

Alexander Review: Give us back our schools



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Biggest investigation since Plowden demands end to era of centralised control

The biggest investigation into primary education in a generation has demanded that England's schools are reclaimed from politicians who have imposed a "state theory of learning" on teachers.

The final report of the independent Cambridge Primary Review, published today, calls for the depoliticisation of the classroom, with central control slashed to a minimum and funding pumped into schools.

The study, which has taken three years and draws on the work of more than 3,000 researchers, begins: "Ours is a public system of education which belongs to the people and is not the personal fiefdom of ministers and their unelected advisors."

Its recommendations include that formal primary education should not start until the age of six, and that the current system of league tables and national tests be scrapped and replaced with a new system of accountability in which teacher assessment plays a stronger role.

Subject specialists should also be introduced alongside generalist class teachers in the upper years of primary.

Professor Robin Alexander, who led the inquiry, said he was irritated that the debate over education had been presented as a simple battle between "the trendy" and "back to basics" factions.

"The whole discourse has been hijacked by the mythmakers," he told The TES. "This is about reclaiming the debate, it is about resetting the agenda for professionals."

The final report, *Children, Their World, Their Education*, is being sent to every school in the UK, including secondaries and special schools.

It is the largest inquiry of its kind since Lady Plowden's in 1967, but is more independent than its predecessor. The Alexander Review was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn charitable foundation while the Plowden report was commissioned by the government of the day.

Many of its findings have been revealed over the last year and half in a series of interim reports, including an assertion that childhood is not in crisis, and that primary schools provide a safe haven for young children in a changing world.

John Bangs, head of education for the National Union of Teachers, said teachers would applaud many of the review's conclusions, including the change in official primary starting age. "Professor Alexander is spot on that education is too important for the factionalisation of party politics," he said.

Ministers are due to announce their plans for the primary curriculum within the next month, which are expected to draw from a separate, government sanctioned review led by Sir Jim Rose. But the Cambridge

Primary Review report calls on them to reject the Rose proposals, which include restructuring the curriculum around six “areas of learning”.

As the report notes, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, as well as Ed Balls, the Schools Secretary have criticised the interim reports for containing “a collection of recycled, partial or out of date research”.

However, both the anti-centralisation and the subject specialist recommendations will appeal to the Conservatives, which have pledged to move funding from agencies to the frontline.

David Laws, Liberal democrat spokesman for education, said: “The strength of the report is that it’s not been commissioned by the Government and its terms of reference haven’t been unnecessarily restricted. It is able to recognize some of the achievements of primary education and progress made in the last decade while also being willing to be critical about those things that have gone wrong. We feel very strongly that the degree of micromanagement and interference is on a scale that would never have been tolerated and would have been seen as shockingly totalitarian 30 years ago.”

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