

**NEWS RELEASE
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**IMPROVING PRIMARY EDUCATION
REQUIRES CHANGE AT WESTMINSTER AS WELL AS IN SCHOOLS,
SAYS CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW DIRECTOR**

Today, launching *After the election: policy priorities for primary education*, Professor Robin Alexander, Director of the Cambridge Primary Review, said:

‘Drawing on the Cambridge Primary Review’s evidence and on the many regional and national consultations since our final report was published last October, we have set out 11 post-election policy priorities for primary education. We are sending our statement to Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Nick Clegg and other party leaders, as well as to education stakeholders. The Cambridge Review is the most comprehensive enquiry into English primary education for half a century, it is genuinely independent, and its findings and recommendations are widely supported, so we expect political leaders to respond constructively.

‘Top of the list is the task of reducing England’s long tail of underachievement. What raises standards is good teaching, but we know that the gaps in attainment, equity and wellbeing coincide, so narrowing the attainment gap requires action across a wider spectrum of public policy than education alone. The stubborn insistence that there’s no alternative to SATs must be abandoned, for we need an assessment system that more effectively combines essential information for parents and teachers with support for children’s learning, and does so without causing collateral damage. The shelving of the Rose curriculum proposals in the pre-election legislative wash up is an opportunity, not a setback. We can now ask what a 21st century primary education is for, and what kind of curriculum will equip young children with essential knowledge and skills while exciting their imagination and kindling their commitment to lifelong learning. Relatedly, there should be a thorough review of primary school staffing to ensure that schools have the breadth and depth of expertise to deliver the highest possible standards across the whole curriculum, not just in literacy and numeracy.

‘But these and other items on our list require change in the policy process itself. The Westminster reforms which Parliamentary candidates are queuing up to endorse must be about much more than MPs’ expenses. The tide of centralisation and DCSF micro-management needs to be halted. National agencies like Ofsted, QCDA and TDA are more useful, and command greater respect, when they act as objective advisers rather than political cheerleaders. Research should be embraced, not cherry-picked or dismissed if it comes up with politically inconvenient truths. And the relationship between government, national agencies, local authorities and schools needs to be re-balanced.

‘We argued all this in our final report last October, but what teachers have told us since then makes it even more urgent. Many primary heads at our dissemination conferences said they were impressed by the Cambridge Review’s evidence and proposals and wanted to take them forward, but feared to do so without permission from their Ofsted inspectors and local authority school improvement partners (SIPs). We stress that “fear” and “permission” were their words, not ours. It cannot be right if senior professionals are afraid to act as their experience, knowledge and judgement dictate, or if supposed agents of school improvement block the application of evidence that doesn’t toe the party line. Fortunately - and this too must be emphasised - not all teachers say this and not all inspectors and SIPs give them cause. But, as we said in our final report, “Children will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected merely to do as they are told.”

‘Clearly, there are matters on which government can and must take the lead. But if schools assume that reform is for government alone, and wait to be told what to do, then little will change. In this matter, evidence is critical. The alternative to micro-management from the centre is not unaccountable professional license. The Cambridge Review is very clear that teachers, like all professionals, should be able to give coherent justifications for their decisions, citing evidence and principle rather than offering the unsafe defence of compliance with what others dictate. This also requires reforms in primary teachers’ training and continuing professional development, and in school leadership. And it demands a much closer articulation of policy, practice and research.’

Further notes

- *After the election: policy priorities for primary education* is available from Richard Margrave (see below) or the Cambridge Primary Review website: www.primaryreview.org.uk .
- The 11 'policy priorities for primary education' are: 1- Accelerate the drive to reduce England's gross and overlapping inequalities in wealth, wellbeing and educational attainment. 2 - Make children's agency and rights a reality in schools, classrooms and policy. 3 - Consolidate the Early Years Foundation Stage, understanding that the quality of early childhood provision matters more than the school starting age. 4 - Address the neglected question of what primary education is for, making aims drive educational practice rather than merely embellish it. 5 - Replace curriculum tinkering by curriculum renewal, attending to the challenges and problems which the Rose review's remit excluded. 6 – Abandon the dogma that there is no alternative to SATs and undertake radical reform to ensure that assessment does its job validly, reliably and without collateral damage. 7 - Replace the pedagogy of official recipe by pedagogies of repertoire, evidence and principle. 8 - Rethink the government's professional standards for teachers, retaining guidance and support for those who need it but liberating the nation's most talented teachers - and hence the learning of their pupils - from bureaucratic prescriptions. 9 - Initiate a full primary staffing review, facilitating the more flexible use of generalist and specialist expertise so as to secure high standards not only in 'the basics' but in every aspect of the curriculum to which children are entitled. 10 - Help schools to work in partnership with each other rather than in competition, sharing ideas, expertise and resources and together tackling local needs. 11 - Re-balance the relationship between government, local authorities and schools, ending micro-management by DCSF and policy policing by the national agencies.
- The briefing gives greater detail about each of these, but for a full discussion see the Cambridge Primary Review final report.
- The Cambridge Primary Review was launched in October 2006, as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of English primary education. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation from 2006-12, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander. Between October 2007 and February 2009 the Review published 31 interim reports. Its final report was published in October 2009. Since then, the Review's findings and recommendations have been discussed and debated at nearly 70 regional, national and international events.
- The final report: *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, 608 pp, Routledge, October 2009. ISBN 978-0-415-54871-7 (pb). Editor: Robin Alexander. Authorial team: Robin Alexander, Michael Armstrong, Julia Flutter, Linda Hargreaves, Wynne Harlen, David Harrison, Elizabeth-Hartley-Brewer, Ruth Kershner, John MacBeath, Berry Mayall, Stephanie Northen, Gillian Pugh, Colin Richards and David Utting. Order a copy at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717>. Download a 4-page briefing and a 42-page booklet about the report at www.primaryreview.org.uk .
- Companion research volume: *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, 850 pp, Routledge, October 2009. ISBN 978-0-415-54869-4 (hb only). Editors: Robin Alexander, with Christine Doddington, John Gray, Linda Hargreaves and Ruth Kershner. 66 contributing authors from 21 university departments. Order a copy at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717> .

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