

## National Testing of Pupils in Europe: Objectives, Organisation and Use of Results

This study produced by the Eurydice network gives a detailed picture of the context and organisation of national tests in 30 European countries and the use made of test results in informing education policy and practice and in guiding the school career of pupils. It presents the diverse choices made by European countries regarding the objectives, frequency and scope of national tests and points to important Europe-wide patterns and trends. It also emphasises the need to develop coherent systems of pupil assessment that combine the respective strengths of nation-wide tests and other forms of assessment and aim not only to grade pupils but to help them improve.

The efforts of European countries to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their education systems have led to a growing emphasis on the measuring and monitoring of performance. In the majority of European countries regular national testing has been established relatively recently and it has been expanding rapidly in the current decade. In the school year 2008/09 only the German-speaking community of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Wales and Liechtenstein do not administer national tests in compulsory education. Several other countries have not yet completed the full implementation of their national test systems. The significance of national tests continues to evolve and in the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) they are now being assigned a less important role in the overall system of assessment.

The study covers compulsory education and the data refers to school year 2008/09.

### What is Eurydice?

The Eurydice Network provides information on and analyses of European education systems and policies. It consists of 35 national units based in all 31 countries participating in the EU's Lifelong Learning programme (EU Member States, EEA countries and Turkey) and is coordinated and managed by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) in Brussels, which drafts its publications and databases.

All Eurydice publications are available free of charge at <http://www.eurydice.org>.



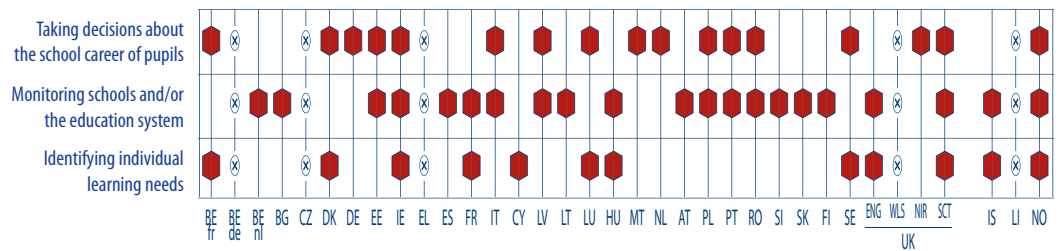
## National tests serve multiple objectives

Current national tests are most often used either to certify individual pupils' achievements or to monitor schools or the entire education system. A smaller number of countries organise national tests to support pupils' learning by identifying individual learning needs.

Education authorities in some countries undertake separate tests in pursuit of each of these objectives but it is more common that

they use the same test for several distinct purposes. An example of the latter is when the results of tests for awarding a certificate or for the identification of learning needs are also used for school and/or system monitoring, or when the results of sample tests administered with the principal aim of monitoring the entire education system are sent back to participating schools in order to be used for the improvement of school work.

**Figure 1: Main aims of nationally standardised tests, compulsory education, 2008/09**



Source: Eurydice.

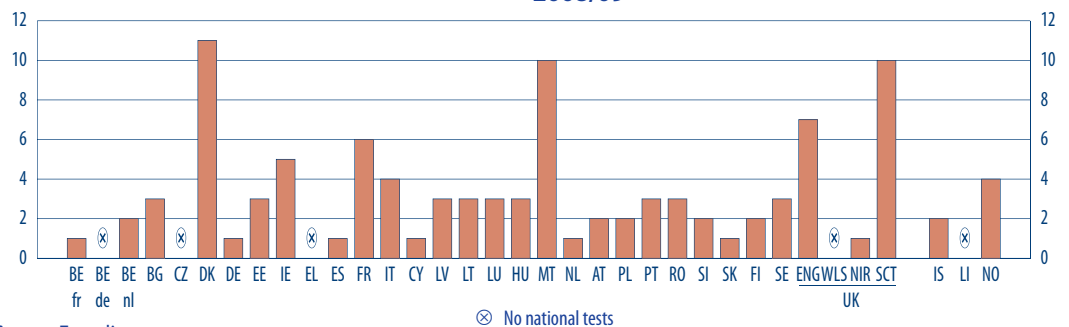
⊗ No national tests

## Frequency of national tests varies across countries

On average, European countries organise national tests in three year groups during compulsory education. The great majority of national tests in Europe are compulsory for all pupils in a given cohort and where they are optional they are often taken by almost everybody. Certain countries test pupils significantly more frequently than the

European average. Thus in Denmark pupils can take up to eleven national tests during compulsory education, followed by Malta and Scotland (up to ten), in England (up to seven) and France (up to six). In six other countries, on the other hand, there is only one national test during compulsory education.

**Figure 2: Number of school years at which national tests are administered, 2008/09**



Source: Eurydice.

⊗ No national tests

## National tests often cover only the core subjects

National tests often concern only the two core subjects of language of instruction and mathematics, to which in certain countries a foreign language and/or science are added. Aside from tests for the award of certificates at the end of lower secondary education, only a minority of countries consistently test pupils

more broadly across the curriculum. Several countries, however, rotate the subjects tested annually, which permits a wider coverage without significantly increasing the burden on pupils and teachers.

