

# Sociology Factsheet



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## Are Standard Assessment Tests (SAT's) a Good Measure of a Child's Educational Ability?

National testing of children of all ages has been in the spotlight for many years now. It is important when studying the Sociology of Education to be aware of contemporary issues in society as the examiner will expect you to keep up-to-date with current changes and will expect you to show an awareness of current debates in your exam answers.

This Factsheet will therefore focus on the current debate surrounding Standard Assessment Testing in schools.

### What are Standard Assessment Tests?

Standard Assessment Tests are national tests (often known as SATs) which each child in England will take at the end of each key stage of their education (ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16). These tests are used along with teacher assessments to measure each child's performance.

The tests aim to assess children's performance in selected parts of a subject on a particular day. These tests give an independent measure of how children and schools are doing compared with national standards in these subjects

### When are children assessed?

Age	Assessment	Subjects assessed
Aged 4 – 7	SATs : Key stage 1	Reading Writing Maths
By the age of 7, most children are expected to achieve level 2.		
Aged 7 – 11	SATs : Key Stage 2	English Maths Science
By the age of 11, most children are expected to achieve level 4.		
Aged 11 – 14	SATs : Key Stage 3	English Maths Science
By the age of 14, most children are expected to achieve level 5.		
Aged 14-16 End of compulsory education	GCSEs : Key stage 4 Vocational GCSEs	Wide variety of subjects where students have a choice
By the age of 16, most children are expected to achieve 5 A* to C grades or equivalent		

Not many years ago, there was a widely held view that children in England were under-tested; now that seems to have swung right round to a belief that they are over-tested. The first national tests were taken at age 7 in 1991 and at age 11 in 1994. Before this primary school pupils took no national tests.

### Why do children take SATs?

- SATs tests were introduced by the Conservative Government to raise standards in schools
- They were intended to provide a benchmark of individual pupil performance in a range of core subjects, English, Mathematics and Science.
- The results of SATs helps the school to make plans for their future learning.
- They also allow schools to see whether they are teaching effectively by comparing their pupils' performance to national results.
- They also give parents an indication of their child's performance
- Secondary schools use the results to form grouping/ability sets etc. as SATs results are passed on to the secondary schools when pupils transfer
- SATs results are reported to the DfES with individual schools' performance published in performance tables, usually referred to as 'league tables'.
- Each LEA is also judged on the performance of its schools and compared nationally.



**Are SATs tests improving standards in schools?**

The argument for the introduction of national testing was that it would drive up standards in schools.

The SATs results of 2008 showed that at the age of 11 (key stage 2) 61 percent of children had reached level 4 — the grade they are expected to reach — in reading, writing and Maths, up one percent from last year.

The results found that 81 percent of pupils reached level 4 in English, and 78 percent achieved that grade in Maths, both up one percent from last year. In science, the figure was unchanged at 88 percent.

But that meant the figures were once again below the government's 85 percent target for English and Maths.

In 2008, more than a third of the pupils starting at secondary school in September have failed to reach the level expected for their age in each of the three Rs - reading, writing and arithmetic.

The data also showed the proportion of children scoring the top mark in their SATs had fallen significantly.

Only 29% of pupils were reaching the higher level five in English, down from 34% in 2007. In Maths, 31% were reaching level five, down from 32%, and in science 44% are reaching this level, down from 47% last year.

Overall, 39% of pupils - a total of 220,000 - failed to get a level four in either reading, writing or Maths.

Since Labour came to power, a total of over 3 million pupils have not obtained the basics in the three Rs.

**From the information here and from further research, draw your own conclusions as to whether SATs tests are improving standards in schools**

**Are the results accurate?**

In 2008 the SAT's results were surrounded by numerous problems with thousands of pupils failing to receive their results by the end of the summer term as expected because of problems with marking.

Some pupils who took the exams were marked down as absent and there was also widespread concern about the quality of the marking

"These may well represent only the 'tip of the iceberg' in terms of national concerns about the reliability and validity of this year's results," the National Association of Headteachers union said in a statement.

A report by right-wing think tank Civitas revealed that nine out of 10 secondary school teachers could not rely on the Key Stage 2 results as a reflection of pupils' true ability.

The report, based on a survey of 107 teachers, found 77 percent believed pupils were achieving higher results because they were being coached at primary school for the tests.

The purpose of testing in state schools has come to be more about 'proving' that standards are rising — irrespective of whether they actually are.

