



# **“PRIMARY IS WHAT COMES FIRST”**

**HOW END OF KEY STAGE 2  
EXAMS IMPACT  
DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN**

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# SUMMARY

England's end of primary school tests (SATs) may not be working as well as they should for the children who need the most support at school and our research findings underpin a strong case for reform.

This report examines how end of key stage 2 assessments are experienced by disadvantaged pupils and their schools. Drawing on a nationally representative poll of primary school senior leaders and qualitative interviews with teachers and senior leaders across England, we find that SATs in their current form are not fulfilling their core objectives well for disadvantaged pupils.

The disadvantage gap in primary education is already stark: by the end of primary school, disadvantaged pupils are on average 10 months behind their peers, and this gap has been growing since the pandemic (EPI 2025). SATs should be helping to close this gap. Last year's Curriculum and Assessment Review represented a significant opportunity to address longstanding concerns about the impact of end of key stage 2 exams on pupils, teachers, and schools. While the review did take some positive first steps in acknowledging the challenges in the primary curriculum, many in the sector felt it did not go far enough and that the case for more significant reform to primary accountability and assessment infrastructure remains pressing. Following the review, the secretary of state for education has maintained that primary school assessment plays an important role in "pushing standards up for every child" (DfE 2025).

This paper identifies three areas where SATs may not be serving disadvantaged pupils well.

- 1. Perverse incentives and curriculum narrowing.** The accountability framework appears to incentivise schools to narrow their curriculum and focus on tested subjects, particularly during preparation periods. The loss of wider curriculum time and enrichment falls disproportionately on disadvantaged pupils, who are often less likely to access these experiences outside school.
- 2. An accountability framework that does not reflect school context.** Schools are judged against a single national benchmark without meaningful account taken for the communities schools serve and the cohorts they have each year. This can obscure genuine performance, particularly for schools serving more disadvantaged communities, and leave senior leaders facing scrutiny they feel bears little relationship to what their school has delivered.
- 3. Increased teacher pressure makes its way into the classroom.** SATs-related accountability pressure contributes to teacher stress, affects pedagogy, and is a factor in decisions to leave the profession. These effects are felt most acutely in schools with the least capacity to absorb them, with consequences for the quality of teaching and pastoral support that disadvantaged pupils often depend on more than their peers.

Our polling revealed the extent to which these views are held across the primary teaching workforce. Key findings include:

- 82 per cent of primary senior leaders polled felt that SATs disproportionately impact disadvantaged students, with 90 percent of respondents reporting pupils with SEND experience the greatest negative impact

- 93 per cent of those polled felt that preparation for SATs impact the breadth of curriculum in primary schools, with 77 per cent reporting more time being spent on tested subjects when preparing for SATs
- just 7 per cent of senior leaders believed that SATs should be kept as they are.

This is not an argument against assessment or accountability for primary schools, nor a call to abolish SATs; we will be setting out our policy recommendations in a forthcoming paper. Instead, this paper is a problem diagnosis; an exploration of where the system in its current form may not be properly supporting disadvantaged pupils, and an exploration of why that might be the case and what the implications of these shortcomings are for disadvantaged pupils.

## METHODS

This research draws on two novel sources of evidence: a poll of primary school senior leaders conducted by YouGov, and a series of qualitative interviews with senior leaders and year 6 teachers.

### *The polling and qualitative interviews*

YouGov conducted a nationally representative online survey, designed by IPPR, of 215 senior teachers at primary schools in England, excluding independent schools, between 17 May and 4 June 2024. Results were weighted by age, gender, and region.

IPPR conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with a total of 20 teachers and senior leaders from primary schools across England. Participants included primary school headteachers and executive headteachers as well as year 6 classroom teachers. It is important to note that the qualitative sample is not necessarily representative of the primary school workforce.

Participants were recruited through networks with an existing interest in assessment and education reform, and their views may not reflect the full range of perspectives across the sector. Qualitative findings should be read as illustrative of experiences and attitudes within the sector rather than as definitive or generalisable claims. Where possible, qualitative findings are corroborated by the polling data.