In the ongoing debate among policy-makers and education experts about the benefits and

the potentially negative effects of frequent testing, discussions have focused on the need to find a balance between the need for up-to-date performance data and the risk of over-testing, as well as to consider certain perverse effects of testing such as the possible

narrowing of the curriculum, the reduction of effective teaching time and the increase of stress and overload. Such undesirable effects may be especially marked when high stakes for pupils but also for teachers and schools are involved.

### Combining test results with other assessments when much is at stake

The majority of European countries organise national tests which are highly significant for pupils, as the results feed into decisions regarding their subsequent school careers. In most of these cases, the results are considered in conjunction with those of other assessments, most notably continuous teacher assessment and internal examinations. This

approach enables teachers to have a say in decisions affecting their pupils. It also combines the strengths of several assessment instruments, and addresses the concern that national tests tend to represent a snapshot of pupil attainment at one particular time and in only a few areas.

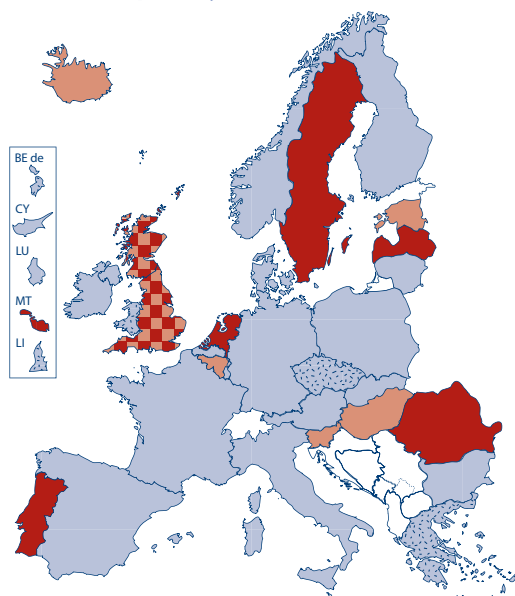
### Test results are not commonly published or considered in school evaluation

The results of national tests are used for several purposes which include the monitoring of standards, providing feedback to pupils and parents, and guiding the activity of teachers. In all countries, tests also play an important role in policy development and their results are analysed when formulating measures to deal

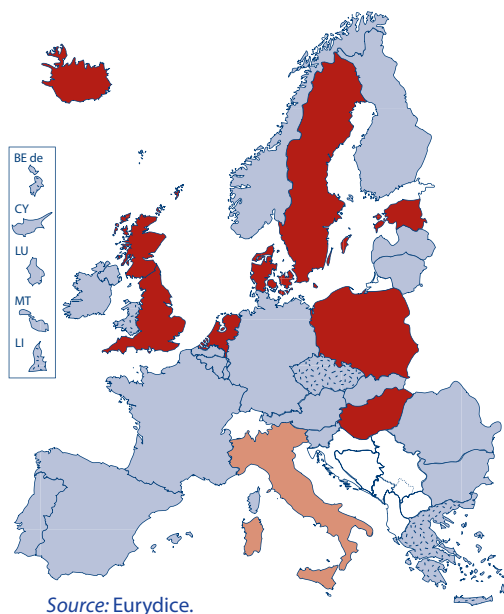
with disparities in attainment levels, develop the curriculum or improve the continuing professional development of teachers.

Many European countries provide schools with their aggregated test results for comparison with the national average. In general, schools are left to decide how they will use these

**Figure 3: Use of test results in school evaluation, compulsory education, 2008/09**



**Figure 4: Publication of individual schools' results in national tests, compulsory education, 2008/09**



- A.** Test results used in external evaluation
- B.** Recommendations for the use of test results in internal evaluation
- No **A** and no **B**
- No national tests

- Publication organised, or required of schools, by central/local government
- Publication at the discretion of schools
- No publication
- No national tests

results to improve their work. However, in twelve countries, there are requirements or recommendations that test results should be considered in external and/or internal evaluation of schools. In comparison with some non-European countries, such as the United States and Canada, test results in Europe are only rarely used as an accountability tool which involves sanctions and rewards and may affect resource allocation.

Most European countries do not publish the aggregated test results of individual schools. In some countries official documents expressly forbid the use of results to draw up comparative school league tables or rankings, as these are considered unlikely to improve educational provision.

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### The **full study**

National testing of Pupils in Europe: Objectives, Organisation and Use of Results

is available in French and English

on the **Eurydice website: [www.eurydice.org](http://www.eurydice.org)**

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### **Printed copies** of the study

in English and French will be available from November 2009.

The German translation will be available shortly afterwards.

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### **Other key documents of interest:**

- Theoretical and Real Effects of Standardised Assessment, literature review by Nathalie Mons, August 2009
- Eurydice: Key Data on Education 2009  
[a comparative analysis of education systems in Europe]
- European Commission: Education and training