**Do SATs results give parents a good indication of the standard of a school?**

The results of SATs tests are published in League tables which give schools, parents and the students an indication of the success of each school.

**What are league tables?**

League tables are an annual comparative assessment of the performance of English state schools, published in most national and regional English newspapers. Wales and Scotland have abolished league tables.

**What do league tables tell us?**

They **will** tell us:

- a school's average level in exam performance
- its performance in three key subjects: English, Maths and Science
- its performance in public exams, relative to others in the area and in the UK
- a favourable or negative comparison with previous year's results
- contextual value-added performance, which takes into account prior performance and socio-economic circumstances. Basically, how many free meals the school gives out and how many non-English speaking children there are.

However, they **won't** provide:

- a full picture of the school's performance relative to the nature of its intake (for instance, selective schools are much more likely to fare better)
- an assessment of the quality of teaching
- the means to decide whether your child will be happy
- tables for independent schools.

**Case study BBC news : Do school league tables matter?**

*When we were looking for our first house to buy after years moving around in the Army, we checked the schools in the area on the basis of the GCSE league tables.*

*They helped us to narrow down the choice of areas to search for houses very quickly. We have since been very pleased with the performance of our children at the chosen secondary school. League tables have served us very well and we welcome the transparency they have brought. Methinks the teachers do protest too much.*

**Chris, UK**

*League tables can fail to accurately represent the true standards of a school. For example a school which excels in certain subjects but is weak in others can end up with a lower score than a school which is mediocre all round.*

*In some cases parents are more concerned with the quality of particular departments either because they consider them to be the important subjects or because their child is good in those areas rather than looking at the overall performance of the school.*

**Ros, UK**



## Why have league tables been abolished in Scotland and Wales?

### League Tables

were viewed by many as divisive and a crude yard-stick and by removing league table it removed the administrative burden from schools, allowing schools to concentrate on other issues.

League tables have skewed schools' priorities – schools priorities were influenced by league table results.

Schools' attitudes to the tests can become obsessive. Allegations of teachers who cheat in the tests and even force sick children to sit the exams so their school will not be penalised by their absence show that league table culture has gone too far.

League tables say more about the wealth and backgrounds of a school's pupils than teachers' effectiveness.

### So what is the future of SATs?

The government plans to replace end of Key Stage 2 SATs with single-level, shorter, less formal test in English and Maths which will be taken up to twice a year, when individual children are ready to progress. However, an enquiry into 'irregularities' in the trial test results show inconsistencies which may have resulted from scores being lower than expected.

From the trials being undertaken at the moment in 400 schools across England, it would appear that teachers are being asked to spend more time gathering evidence of children's ability than they do at present so that they can ensure that children are being entered for the right tests at the right time. The methods of gathering this evidence include:

- collecting portfolios of pieces of written work
- recording evidence from pieces of oral work
- filling in assessment forms for a significant number of pupils in order to make a judgement as to their overall level.

Therefore, should SATs be replaced with teacher assessment or are there other alternatives?

**Assessment of children in school is important to know their progress. However, are SATs the right method of assessing this progress?**

**What are your views of SATs?**

**Discuss your ideas with other students and draw some conclusions on the future of national assessment in schools**

**Exam Hint:-** Questions on education can often be quite general which allows you to use your own information in appropriate ways. Going beyond information in the text books will give you valuable marks. For example you might be asked to '**examine some of the government policies that have been introduced since 1988 in order to raise achievement in education**'.

SATs would be one of the recent policies you could discuss. Examiner's comments for this type of question state there is often little focus on how the policies identified led to an improvement (or not!) in achievement. The question asks you to **examine**. This gives you the opportunity to discuss whether the policies (such as SATs) have actually improved educational achievement. Your answer to this sort of question should include: SATs were introduced to raise standards in education. Prior to their introduction primary school children were not assessed.

They have raised standards because the results are published in league tables and competition between schools has increased performance. However, as shown in this Factsheet, 2008 figures show that children are not reaching the Government targets and many are entering secondary school without the basic levels required. This would give provide a good argument about whether SATs have raised achievement or not.

### Test your understanding

1. Why are children tested at key stages?
2. What evidence is there that SATs raise achievement in schools?
3. What evidence is there that SATs do not raise achievement in schools?
4. Identify the advantages and disadvantages of league tables.