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Richard Garner: A study that should sound the death knell for league tables

There is a groundswell of opinion in favour of a later start to formal schooling

The first thing to say about the Cambridge review of primary education is how welcome it is to read a report unfettered by government restrictions on what it can cover.

Professor Robin Alexander's team has come up with an impressive analysis of what is wrong with our present system. Too much testing, too much concentration on the three R's to the neglect of a broad and balanced curriculum, and too many "Stalinist" directives from ministers as to how teachers should teach. It also recommends that children should not start formal schooling until the age of six, in line with most other European countries.

Of course, the trouble with the report is that because it was not commissioned by ministers, there is no necessity for anyone to implement its recommendations.

But there is a groundswell of opinion in favour of a later start to formal schooling. One of its champions is Barry Sheerman, the influential Labour chairman of the select committee that covers children, schools and families.

The main thrust of the report - that teachers should be freer to teach - will find favour with both Michael Gove, the Conservatives' schools spokesman, and David Laws of the Liberal Democrats.

Even the maligned Sir Jim Rose, who carried out the formal review of primary education for Schools Secretary Ed Balls, talked of the need for more emphasis on creativity in the curriculum. (The major criticism of his efforts is that he was prevented from recommending changes to the testing regime, which was not part of his remit).

This report's recommendations on what to do with the testing regime are unlikely to find any backing in government circles of whatever political colour. Professor Alexander wants an end to the national curriculum tests in English and maths at 11, and the league tables that are based on them.

He argues that they should be replaced by assessments in all subjects taken by children at 11. The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, for one, is likely to oppose this idea, because it would mean more work for teachers (the current tests are externally marked).

I can see no reason why we cannot dispose of the primary league tables. Labour never meant to introduce them and only did so because an assiduous journalist decided to produce one of their own. David Blunkett decided that if they were to be published, it was best they were accurate.

As long as parents have a guarantee that they can access a school's results in their locality through their local authority, complaints that their demise would leave parents unable to choose a decent school can be countered. I believe that most parties, if not all, would balk at scrapping the tests altogether and therefore that part of the review's recommendations will fall on stony ground.

But the absence of league tables, and possibly a further investigation of the idea put forward by Michael Gove - that children should be tested at the beginning of secondary schooling to avoid teaching to the tests throughout the last year in primaries - should be enough to help the primary sector move towards the more balanced curriculum we all crave.

Full marks to Professor Alexander and his team for the most authoritative investigation of any part of the education system that I have seen in 30 years of education reporting. Two out of three, though, for his main conclusions. However, as Meatloaf once sang, two out of three ain't bad.

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