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## Test regime must change

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Primary Review says no evidence to back Government claim that testing raises standards. Children's reading standards have barely improved in 55 years, despite ministers spending £500 million on the National Literacy Strategy, the biggest inquiry in primary education in 40 years has been told. [More...](#)

In a strong critique of Labour's record, academics denounced the testing regime as "inadequate": it provides unreliable information on standards, encourages schools to neglect lower achievers, narrows the curriculum and increases pupils' anxiety, the authors said.

However, the three reports commissioned by the Primary Review based at Cambridge University also find that pupils generally are positive towards school and get a "good deal" from their education.

Last month, the two-year inquiry's first report said schools were valued as havens for their pupils in a world dominated by the break-down of family life and rampant materialism. Today's studies analyse whether underlying standards, as measured by national tests, international testing studies and other independent data, have really risen in primaries in recent decades.

Standards in science have improved, they say, and represent a national success story. In maths, pupils are also doing better than in 1995 and progress seems to have been made in writing.

However, Professor Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell, of Durham University, having studied test evidence dating back to 1948, say that reading standards have

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remained constant. "The £500m spent on the National Literacy Strategy had a barely noticeable impact on reading," says their report.

Another paper, by Professor Wynne Harlen, of Bristol University, concludes that there is no evidence for the Government's claim that "testing drives up standards".

Teachers are encouraged to teach to the test rather than building deeper understanding in pupils, spending up to five full weeks a year on test preparation, while testing is narrowing the curriculum and demotivating lower achievers.

Writing in today's TES, Professor Robin Alexander, the review's leader says: "The consensus which these reports reinforce is now so commanding that it is hard to resist the view that sooner rather than later the apparatus of national testing must change radically ..."

Education ministers have been adamant that the testing system in England will not be changed. A Department for Children, Schools and Families spokeswoman said: "These reports use tunnel vision to look at education. Primary standards are at their highest ever levels. Provisional 2007 results in reading show that 84 per cent of 11-year-olds achieved the expected level - up 17 percentage points since 1997. This huge rise in standards since 1997 follows 50 years of little or no improvement in literacy and represents a very good return on our investment in the literacy strategy. Robust national tests taken by all children on a consistent basis allow parents to see how accurately their school performs."

But in the Prime Minister's first education speech since being in office, there was an intriguing sentence that hinted at possible reform. Buried in Gordon Brown's speech was the sentence: "And as we start to move to personalised testing, we must keep assessment under review to ensure that it supports learning and achievement and does not dominate teaching."

Brown speech, page 4

Analysis, pages 14 & 15

Leading article, page 28

Robin Alexander, page 28.


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