## DEFINING ‘DISADVANTAGE’

For participants in the qualitative interviews, and where the polling asked respondents about disadvantaged pupils, ‘disadvantage’ was defined as: “pupils who face additional barriers to learning compared with their peers, including pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, pupils with English as an additional language, pupils with long term health conditions, and pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds”.

Where the report refers to findings broken down by school deprivation level, this is based on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at respondents’ schools, divided into three bands: 14 percent or less (least disadvantaged), 15 per cent–34 per cent, and 35 per cent or more (most disadvantaged).

For KS2 assessment, the Department for Education (DfE) defines disadvantaged pupils primarily as those eligible for free school meals in the last six years or who have been in care (DfE 2026).

# 1. SYSTEM EFFECTS: HOW SATS SHAPE SCHOOLS

SATs are designed to hold schools accountable for the quality of the education they provide to their pupils, particularly in reading, writing, and maths. Held at the end of a pupil's primary school journey, they form an important part of the primary assessment architecture and represent an important first step in pupils' transitions from primary to secondary. They set an academic standard for pupils, provide a mechanism to hold schools accountable for the quality of the education they provide (DfE 2016), and establish a baseline for measuring pupils progress through secondary school and calculating progress 8 scores for secondary schools (ibid 2025).

While our polling and qualitative data shows support across the sector for KS2 pupils' learning to be assessed in some form, our findings also highlight that SATs in their current form are not fulfilling their accountability function well, and in some cases incentivise behaviours from schools that is counter to the government's stated objectives. This reflects broader findings on the influence assessment has over what is taught in school (Menzies et al 2023). The ways in which the system is failing are not evenly distributed: they are most damaging for the schools serving the most disadvantaged communities and on the disadvantaged pupils those schools exist to serve.

## **PERVERSE INCENTIVES, CURRICULUM NARROWING, AND TEACHING TO THE TEST**

A fundamental problem is one of incentive design. SATs results are published and tied to school accountability, and as a result they generate a specific chain of pressure: senior leaders face scrutiny from governors, local authorities, and Ofsted based on results. That pressure produces predictable responses. Schools may teach to the test, narrow their curriculum, and prioritise assessed subjects. 93 per cent of polled primary senior leaders agreed that preparation for SATs impacts the breadth of the curriculum, and 77 per cent reported more time being spent on tested subjects during preparation periods.

These are rational responses to the incentives the system creates, but they are not necessarily what the system was designed to produce. A school that puts children through past papers at the expense of time on history, art, music, or physical education may improve its SATs results without improving the holistic quality and breadth of the education it provides.

While there may be benefits to additional time spent on English and Maths – as these are foundational subjects that enable children to access the broader curriculum – these narrowing effects are not evenly distributed. The loss of curriculum diversity and time on enrichment is particularly acute for disadvantaged pupils. Half of teachers in the most disadvantaged schools report less time for enrichment during SATs preparation, compared with 37 per cent in the least disadvantaged schools. Losing enrichment opportunities in school can feel more significant for disadvantaged pupils who, in contrast to their more affluent peers, in many cases have no access to enrichment beyond what school

provides. As one senior leader reflected: “Our children are not the children who attend drama clubs at the weekend and play football on football teams because that comes with a cost. So if we don’t provide that during the week, then we’re not enabling those children to develop as whole people”.

## **THE CONTEXT-BLINDNESS OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

The way results are calculated and assessed can obscure rather than illuminate school performance, often in ways that disproportionately impact schools serving disadvantaged communities. Schools are judged against a single national benchmark with the composition of their cohort not seriously taken into account. The disadvantage gap at KS2 is at the highest level since 2012/13 at 3.16 (DfE 2026). On average, children who have received free school meals in the last six years or who have been in care do substantially worse in their SATs than their peers. For example, in 2025 around one in two (47 per cent) of disadvantaged children met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, compared to over two in three (69 per cent) of their peers (DfE 2026).

