

To: Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education  
Rt Hon Peter Kyle MP, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology

9 June 2025

Dear Ministers,

The Department for Education has issued new guidance concerning the statutory Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA). The effect of that guidance is that, from the start of the 2025 autumn term, schools accepting reception pupils will be required to assess those pupils by means of a teacher using a device to administer the assessment and the pupil using a second touchscreen device to respond to the assessment.

We are children's campaigners, school leaders, educationalists, child health experts, and cross-party parliamentarians, and we are united in our deep concern at this retrograde step which pushes our youngest schoolchildren, the majority of whom will be just four years old, onto touchscreen devices, and which implicitly endorses and normalises device use in reception classes.

It will not benefit teachers, it will not benefit parents and it certainly will not benefit children. We urge you to withdraw this damaging guidance without delay.

### **Key concerns**

At present, resources for testing children's communication, language, literacy and early mathematics skills, usually within the first six weeks of starting a reception year, include teddy bears, worksheets, and colourful physical objects. As such, these are admirably and straightforwardly consistent with a play-based approach to early years, an approach underpinned by decades of pedagogical research stressing the centrality of play in building cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

The current approach is flexible, adaptable and uninvasive, by using activity-based objects and materials that most children are already familiar with, and it allows teaching staff to interact with their children in different ways depending on how a particular child responds to the assessment questions. Teachers and children value and benefit from the opportunity for differentiated human interaction between teacher and child.

The earlier RBA guidance expressly acknowledged that pupils need to be able to *"respond to the assessment in a variety of ways such that they may need to demonstrate linguistic skills, such as blending sounds, or mathematical skills, such as number sense"*. What has changed?

With limited exceptions for certain SEND pupils, a screen-based RBA process can only be inferior to this approach: depersonalising the assessment process, removing opportunities for

teacher autonomy and tailoring, potentially masking learning difficulties, introducing unfamiliarity, distraction and complexity to the assessment process, and undermining the rights of parents to raise their children in a screen-free, or 'screen-lite', environment, as many are now choosing to do.

## **Screen-based RBA**

By substituting screen-based testing for physical assessment tools, objects and props, the new 2025 version of the RBA will encourage and embed an approach to early years education and development which is fundamentally at odds with a healthy approach to child development and set a manifestly unhelpful precedent from a welfare and educational perspective.

While we may not have fully understood the scale of harm in the past, the evidence is now overwhelming: extensive personal device use by young children carries significant risks. It is therefore increasingly difficult to reconcile the Department for Education's role in safeguarding child development and educational outcomes with policies that effectively mandate device use in early years and primary settings. The evidence base for those harms and risks makes clear that device use among young children carries negative impacts spanning cognitive, linguistic and emotional development, early education attainment, motor development and handwriting.<sup>1</sup>

Against the backdrop of that evidence base, for the DfE by issuing this new guidance to encourage and endorse screen use in the first six weeks of a child's primary education is particularly egregious.

The message from a substantial majority of parents is clear: they do not aspire for more tech in their children's lives, let alone in their classrooms.<sup>2</sup>

Putting the RBA onto devices sets an inevitable expectation that reception-age children will, at a minimum, be familiar enough with touch screen technology to be able to use devices, or even that screen usage is vital for school readiness. What signal does this send to parents eager for their child to be successful achievers in their new school environment? The procurement contract between the DfE and Made Tech reportedly stipulates that the RBA will be the first service launched to schools in a wider suite of "digital assessment" tools<sup>3</sup> – in other words the thin end of a wedge that will serve tech companies ahead of pupils.

### ***"the harms of screen time ... significantly outweigh the benefits for young children"***

The DfE's approach contrasts unfavourably with the enlightened approach of countries which are moving at pace to distance themselves from tech dependency in education. Examples

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<sup>1</sup> See for example [Health Professionals For Safer Screens](#) and [Education Select Committee report, May 2024, 'Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing](#) for summaries of the evidence base of excessive screen use visiting harms on children.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the [Internet Matters](#) survey of families, January 2024; and the [Parentkind](#) survey of parents March 2024.

