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3

Call for schooling to begin at six

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Children should begin formal schooling a year later, at six, to avoid being “alienated” permanently from education, according to the leaders of [one of the biggest reviews of English primary schooling in a generation](#).

The [Cambridge Primary Review](#) reports on Friday after six years of work and 31 interim reports. The Review’s editor, Robin Alexander of Cambridge and Warwick universities, challenged ministers with a call for a “a lighter hand on the tiller from central government”, which should “step back” from its self-appointed role since 1997 of telling teachers how to teach. Professor Alexander was speaking on Thursday at a press conference ahead of the review’s launch.

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The 586-page report by 14 academics is likely to exert considerable long-term influence over thinking in England’s educational establishment, although Whitehall policy in the shorter term will be influenced more by the April 2009 government-commissioned report on the primary curriculum by Sir Jim Rose, who recommended that computer skills should have the same importance as literacy and numeracy.

The latest report’s most eye-catching proposal was for the formal style of education currently taught at English primaries to start a year later than usual, yielding to an extra year of education based on play.

Conventional education would therefore begin at six rather than five, bringing it into line with most other European countries – though in Finland, which has the best education results in the world by one measure, formal schooling begins at seven. Some parents say their children are not yet suited to formal education at five, although others strongly support it.

Dame Gillian Pugh, head of the review’s advisory committee, justified the proposal by arguing that when it came to long-term development, “they’re not going to learn to read or write and add up if you’ve alienated children by the age of four or five”. Criticising early formal education, she said: “There is quite a lot of evidence to show that it can actually do some harm.”

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