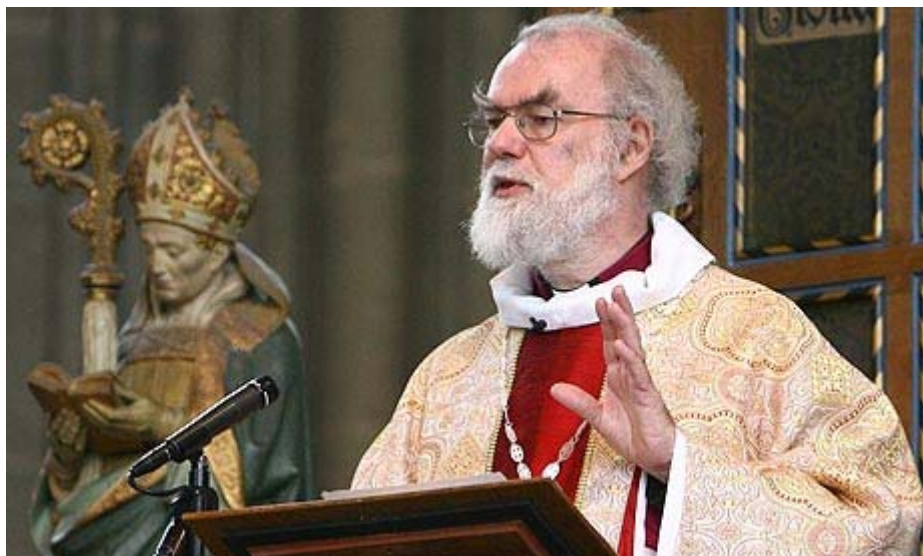


Rowan Williams condemns 'oppressive' English educational system

Polly Curtis, education editor

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The archbishop of Canterbury has criticised the 'oppressive' education system.

Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA

Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, has set out a devastating critique of the "oppressive" English education system accusing successive governments of prioritising test marks over children's spiritual or emotional happiness.

The school system is now so results-driven that children are in danger of being written off as failures at an early age, he warned in a speech at Lambeth Palace marking a major expansion of the church's academy programme.

He claimed teachers had been undermined and very young children over-tested in governments' pursuit of making schools accountable.

"We have in the past few decades created an extraordinarily anxious and in many ways oppressive climate in education at every level in the search for proper accountability," he said.

"This search is laudable in itself, but its workings out have been unhappy: an inspection regime that is experienced by many teachers as undermining, not supportive, an obsession with testing children from the earliest stages, and in general an atmosphere in most institutions of frantic concern to comply with a multitude of directives – all of this gives a clear message about the priority of tightly measurable achievement over against personal or spiritual or emotional concerns.

"We are in danger of reintroducing by the back door the damaging categorising of children at an early age as successes and failures."

His comments will fuel concerns just days after the biggest review of primary education in 40 years, conducted by Cambridge University, called on the government to scrap league tables and high stakes Sats tests to ease the pressure on children.

The government rejected that report outright but Williams said the report had been a sign that public opinion about the education system was shifting.

There are now 27 church sponsored academies out of the 200 already open.

Eight more are planned for 2010 with a further 30 under discussion marking the beginning of the biggest expansion of faith education in decades.

Williams said that the Anglican academies would offer a strong religious education and to deny children that would be an "injustice".

He said: "If the task of education is to provide the tools for making sense of a human life, then it is crucial that what education offers in practice should include as wide a range as possible of those tools or resources.

"Thus for education to include intelligent and imaginative reference to what religious belief means and has meant in human society is a necessity; ignoring this dimension is another kind of injustice."