<sup>3</sup> [DfE signs £20m deal to digitise assessment of reception pupils. Public Technology](#)

include Sweden, which recently announced a nationwide move back to pen and paper schooling,<sup>4</sup> and Madrid, which is poised to restrict device use amongst primary age children with infant school students aged three to six allowed one supervised hour of computer time a week due to “*the risks associated with the early, intensive and inappropriate use of information technology*”.<sup>5</sup>

The RBA guidance also sits at odds with the recommendations of the May 2024 Education Select Committee report, ‘*Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing*’. The Committee was unequivocal in concluding that “*The overwhelming weight of evidence submitted to us suggests that the harms of screen time and social media use significantly outweigh the benefits for young children*”.

We agree with and wish to draw your attention to the comments of Helen Hayes MP, current Chair of the Education Select Committee, in reply to the Government’s comments on that May 2024 report:

*“The sheer weight of evidence heard during the previous Education Committee’s inquiry was damning. Its cross-party members were unequivocal in their concern for the effects that over-exposure to screens and to social media...can both have on children’s wellbeing. By contrast this response from the Government is disappointing in its lack of urgency to tackle an issue that is almost universally understood to be a defining issue of our time by parents, carers and people from across the education and care sectors.”*

### **Pupils are the primary stakeholders**

DfE’s guidance appears to have been rolled out without any meaningful consultation with either of the two groups most concerned with the welfare and education of children: parents and teachers. If a risk-benefit assessment of introducing a device-centred RBA has been carried out, the DfE should publish it; this does not appear to have been done. Has the DfE reviewed any of the relevant research or evidence addressing the developmental impact of screen exposure for early years children?

We note that a report from 2024 states that the beta tool underlying this digital RBA test had only been trialled in a few hundred schools (less than 3% of the target user base of more than 16,000 schools). In comparison, the pilot for the current RBA, carried out in academic years 2018 and 2019, invited all primary schools to participate; 8,994 schools uploaded their data with a sample of 4,046 schools drawn for analysis.<sup>6</sup>

We struggle to see in whose interests the Government’s decision to introduce this guidance was made.

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<sup>4</sup> The Guardian, [Switching off: Sweden says back-to-basics schooling works on paper](#)

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian, [Madrid plans to limit computer and tablet use in primary schools to two hours a week](#)

<sup>6</sup> Standards & Testing Agency, [Reception baseline assessment validity](#)

Pupils, not tech companies, are the primary stakeholders of our education system. For their sake, we urge you to reverse this guidance, which the evidence now weighs against, with immediate effect.

Yours sincerely,

**Rt Hon Laura Trott MP**, Shadow Education Secretary  
**Neil O'Brien MP**, Shadow Minister for Education  
**Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP**, former Education Secretary  
**Baroness Barran**, former Minister for the School System  
**Lord Nash**, former Minister for Schools  
**Richard Tice MP**, Deputy leader of Reform UK  
**Rt Hon Sammy Wilson MP**, Education spokesman for the DUP  
**Rt Hon Tom Tugendhat MP**  
**Rt Hon Claire Coutinho MP**  
**Jim Shannon MP**  
**Rebecca Paul MP**  
**Lewis Cocking MP**  
**Sarah Pochin MP**  
**Manuela Perteghella MP**  
**Jack Rankin MP**  
**Rt Hon Baroness Stedman-Scott**  
**Mouhssin Ismail**, Chief Standards Officer at City of London Academies Trust  
**Peter Lee**, Headteacher at Q3 Academy, West Midlands  
**Damian McBeath**, Principal of John Wallis Academy, Kent  
**Caroline Nash**, Co-founder of Future Academies  
**Clive Wright**, Headteacher at Saint Martin's Catholic Academy, Leicestershire  
**Andrew Percival**, Deputy headteacher, Stanley Road Primary School, Oldham  
**Katharine Birbalsingh**, Headmistress at Michaela School, London  
**Ben Newmark**, Senior school leader and SEND inclusion expert  
**John Walker**, CEO of Sounds-Write Phonics  
**Dr Rebecca Foljambe and Arabella Skinner**, Founder and Head of Policy at Health Professionals for Safer Screens  
**Sandy Chappell**, Child speech and language specialist  
**Justine Roberts**, Founder and CEO of Mumsnet  
**Miranda Wilson**, Founder of Tched Off  
**Sophie Winkleman**, Children's campaigner  
**Isy Suttie**, Children's campaigner  
**Jess Butcher**, Founder of ScrollAware  
**Molly Kingsley and Jane Rowland**, Founders of SafeScreens