

RECEPTION BASELINE ASSESSMENT (RBA)

STATEMENT

The Joint Primary Group of the [Association of Teachers of Mathematics](#) and the [Mathematical Association](#) welcome the cancelling of Reception baseline testing in September 2020 and, in common with a wide range of Early Years experts, urge the Government to abandon the Reception baseline altogether.

Here are a series of statements from Early Years experts challenging the premise of the RBA: <https://www.early-education.org.uk/no-RBA-assessment>.

Our reasons are outlined in this statement.

HISTORY

In September 2016, the Department for Education (DfE) was due to introduce a Reception baseline check for all children in Reception in England. Feedback from its public consultation in 2013 was ignored: 51% of respondents said “no” to the introduction of a baseline test at the start of Reception, and 73% opposed the idea of a government-approved, commercially produced test. 54% of respondents were teachers and headteachers. Despite this, in 2015 three commercial RBA providers were approved by the DfE:

- The Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University (CEM) - an assessment based on tasks and observation
- Early Excellence (EE) - an observation-only assessment
- The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) - a computer-based assessment

During the 2015 pilot, two thirds of schools chose EE, an observation-based RBA, however, NFER was chosen by Government as the national provider. In summer 2016 RBA was put on hold.

In September 2017 the DfE announced that a new assessment in Reception would be introduced from 2020 as a measure to track pupils’ progress during primary school. The government said the proposed RBA would be developed in conjunction with the teaching profession, and would be 'teacher-mediated', meaning the teacher would be present while the test is administered. It was proposed that the RBA will take place during the first six weeks of the autumn term of the Reception year, a non-statutory school year.

Children starting Reception in September 2020 would have been the first group to take the new RBA.

In June 2020, the Government released this statement:

“Due to the challenging circumstances faced by schools in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, statutory introduction of the RBA has been postponed to Autumn 2021. Instead, schools have the opportunity to sign up to the RBA Early Adopter year.”

UNNECESSARY

Every Reception teacher assesses children in order to teach effectively, however the RBA disregards critical areas of our youngest children’s development. The scope of the RBA is extremely narrow, consisting of two, 20-minute tests in literacy and number in the first few weeks of arrival at school. Just *literacy* and a narrow aspect of *number* are to be tested. The

content of the assessment is random, with tasks that are neither predictive of, nor aligned with, future mathematical attainment.

Both the Government and the DfE are clear that the RBA is not intended to be used to inform teaching. The DfE refers to Reception RBA as “*An assessment for pupils in Reception to measure their progress in primary schools from 2020.*” (DfE 2018 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reception-RBA-assessment>). The stated purpose of the RBA is to allocate each four- or five-year-old a score for school accountability purposes. By calling the RBA “assessment”, the DfE is deliberately obscuring a school accountability measure as a diagnostic assessment. In terms of workload, in addition to their diagnostic assessments on which to base future teaching, Reception teachers will now have an extra test to administer which, for a class of 30 at 40 minutes for each child is likely to take two weeks of valuable teaching time. The results of the RBA will be unavailable to teachers and ‘black boxed’ for seven years until the children end primary school in Y6.

COST

The contract for the first two years of Reception RBA has been awarded to the NFER at a cost of £9.8 million. This does not include the hidden costs for schools, for example, for staff cover to administer the two 20-minute tests, one-to-one, for all 30 children.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Formal assessment for the purposes of accountability puts pressure on schools, families and on children. Reception-age children have not begun their educational journey, being under-statutory school-age and it is proposed they are to be used to hold schools to account. It is very questionable practice to ‘score’ a young child at any time, particularly during his or her first weeks in full-time school (National Research Council, 2001). Moreover, the use of scores from a one-off test across a narrow range of competencies in the first few weeks in school is being proposed at an age when children in many high-performing countries are not, for sound evidential reasons, in formal school (Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck, 2017; Whitebread, 2013).

RELIABILITY

The Reception RBA will be an inaccurate assessment of 4- and 5-year-olds. A formal test does not give an accurate assessment of this age of child (National Research Council, 2001). Moreover, the adult administering the test will be unfamiliar to the child, thus responses will not demonstrate accurately what these children are able to do.

It is questionable that the test assesses the elements of number and literacy that are demonstrated by research as indicative of future achievement.

As an accountability measure, it would appear to be in schools’ interests to obtain low RBA scores in order to demonstrate good progress from Reception to the end of KS2. This will clearly affect the validity of such a test.

Many of the children who sit the RBA in Reception will not be the same children who sit the KS2 SATs tests seven years later, thus progress will not be demonstrated.

This report by the British Educational Research Association (<https://www.bera.ac.uk>) calls cogently into question the validity of using the RBA Reception to hold schools in England to account for the progress that those pupils have made by the end of KS2:
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/a-RBA-without-basis>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The core purpose of schools is to support and nurture the young as they develop from child into young adult, and to provide them with the knowledge and understanding they need to become lifelong learners and good citizens. There is no evidence, or indeed claim, that the RBA will do this. The implications from consultations indicate that teachers and leaders from inside the profession, who are actually working with the young children in question, suggest the opposite. Instead of settling new pupils into a safe and happy environment, they will be preoccupied with a time-consuming test, which will not inform their practice.

In recent challenging times, schools have repeatedly proven that they are highly professional organisations who respond quickly and effectively to the needs of the children in their care. The significant sums of money that the RBA test requires would more effectively be used to support young learners by providing for the ongoing training of the profession.

REFERENCES

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