We know that the disadvantage gap exists from when children start school and only widens as they progress through their education (EPI 2025). This means that schools serving more disadvantaged communities have a higher mountain to climb in supporting their children to reach the ‘expected standard’. Without taking into account the profile of pupils in a cohort, it is impossible to differentiate between two schools with identical results on paper, despite the fact one might be exceeding expectations to achieve those results, and the other might be underdelivering for its pupils. 67 per cent of polled senior leaders do not think that schools have the support and resources they need to ensure that SATs are experienced fairly and equally by all pupils, and 82 per cent believe SATs disproportionately impact disadvantaged students.

This context-blindness is compounded by cohort variability. The same school, with the same teachers, producing the same quality of education, can see results move significantly from one year to the next simply because of the profile of the year group. As one senior leader observed: “I’ve got 45 percent SEND [special educational needs and disabilities] in my current year 6, and only seven per cent next year. So next year my results are going [to look very different] and everyone is going to go ‘isn’t that amazing, the job they’ve done.’ But it’s just a different cohort of children.”

As a result, senior leaders may face scrutiny from governors, local authorities, and Ofsted that they feel bears little relationship to what the school has delivered. Another senior leader reflected that: “the local authority will hold you to account. The DfE will hold the local authority to account. Ofsted will challenge you around that data picture when it’s not true”. Several senior leaders across our qualitative interviews referenced the uneven distribution of children who are working below the standard of the test, and therefore not required to sit their SATs papers. The proportion of children who fall into this category has been steadily rising since 2018/19, from 5.1 per cent to 7.8 per cent in 2024/25 (DfE 2026b). The distribution of these children who are struggling won’t be even. Schools in disadvantaged areas are more likely to serve variable and complex cohorts, and they carry a disproportionate share of the burden of cohort variability.

## **WHAT SATS ARE NOT CURRENTLY MEASURING**

Many of the senior leaders and teachers we spoke to also highlighted that SATs measure too narrow a slice of what schools are asked to do. Schools are held accountable for English and maths results while also being responsible for the

whole child, for pastoral development, enrichment, personal development, and preparing children for secondary school and adult life. One headteacher remarked that: “I think we’ve forgotten what the word ‘primary’ means. Primary is what comes first. What comes first is a love of learning and fundamental skills. SATs cuts right across all of that”. 89 per cent of polled senior leaders agree that greater flexibility in assessment and accountability would allow schools to improve the quality of the education they offer without lowering standards.

## 2. TEACHER EFFECTS: WORKFORCE CONSEQUENCES

While many teachers find teaching year 6 personally and professionally rewarding, there is also a perception of higher stress and stakes. Our findings suggest that SATs-based accountability measures are a primary driver of this stress. 93 per cent of senior leaders polled agreed that the preparation and administration of SATs increased stress levels for teachers. This finding is near-universal: preparing pupils is stressful for teachers regardless of the school in which they teach. One year 6 teacher reflected that: “year 6 is definitely the most stressful year... I feel like we talk about SATs from September”. A senior leader similarly reported that “not many teachers want to teach in year 6. They say ‘please don’t put me in year 6. I don’t want that added pressure.’”

That pressure is not an abstract institutional force. Research has found a spike in year 6 teacher anxiety during the week that SATs take place (Jerrim 2023). It shapes the professional decisions teachers make and influences what children experience in the classroom. It also influences teachers’ decisions to leave the profession: 52 per cent of those we polled reported SATs-related pressures as a significant factor in influencing teachers’ decisions to leave.

### THE IMPACT ON PEDAGOGY

Teacher stress has pedagogical consequences. Teachers under accountability pressure do not just teach more English and maths, they may also teach these subjects differently, in ways that some teachers reported being less creative, responsive, or enjoyable for pupils (Menzies et al 2023). One classroom teacher reflected that “I don’t particularly love teaching maths anymore because we have gone quite test-based... I’m used to maths being more practical or more hands on, but we’re doing very much test questions after test questions. I get bored teaching it”.

For some teachers, this awareness extends to what the pressure is doing to their pupils. Another teacher worried that “I’m scared I’m putting kids off maths!”. Pressure for results changes the quality and character of teaching itself. This pressure can extend even into spaces teachers try to protect. Another year 6 teacher reflected that: “even when we’re reading for pleasure, I’m trying to bring in a SATs question, even if it’s only orally, so that they’re getting used to the wording”.

