most disadvantaged areas).

We will continue to consider how we can most effectively support disadvantaged students in post-16 education, and will continue to keep financial arrangements under review.

*Tuesday 8 October 2019*

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