



... children, their world, their education

**NEWS RELEASE**  
**FRIDAY 12 OCTOBER 2007**

### **TAKING THE EDUCATIONAL TEMPERATURE: FIRST INTERIM REPORT FROM THE PRIMARY REVIEW**

*Community Soundings*, the first of a series of 32 interim reports from the Primary Review, is published today (Friday 12 October 2007). Reporting on a major public consultation undertaken earlier this year it finds strong support for the work of primary schools, general agreement about what is right and wrong with recent educational policy, but deep anxiety about the condition of childhood today and the society and world in which children are growing up. The report also identifies from this consultation important questions about current and future educational policy and practice.

The independently-funded Primary Review, the biggest enquiry into English primary education for 40 years, has been collecting evidence since its launch one year ago and will publish its main report in late 2008. Meanwhile, interim reports like this will stimulate debate to feed back into the Review.

*Community Soundings* reports on 87 meetings with community representatives, employers, religious leaders, parents, governors, heads, teachers and children in different parts of England. In spite of considerable diversity in the membership and location of these community soundings, there was a striking measure of agreement on the main educational and social issues. No less striking was the fact that although witnesses had much to say that was positive, and the work of primary schools was generally well regarded, there was a pervasive anxiety about specific aspects of recent educational policy, and about the wider world.

In the area of policy, witnesses strongly supported *Every Child Matters*, but were ambivalent about the national literacy, numeracy and primary strategies and deeply concerned about the stress on young children, their teachers and families caused by the national tests at ages 7 and 11, and about the resulting distortion of the primary curriculum. Outside the school, witnesses were worried about the condition of family life, the decline in mutual respect and social cohesion, the dominance of anti-social behaviour, materialism and the cult of celebrity, and the growing crisis of climate change. Today's children, it was generally felt, are being forced to grow up too soon, and the prospects for the society and world they will inherit look increasingly perilous.

However, the report also records that gloom could turn to hope when witnesses felt able to act rather than merely comply, whether as children working on projects for sustainable development, teachers taking control of the curriculum, or schools using their entrepreneurial talent to enhance staffing and facilities. This finding is a timely corrective to the belief that for every educational challenge there should be a high-profile government initiative or national strategy. In the context of the current policy of 'personalised' education, the report also commends close attention to what children themselves say about the conditions for successful teaching and learning.

*Primary Review Director Robin Alexander said:* 'This is just one piece in the Primary Review's jigsaw of evidence, so it doesn't tell the whole story, whether about government policy, the work of primary schools, or the wider social context in which education takes place. But it takes the educational temperature on these and other matters at a critical time, and it reveals what teachers, parents, children and communities are most concerned about. We hope that people will tell us what they think about the issues raised here and in the other interim reports which we'll be publishing during the next few months.' (Further quote in notes below).

**Reference: Primary Review (2007) *Community Soundings: the Primary Review regional witness sessions*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906468-00-1.**

**FOR A SUMMARY/BRIEFING AND THE FULL REPORT: [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)**

**ENDS**

## FURTHER NOTES FOR EDITORS

### Further quote

*Commenting further on the views conveyed by many of those present at the 87 witness sessions reported in the Community Soundings report, Primary Review director Robin Alexander said: 'For a government which has invested so much in its drive to raise educational standards, there is a battle for hearts and minds to be won. On the one hand, government cites educational expenditure, test results and Ofsted inspections to show that its initiatives are delivering the necessary improvements. On the other, commentators of varying political, journalistic and academic hue read the same information rather differently, sometimes even suggesting contrary trends. While this pattern of claim and counter-claim is predictable, the unease about the present and pessimism about the future which we uncovered as we travelled round the country and talked to many people both inside and outside education cannot so easily be explained away. If things are going so well, why are people so worried? What we heard, in fact, confirms that the health of a national educational system can't be fully captured by the term 'standards', critically important though standards are. The evidence from this one strand of the Primary Review's evidence suggests that standards may have been too readily equated with quality, and that it is time to start exploring the difference between them. We hope that these interim reports will encourage such discussion.'*

