

# Alexander hits out: 'No way has Coaker read my report'



News | Published in The TES on 23 October, 2009 | **By: William Stewart and Helen Ward**

Section: News

## Academic who led Cambridge Primary Review accuses ministers of responding to media reports rather than research itself

The leader of the biggest investigation into primary education in a generation has attacked ministers' response, claiming they rubbished his team's report without even reading it.

Professor Robin Alexander, director of the independent Cambridge Primary Review, said last week's dismissive Government reaction was indicative of a cultural change that sees ministers and their officials respond to media reports of research instead of the research itself.

The Government's initial reaction was to dismiss the idea of a later school starting age - but this was based on a misunderstanding of the report's recommendation to extend the current early-years foundation stage.

Under increasing pressure to justify the Government's curt reaction to the review, Schools Secretary Ed Balls told the Commons committee on children, schools and families that children should have a less structured approach in the foundation stage than in the years beyond it, and he would be quite happy to see this running until age six.

But last week, within hours of its publication, schools minister Vernon Coaker had described proposals in the 586-page final report as a "backward" step and said the world had "moved on" since the review was started.

Professor Alexander said: "There is absolutely no way he could have read it. The Secretary of State received his copy the previous day. It is also apparent because of the number of errors in what he said about it."

The academic said the long-term nature of the research, which began in 2006, was an asset rather than a shortcoming. His team had continued to gather evidence this year and their report was as up to date "as any can be".

Worse still was the fact that Mr Coaker had followed media reports and said that the review recommended the school starting age be raised to six.

"It doesn't," Professor Alexander said. "What the report proposes is that the Government's own early-years foundation stage is extended up to the age of six."

The response exemplified the low level of debate on primary education, he told a Cambridge Assessment conference this week.

He contrasted the approach of today's ministers, who had also "summarily dismissed" earlier reports from the review, with that of previous Labour education secretary Estelle Morris.

"She said, 'What I tried to do was always get a rounded briefing from my advisers about what the document actually said. So that if the journalist said this report says this I could say well actually it says this as well, which is actually quite positive,'" Professor Alexander said.

"There really is a failure of a fairly basic kind to handle the extent to which the whole debate about education has become media led."

He blamed the Government rather than the media, which was just doing its job. He attributed the situation to increased centralisation of education policy in the past decade.

"The problem is that it forces government into defensive mode," said Professor Alexander. "The more Government takes control, the less it can blame other people when things go wrong. It can only aggressively defend what it does."

And, speaking at the document's official launch on Monday at the Royal Society of Arts, Barry Sheerman, chairman of the Commons schools select committee, called for politicians to take a second look.

He said: "So much of this report is a treasure trove for the future ... It means re-energising ourselves to deliver this research into change."

Analysis, pages 18-19

## MINISTERS' CRIB SHEET

What the review really says

- End the "state theory of learning".
- Extend foundation stage to age six, with a single primary key stage.
- Prioritise narrowing gap between vulnerable children and the rest.
- Undertake a full SEN review.
- Follow Professor Alexander's curriculum recommendations.
- Reform assessment; stop current Sats; scrap league tables; assess all areas of the curriculum; use sampling to monitor national standards.
- Undertake a full review of primary school staffing.
- Reform initial teacher training.
- Protect and expand school libraries.

## Quick search

Keywords	<input type="text" value="Enter keyword here"/>
Subjects	<input type="text" value="All subjects"/>
Type	<input type="text" value="All types"/>
Phase	<input type="text" value="All phases"/>

## Related articles



## [Disadvantage lies at heart of primary review](#)

Robin Alexander praises schools as 'the centre that holds when things fall apart', but while rejecting media 'myths' of a generation in crisis he argues that more must be done to narrow the gap between vulnerable children and the rest. Helen Ward reports

---

- [Early-years debate in search of battle lines](#)

---

- [Westminster watchdog won't bite but the pups might nip](#)

---

## Related resources



- [AQA A Lit Poems: Heaney Digging](#)

---

- [Food GCSE Games on the Internet](#)

---

- [Extending and Refining Search Methods](#)

---



TES Editorial © 2008 TSL Education Ltd. All pages of the Website are subject to our terms and conditions and privacy policy. You must not reproduce, duplicate, copy, sell, resell or exploit any material on the Website for any commercial purposes. TSL Education Ltd Registered in England (No 02017289) at 26 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4HQ