

Community Union
Voice Section
2 St. James' Court
Friar Gate
Derby DE1 1BT

22 June 2021

Dear Colin,

RE: LEGISLATIVE CHANGES RELATING TO THE PHONICS SCREENING CHECK FOR YEAR 2 PUPILS IN ENGLAND FOR THE 2021/22 ACADEMIC YEAR

Thank you for writing in request of our views relating to the amendments STA will need to make to the KS1 Order, pursuant to section 87(6A) of the Education Act 2002, in order to require schools to:

- Administer an existing past PSC test paper (available on gov.uk) to all year 2 pupils in the second half of the autumn term 2021, in order to assess which pupils are at the expected standard in phonics;
- Report to the department by the end of the 2021 autumn term, via a data return to their local authority, the results of that autumn term assessment of year 2 pupils;
- Administer the PSC in the summer of 2022, to year 2 pupils yet to meet the expected standard in phonics (based on the results of the autumn term 2021 check), or to those year 2 who did not take the check in autumn 2021, alongside the year 1 cohort.

I am sure that it will come as no surprise for you to learn that we are deeply disappointed in the government's decision to revert to "business as usual" in regard to statutory assessment and public examination, this despite the current indications that the COVID-19 crisis is far from over and is likely to continue to have a significant impact upon schools for the foreseeable future. Therefore, for the Secretary of State to announce that a statutory autumn Phonics Screening Check will take place in autumn 2021 is shameful, singularly failing to recognise the negative impact that this will have on already exhausted teachers and children who have been unable to attend schools for over three months in the last five terms.

We have noted many times, together with our sister unions, that the government needs to have particular regard for teachers, support staff and children at this time, and that anything that does not directly contribute to the educational recovery – through diverse aspects such as academic, social or mental wellbeing – should be considered counterproductive at this time. It remains unclear as to how children of this age will be supported by the government through an incomplete recovery plan, nor benefit from the derisory amount of money announced. Recovery planning must take priority and until a coherent plan has been reached, assessment proposals, such as those suggested could be potentially detrimental and should not be implemented.

The proposal sets out the intention that the Phonics Screening Check will “ensure that pupils who require further support in phonics are identified,” but staff already know who they are. They know that there are more this year than in previous years due to the impact COVID-19 has had on school attendance, and they have put in strategies to address this, but they require time for them to be effective. Furthermore, the proposals indicate that this is to help reduce workload burdens on schools, despite the additional workload burdens that statutory assessment causes. And now schools are expected to administer the check to two whole cohorts in Autumn 2021 and Summer 2022.

Voice Community have been consistent in our view on both the phonics screening test and the multiplication tables check. We have stated on several occasions that pupils do not benefit from either of them, that teachers do not learn anything from them that they do not already know, and that they are simply another data set against which schools can be measured putting pressure onto pupils and teachers, increasing workload and risking narrowing of the primary curriculum.

We do note that STA have been very clear that, as with the autumn 2020 phonics screening check, data from the autumn 2021 phonics screening check will not be used for the purposes of school accountability and will not be added to Analyse School Performance. And we offer our thanks for this reassurance, however we would argue that this data should not leave schools and that the risk in collection through the local authority, presents risks – such as league tables and action against underperforming schools, which must be guarded against.

Once again, thank you for affording Voice, the education section of Community Union, the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and we welcome the opportunity to play our role in the future, but for now, we urge you to reconsider these proposals for the sake of the whole sector.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "MHodge". The signature is stylized with a large 'M' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Martin Hodge
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