This can impact teachers’ ability to be professionally curious, to spend time with their pupils on topics other than the curriculum, and to focus on their wellbeing. Prioritising tested subjects is not necessarily a negative phenomenon if the tests prioritise the most important knowledge and skills (Menzies et al 2023). The difficulty arises when either the test instrument itself is not fit for purpose, or teachers feel pressured to de-prioritise other key aspects of their role, such as pastoral care. One teacher reflected on not being able to give a child who had suffered a bereavement the time and attention that they would like to: “I would have liked to have had more time with [pupil], but I feel like he’s been offloaded a little bit to another member of staff”. For some teachers, a system designed to

assess schools and monitor pupil progress has created conditions in which a year 6 teacher cannot always give their pupils the level of support and attention that they need.

### DISADVANTAGED PUPILS FEEL A DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT

The impacts of teacher pressure are more intensely felt by disadvantaged pupils. SATs related pressures are more acutely in disadvantaged schools: 79 per cent of senior leaders in the most disadvantaged schools report a negative impact on day-to-day school life compared with 67 per cent of their counterparts in the least disadvantaged schools. The teacher stress we have discussed here operates within that context.

**FIGURE 2.1: THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF SATS ON SCHOOL LIFE**

*Proportion of respondents who report a negative impact on day-to-day school life due to SATs*



Source: YouGov polling for IPPR (2026)

Schools serving disadvantaged communities tend to have the least capacity to absorb and mitigate pressure, and teacher recruitment and retention challenges hit them the hardest (Allen et al 2016; EEF 2023) They often have to stretch their resources further, including by providing a greater pastoral workload, reflecting a broader pattern in the evidence base on school workforce inequality that extends beyond the findings of this paper. Given that high-quality teaching is a crucial tool for improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils (EEF 2021), it is important that system incentives support great teachers to work in schools serving disadvantaged communities. The children who most depend on their teacher as a consistent, attentive, dependable adult in their lives, those who may have less support at home than more affluent peers, are the most likely to be in classrooms where that presence is being eroded by accountability demands.

### 3.

## PUPIL EFFECTS: WHO BEARS THE COSTS

Our first two chapters have documented how SATs shape schools and teachers in ways that tend to fall disproportionately on disadvantaged communities. This chapter looks at what this means for disadvantaged pupils themselves, and the potential harms that they experience directly, independently of the accountability pressures and the pressures on teachers already discussed.

For many disadvantaged pupils, SATs arrive at the end of a primary school career that has often already involved significant barriers to learning, and the system asks those children to demonstrate their abilities in a format that many teachers feel does not allow them to do so. On this our polling is unambiguous: 93 per cent of senior leaders say that SATs do not support disadvantaged pupils well, with 82 per cent also agreeing that disadvantaged pupils are disproportionately impacted by SATs.

#### **LABELLING, CONFIDENCE, AND THE LANGUAGE OF ‘EXPECTED STANDARD’**

The expected/below expected binary is one of the principal problems cited by teachers and senior leaders as part of this study as a key way in which SATs impact disadvantaged pupils. The binary arrives at the end of a primary school career for pupils who have often already faced significant barriers to learning. 83 per cent of senior leaders polled felt that SATs do not allow pupils to demonstrate what they know and can do, with 89 per cent of leaders in schools with the highest FSM rates believing their disadvantaged pupils are disproportionately impacted. As with all assessments, the quality of the test is key to ensuring that the results have utility for teachers, schools and the accountability system.