### Where next?

In addition to seeking to encourage public discussion, *Community Soundings* identifies matters to be taken forward to the National Soundings, the stage of the Primary Review where emerging issues from the different evidential strands will be explored at meetings with national organisations, both statutory and voluntary, and with teachers. For these meetings *Community Soundings* lists 44 specific questions on the following broad themes: social change and the national and global contexts; children's well-being and multi-agency provision; the quality of parenting and the relationship between home and school; the aims and values of primary education; priorities, scope and balance in the primary curriculum; assessment, testing and the future of SATs; learning, teaching and the quality of primary teacher training; ages, stages and structures in primary education; funding, policy and the balance of national and local control.

*Community Soundings* also raises a number of matters which are more pressing in some parts of the country than others, for example: the contrasting tasks and challenges of large urban and small rural schools; handling ethnic and religious diversity; the demographics and impact of migration; the situation of marginalised social groups; funding disparities among local authorities and schools.

Next in this series of interim reports will be a group of surveys of published research on the theme 'How well are we doing? Research on reform, standards and quality in English primary education.' After that will come reports on children's lives at home and school, and on their development and learning. These will be followed by an account of the written submissions received by the Review and further reports from the research surveys.

### The Primary Review

Based at the University of Cambridge and supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Primary Review was launched in October 2006 and will run for two years. It aims to gather evidence from a wide range of sources, sift facts from rhetoric, and stimulate debate about the future of this vital phase of education. The Review will culminate in a report containing recommendations for future policy and practice.

The most comprehensive such enquiry since the Plowden Report of 1967, the Primary Review is examining how well the current system of primary education is doing, how it can be improved and how primary schools should respond to the national and global challenges which lie ahead. Along the way, the Review is assessing the impact of the many government primary education initiatives of the past 20 years.

### Focus and evidence

The Review is focusing on ten broad themes: (i) purposes and values, (ii) learning and teaching, (iii) curriculum and assessment, (iv) quality and standards, (v) diversity and inclusion, (vi) settings and professionals, (vii) parenting, caring and educating, (viii) beyond the school, (ix) structures and phases, (x) funding and governance.

The Review draws on four kinds of evidence: (i) written submissions, of which a large number have been received, and on which a report will be issued later this year; (ii) oral soundings taken from schools and

communities locally (the 'Community Soundings' reported here) and from national groups and organisations; (iii) systematic searches of official national and international data; (iv) surveys of relevant published research, commissioned from leading national experts.

### **Direction and consultation**

The Review is directed by Professor Robin Alexander, Fellow of Wolfson College, University of Cambridge and Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Warwick. The work of the Review's Cambridge-based central team (Robin Alexander, Catrin Darsley, Christine Doddington, Linda Hargreaves, David Harrison, Ruth Kershner) is supported by 70 research consultants from universities across the UK and a 20-strong Advisory Committee, chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh, whose members come from both inside and outside education.

The Primary Review's launch last autumn followed nearly three years of planning and consultation involving the government, opposition parties, statutory national educational agencies, teaching unions, and representatives from local authorities, schools, educational research, parents' groups, business and religious communities. The consultations showed strong support for the Review and helped shape the way it is being undertaken. The Review is fully independent, but it is committed to constructive engagement with government, opposition, national agencies and the teaching unions, and it has already had the first of several planned sessions with the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee.

### **The interim reports**

There will be 32 interim reports, of which *Community Soundings* is the first. The series will also include an analysis of all the written submissions received by the Review and the 30 surveys of published research relating to the ten Review themes. Each report will be available on the Review website both in full and in the form of a 3-4 page briefing. The research survey reports will be published in thematic groups, with a single press release covering each group.

**FOR FURTHER DETAILS:** [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)

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