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NEWS RELEASE

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT STANDARDS AND TESTING FROM THE PRIMARY REVIEW

Following widespread interest in its *Community Soundings* report (12 October) the Primary Review today publishes three further interim reports, this time from its research survey strand. Commissioned from academic specialists and grounded in some 240 sources of published evidence, both official and independent, the reports raise important questions about standards of pupil achievement in English primary schools over recent years, about how English primary pupils compare with those from other countries, and about the national and international tests on which evidence about standards has been based. Concern about the KS1/KS2 tests was also a prominent theme in the *Community Soundings* report. The reports are:

- ***Standards and Quality in English Primary Schools Over Time: the national evidence***, by Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell, University of Durham (Primary Review Research Survey 4/1). ISBN 978-1-906478-01-8.
- ***Standards in English Primary Education: the international evidence***, by Chris Whetton, Graham Ruddock and Liz Twist, National Foundation for Educational Research (Primary Review Research Survey 4/2). ISBN 978-1-906478-02-5.
- ***The Quality of Learning: assessment alternatives for primary education***, by Wynne Harlen, University of Bristol (Primary Review Research Survey 3/4). ISBN 978-1-906478-03-4.

The findings from these three detailed and authoritative surveys of published evidence are mixed.

In positive vein the evidence shows: the stability of English primary education over time; primary pupils' positive attitudes towards their learning; improvements in primary mathematics standards during recent years, especially since 1995; and high standards in primary reading and science compared with many other countries.

Less positively, the evidence shows: gains in reading skills at the expense of pupils' enjoyment of reading; increases in test-induced stress among pupils; a narrowing of the primary curriculum in response to the perceived pressure of testing; the limited impact of the national strategies on both reading standards and the quality of classroom discourse on which higher-order learning depends; and the persistence of a much bigger gap between high and low attaining pupils than in many other countries.

The evidence raises questions about current national assessment methodology: the generally low level of dependability of the current national testing system; the misleading nature of KS2 results between 1995 and 2000; the narrow definitions of 'standards' which have been adopted; and the relative thinness of evidence about how English primary pupils compare with those from other countries.

The reports question significant tenets of recent policy: one of them doubts whether, on the basis of the evidence, the national strategies for primary literacy and numeracy have given value for money; another argues that the evidence does not support the claim that national testing of itself 'drives up standards.'

The reports propose major changes to policy and practice in the areas of assessment and monitoring: basing the accountability of individual schools on their contribution to pupils' education as a whole rather than just on pupil performance in the KS1/KS2 tests; monitoring national standards of pupil achievement through independent sample surveys rather than the KS1/KS2 tests; shifting the emphasis from summative to formative assessment; making greater use of teacher judgement in the former; grounding future policy on assessment, testing and the monitoring of standards more firmly in the research evidence.

FOR BRIEFINGS/SUMMARIES AND COPIES OF THE FULL REPORTS: richard@margrave.co.uk (before 2 November), www.primaryreview.org.uk (from 2 November)

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FURTHER NOTES FOR EDITORS

Primary Review Director Robin Alexander said: 'These three reports investigate published evidence on one of the more prominent concerns noted in the Community Soundings report which we published on 12 October: the national tests at Key Stages 1 and 2 through which individual pupils are assessed and national standards are monitored at the primary stage. The authors are established and well-respected specialists in this field, and between them they have examined a vast body of evidence. Their analyses repay careful study and their conclusions deserve serious attention, especially since they resonate so strongly with evidence from other sources and with major studies of 'high stakes' testing undertaken in Britain and the United States.'

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 English 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 on 12 October) and from national groups and organisations; (iii) systematic searches of official national and international data; (iv) surveys of relevant published research - as in the present case - 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, Julia Flutter, 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 four have now been published. 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

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