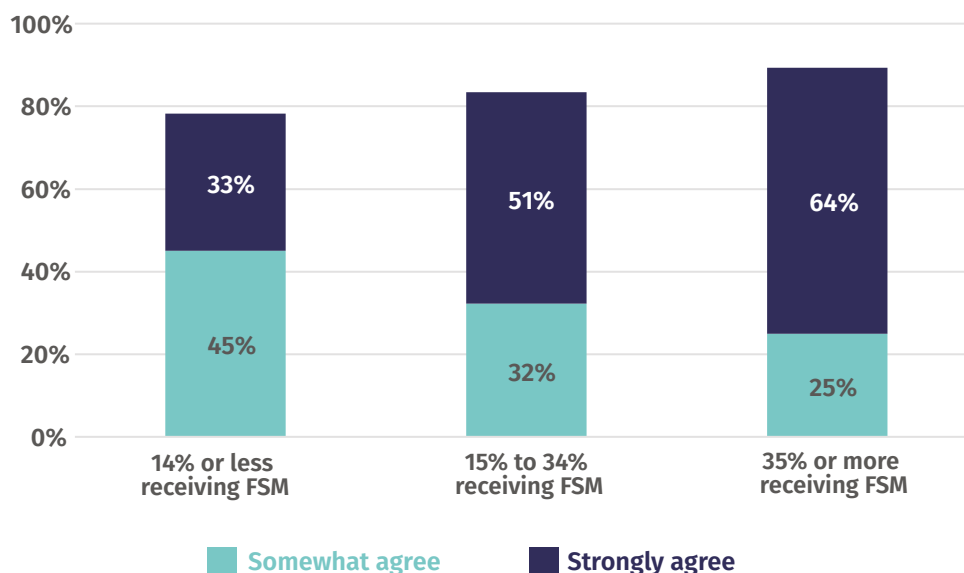
Our qualitative interviews highlighted that part of the reason teachers and senior leaders do not feel SATs accurately reflect their pupils’ ability is down to the test content itself. Many interviewees reflected that the reading papers often embed assumptions about cultural experience and background knowledge that disadvantage pupils without access to those experiences.

One senior leader reflected on a pupil who was relatively new to the UK: “the first section was all about medieval England and castles. Having not grown up in the UK and read traditional tales or stories that we learn early on, it was completely alien to him. He couldn’t relate to the vocabulary, to the story, to the characters. It was not a true measure of his abilities and capabilities.” Other interviewees spoke about SATs questions based around activities like skiing, travelling, or art that their pupils did not have access to. This is not a failure of teaching; it is an issue of test design. Disadvantaged pupils who have not had access to the cultural experiences embedded in some papers are often assessed on knowledge they could not have reasonably acquired and not on their ability to read, reason, or do mathematics. The language of expected standard compounds this. The binary label does not distinguish between a pupil who could not access test content and a child who could not do the work.

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### FIGURE 3.1: THE IMPACT OF SATS ON DISADVANTAGED PUPILS

*Proportion of respondents who agree that disadvantaged pupils are disproportionately impacted by SATs*



Source: YouGov polling for IPPR (2026)

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Many interviewees also felt that the labelling caused by the language of expected standard can do real harm in terms of confidence and stigma for disadvantaged pupils. While 48 percent of polled senior leaders reported increased pupil reluctance to attend school during SATs preparation periods, our polling also found that leaders in schools with less disadvantaged cohorts are slightly more likely to report increased pupil reluctance (53 per cent in the least disadvantaged schools compared to 46 per cent in the most disadvantaged), suggesting that anxiety reflects parental pressure as much as structural disadvantage.

Across our qualitative interviews, teachers and senior leaders reported SATs-related anxiety was concentrated in specific groups, for example pupils with special educational needs and those who have experienced trauma. One senior leader told us that these pupils “become sort of standout children around the time of SATs. They’re the children that we’ve seen previously whose fight or flight mentalities have kicked in and they find the papers too much.” Interviewees reflected that pupils experience being told they have not met expected standard as being told they “have failed primary school,” and expressed worries about the impact this would have on their transition to secondary.

The met/not met binary matters here: a pupil who narrowly misses the expected standard may be closer in ability to one who meets it, than to another who failed. One headteacher reflected that: “if they’re one or two marks off, they cry, they’re upset, they feel that they have failed”. Our qualitative interviews suggest SATs cause stress and anxiety for some children, though cohort-level evidence is mixed (Putwain 2012; ParentKind 2022; Jerrim 2025).

