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# Devastating criticism of primary education dismissed by ministers

- Doing nothing would be weak, say headteachers
- Schools department calls report out of date

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**Polly Curtis**, education editor  
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Pressure is mounting on Ed Balls, the schools secretary, following major primary education review. Photograph: PA

Pressure was building on Ed Balls, the schools secretary, last night and on his shadow, Michael Gove, to act on the findings of the biggest independent review of English primary education in 40 years after every teaching union gave it their backing and urged politicians to take action.

Some of the leading voices in education appealed to the government to face up to the criticisms in the report and move on its recommendations.

Headteachers' leaders said any attempt to ignore it would be an "act of weakness" on their part.

But Vernon Coaker, the schools minister, suggested the review was out of date and did not take into account the government's primary school reforms.

The Cambridge Review, which covered all aspects of primary schools and their pupils' lives, took three years and was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation charity. It set out a devastating critique of the government's centralisation of the education system, and called on the government to scrap Sats and delay formal learning for pupils until they are six, to ease the pressure.

One fundamental criticism it makes is that ministers refuse to take independent, expert advice in formulating the schools policy. Balls has dismissed interim reports from the Cambridge review that criticised the Sats system of testing pupils.

After the inquiry was launched, Balls ordered a separate review of the primary curriculum from the government adviser Sir Jim Rose, which was prevented from addressing the most controversial issue of school tests. That review triggered Balls'

decision to bring forward the school starting age from five to four, a move designed to counteract the penalties faced by summer-born children who get a shorter education.

But today's report found growing concern about the international evidence that finds that some children are put off school if they feel they have failed formal lessons in the 3Rs at an early age.

The 600-page book will be sent to every school and a series of conferences will be held to debate it. A document setting out the outcome of those debates will be delivered to each of the parties in February before the general election.

Mick Brookes, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: "This comprehensive study of primary education must be taken seriously by government. The fact the work in progress has been completely ignored by the government is a sign of weakness. This report is truly independent, unlike work commissioned and controlled by the DCSF [Department for Children, Schools and Families] which largely says what it wants to hear.

"There are recommendations in this report that could transform the Primary ethos and turn pessimism into hope."

Christine Blower, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said: "It is absolutely extraordinary that the government has decided to ignore the Cambridge Review recommendations.

"Any government worth its salt, particularly in front of an impending general election, would have embraced this immensely rich report as a source of policy ideas. It is not too late for the government to recognise that not all good ideas emanate from the minds of civil servants.

Nansi Ellis, head of education policy and research at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said: "Primary education must not become a battlefield in the forthcoming election – children and their learning will be the first casualties."

Coaker said: "It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed on many major changes in primaries."

"We completely refute the claim that primary standards have not risen across the board."

Nick Gibb, the shadow schools minister, said: "We agree that the wave of bureaucracy over the past decade has been deeply damaging and we must trust teachers more. We agree that we need more specialist training for primary teachers, as we have been saying and which the Government unfortunately has opposed.

However, we do not agree ... that politicians should end school for four to six-year-olds."

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