

# Ed Balls accused of 'lashing out wildly' at primary school review findings

- Head of review says Labour does not listen
- Growing anger among teachers at response

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**Polly Curtis**, education editor  
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A class at a primary school in Combe, Oxfordshire. Photograph: Barry Batchelor/PA

The man behind a major inquiry into primary education today accuses Ed Balls and his ministers of "lashing out wildly" and dismissing his review findings without properly reading it.

Robin Alexander, head of the Cambridge review of primary schools, said the Labour government refused to "listen, engage and learn" from independent advice in its "micro-managed" system.

Writing for the Guardian's Comment is Free website, he sets out how the government's response to the review betrayed the fact that ministers had not properly read it, setting out inaccuracies in how both they and their Conservative shadows described it.

Alexander's intervention comes amid growing anger in schools and teacher groups about the government's dismissal of the review. It also comes after a tumultuous week in which Balls was accused of being a "bit of a bully" by Barry Sheerman, the chair of the Commons committee for children, schools and families, after he appointed Maggie Atkinson to the role of children's commissioner. He also faced heavy criticism at the

national children and adult services conference in Harrogate.

The Cambridge review, the biggest inquiry into primary education in 40 years, was published last week after a three-year process which produced 31 interim reports, 28 surveys and thousands of submissions.

In a 600-page document it concluded that schools are in "good heart ... highly valued by children and parents and in general doing a good job," but condemned the centralisation of the system under Labour and how the curriculum had shrunk to a narrow focus on the 3Rs.

It suggested schools should replace formal teaching with play-based learning until a child turns six and that national curriculum tests – Sats – should be replaced with improved end-of-primary tests.

The Cambridge review received support from every teaching union, agency and school support group but the government – led by the schools minister, Vernon Coaker – accused the review of being "out of date" and failing to acknowledge programmes that were under way to review testing, special educational needs and maths teaching.

Today, Alexander writes that after the government "instantly dismissed" the inquiry, "the review's email in-boxes [were] overflowing with messages not just about the findings that the press focused on – starting age, testing, centralisation – but with expressions of spluttering outrage shading into quiet despair at last week's statement."

He praises the Labour government for making "enormous" progress in primary education, citing the report's central conclusion that primary schools are in "good heart" and adding: "But when things go wrong in a micro-managed system the finger of blame points in one direction only, and in such a situation this government allows itself only one response: lash out wildly."

He claims complaints that the review was "out of date" were inaccurate, citing references in the research to the reviews of Sats, SEN provision and maths teaching which Balls had claimed were missing. Both Labour and Tory spokesmen "misrepresented" his recommendations on raising the age for formal learning, claiming it would leave children with no education before the age of six at all.

Both parties also claimed the review argued for tests to be scrapped when the inquiry concluded that Sats should be replaced with something better, he said.

"Nobody expects ministers to have the time to read every massive report that lands on their desks, not overnight anyway," he concludes. "But serious questions must now be asked about the advice on which the government's response was based, the advisers who provided the minister with such a hopeless script, and the wisdom of approaching a general election as the government which refuses to listen, engage and learn."

A spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said it had received

a letter from Alexander about the issues raised in the article and would respond in due course.

- This article was amended on 26 October 2009. The original said that the Cambridge Primary Review was 600 words. This has been corrected.

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