## ACCESS ARRANGEMENTS

Issues around access arrangements for pupils who need adjustments to sit their SATs, particularly pupils with identified special educational needs or disabilities, was an important theme across many of our interviews with primary school senior leaders. Most interviewees felt that the current system's accommodations for pupils with additional needs (measures like additional time, sitting the test in a separate room, having a reader present), are cosmetically inclusive but substantively inadequate. This was a finding that was also reflected in our polling: 90 per cent of senior leaders polled said that pupils with special educational needs or disabilities experience the greatest negative impact from SATs, and 67 per cent felt that schools do not have the support and resources to ensure SATs are experienced fairly and equally by all pupils.

One senior leader gave a particularly illustrative example: "We had a pupil with [SEND] who had been performing very well on practice papers. On the day of the exam, he said, 'I'm really scared because I'm not going to finish. Having the time up there is making me panic.' And during the exam, he ended up having a panic attack and he didn't finish. But we had to submit the paper."

Interviewees often reflected that the system offers very few opportunities to remedy situations or flex around the needs of individual pupils. Some interviewees felt that while their school did a good job at adapting the curriculum and the way they teach so that all their pupils can access content, SATs access arrangements do not reflect their pupils' needs. As one senior leader reflected, "our ability to not stigmatise our pupils' needs, or to not exacerbate or magnify the things they feel challenging are limited. I am powerless to do anything because the system does not bend".

## CURRICULUM NARROWING AND ENRICHMENT LOSS

As discussed in the system effects section, SATs preparation can narrow the curriculum. For disadvantaged pupils, this can be particularly acute as it means losing access to experiences that support whole-child development.

50 per cent of leaders in the most disadvantaged schools report less enrichment time during SATs preparation, compared with just 37 per cent in the least disadvantaged schools. More time spent on English and maths at the expense of other subjects in the curriculum or enrichment time both during the school day and in after school sessions or holidays, can have significant impacts on pupils. One year 6 teacher reflected that every year, "I have children saying, when are we doing art again?... It's subjects like music and art that benefit children who can't express themselves through maths or reading. Without that time, these children are losing out."

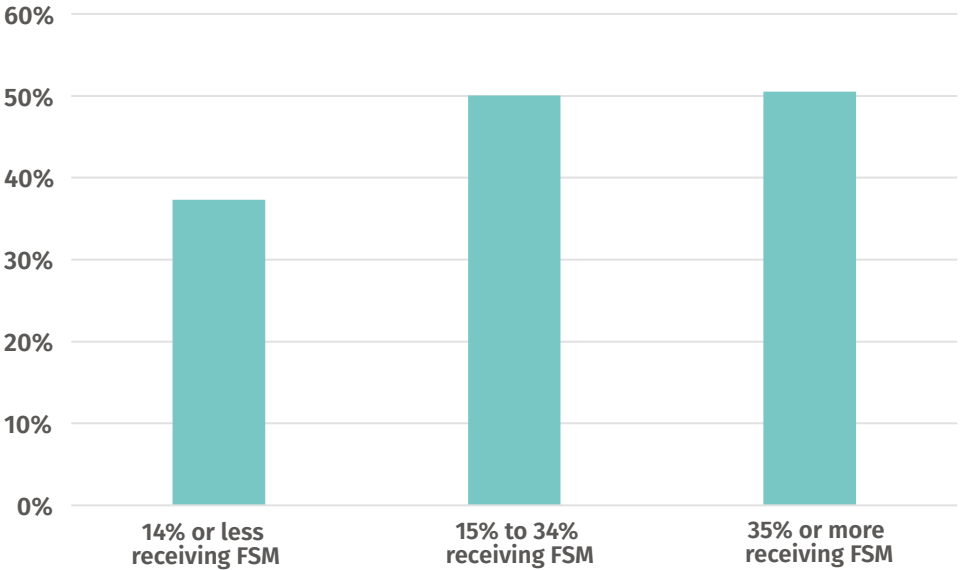
SATs appear also to have some positive consequences on what schools offer children, with almost half (47 per cent) offering additional free materials to support children when studying at home. However, overall, only one in 10 (10 per cent) of respondents regarded SATs preparation as having a positive impact on day-to-day school life. What is clear is that schools change their behaviour during assessment preparation periods, with almost all leaders (97 per cent) reporting at least one significant change to their school in the run up to SATs.

There are important trade-offs for schools to consider in terms of where to allocate time and support for pupils. 86 per cent of respondents reported that disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be identified for additional interventions to support their performance in SATs. On one level, this is positive and shows an assessment system operating as it should: schools are targeting their resources towards those pupils who most need it, to ensure those pupils are at the level we

expect them to be at in subjects most at the core of the curriculum. However, it also has a compounding effect: interventions at lunchtime, after school, or during holidays can also further reduce the amount of time disadvantaged pupils have for other subjects in the curriculum or for wider enrichment activities.

**FIGURE 3.2: THE IMPACT OF SATS ON ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES**

*Proportion of respondents reporting less time spent on extra-curricular or enrichment activities during SATs preparation time*



Source: YouGov polling for IPPR (2026)

Fundamentally, the assessment system does not create the inequality between what disadvantaged pupils can access inside and outside school, but it can play a part in exacerbating these existing inequalities. For children for whom school is their only source of enrichment, cultural experience, and the broader developmental activities that build confidence, SATs preparation can cause them to miss out on experiences that their more affluent peers continue to benefit from.

## 4.

# THE CASE FOR REFORM

SATs perform a range of important and useful functions, both as part of primary assessment and accountability infrastructure, and as a marker for pupils in their transition from primary to secondary. The sector needs a mechanism, or a set of mechanisms, that hold schools accountable for the quality of the education they provide, that establish a baseline for measuring pupil progress through secondary school, that set an expected standard that captures where children should be academically at a key milestone, regardless of their background, and that give pupils an experience of formal assessment at a moment of significant transition for them.

This paper is not arguing against assessment or accountability. Such an argument would not be representative of the views within the sector: every teacher and senior leader we spoke to, and a clear majority of those polled, accept that children should be assessed and that schools should be held to account for the quality of their teaching. As one senior leader reflected, “no teacher ever said we don’t need to assess children”. The problem diagnosis set out in this paper is articulated to explore perspectives from within the sector on both where SATs are falling short of their aims, and where these aims need expanding or reforming.

This paper has focussed specifically on disadvantaged pupils and the schools that support them, but the implications are broader. If an assessment system is not accessible or fair for all those who need to use it, it is not functioning as it should. The evidence from this research, drawn from polling of primary school senior leaders and qualitative interviews with teachers and senior leaders across England, suggests that SATs may not be fulfilling all their accountability and assessment functions in ways that properly support disadvantaged pupils.

This paper has highlighted three overlapping flaws. First, the system in its current form creates perverse incentives that both contribute to reported instances of curriculum narrowing and displaced provision that matters most for disadvantaged pupils. Second, SATs may obscure rather than illuminate school performance in ways that penalise schools serving the most complex and disadvantaged cohorts. Third, the system generates pressure that falls on teachers in ways that can impact the relational and pastoral aspects of teaching that many disadvantaged pupils depend more on than their peers.

The consequences of these three factors for disadvantaged pupils can be significant: a narrower curriculum, less time for enrichment, and labels that may constrain potential. Our polling reflects near unanimity across senior leaders in primary settings: 93 per cent of those polled say SATs do not support disadvantaged pupils well, and only seven per cent think the current system should be kept as it is.

These findings should not lead to the conclusion that SATs should be abolished or that schools should not be held accountable. Or, indeed, that they don’t have some positive consequences. Instead, they should lead to the conclusion that, from the perspective of many involved in the delivery of primary provision, SATs in their current form are not doing what they are designed to do, and that the

costs of this sit disproportionately with disadvantaged pupils and the schools that support them. The question this report raises, therefore, is not whether to assess or hold schools accountable, but whether the current system is the right way to deliver these important functions.

As part of IPPR's work on SATs and primary assessment, we will set out in a forthcoming recommendations paper how SATs could change, in terms of their scope, design, and operation, to better fulfil these functions and to better support the disadvantaged pupils for whom the evidence suggests the current system does not function.

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