

Schools ministers fail to learn lessons

The government's rejection of the Cambridge Primary Review is symptomatic of its high-handed approach to education



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The government's instant dismissal of the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review has become as big a story as the report itself. The review's email inboxes are overflowing with messages not just about the findings that the press focused on – starting age, testing, centralisation – but also with expressions of spluttering outrage shading into quiet despair at last week's statement from schools minister Vernon Coaker.

Thus is the circle of centralisation closed, sadly, to the detriment of a government that has done an enormous amount for young children and primary education, as our report makes clear. If the report finds that primary schools "are in good heart ... highly valued by children and parents and in general doing a good job ... the one point of stability and positive values in a world where everything else is changing and uncertain", this is a tribute to the government as well as teachers. 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.

So Coaker said that by virtue of having started three years ago, the report was out-of-date. What a strange and desperate ploy. One would have thought that this testifies to its depth and thoroughness, especially as when pressed this week by the select committee to explain, Ed Balls wrongly claimed that the report had ignored the Williams maths inquiry (mentioned on pages 38, 46, 49, 433 and 436), the "expert group" on assessment (seven mentions) and the Lamb special educational needs review (the report argues for an SEN review with a broader and different remit).

That was not all the minister got wrong. Like many others, he (and, in this matter, the Conservatives) misrepresented as a bid to raise the school starting age our proposal that the government's early years foundation stage should be extended to age six, thus confusing curriculum (which is what the EYFS is about) with organisational structure. Although we said that, in light of international evidence, the starting age needs to be discussed, that was as far as we went. Get the early years curriculum right, we argued, and school starting age is no longer an issue.

The government claimed we wanted to scrap the English and maths tests (and, by implication, all assessment) and deny accountability. Here, perhaps sharing scriptwriters in hard times, Coaker's "woolly" was matched by Gove's "fuzzy". We said,

emphatically and repeatedly, that children must be assessed at the end of their primary schooling and that schools should be fully accountable. Our evidence pointed to the reform of assessment and external school inspection, not their abolition – who in their right minds would argue for the latter?

The imperative is to have a system of summative assessment that covers all aspects of the curriculum to which children are statutorily entitled, does not treat literacy and numeracy as proxies for the whole, builds on cumulative teacher assessment, does not distort the very thing it is trying to assess and is externally moderated. The minister said the new report cards will provide the necessary breadth. In respect of matters like wellbeing, they may, but the proposed report card measure of a child's entire primary school attainment remains precisely as now – test scores in the 3Rs at age 11.

On standards, the minister had us claiming that "primary standards have not risen across the board". Our report goes into detail on this vital matter and its conclusions are nuanced. If "across the board" means all children, then we know that the attainment gap remains as wide as ever. If it means across the curriculum, then we know about pupils' attainment only in a very narrow spectrum of their learning, and the official definition of "standards" is restricted and misleading.

We looked carefully at what the national tests, international achievement surveys, school inspection and independent research tell us. We separated those claims about standards, positive and negative, that can be sustained from those that cannot, and we identified the methodological problems that get in the way of secure judgments. The true picture on standards is much more complex than the minister's rhetoric allows.

And so it goes on. What was especially rich about the DCSF response was its indignation over what our report "failed to mention" (on which, as I've shown, it was wrong anyway). This from a government that has rejected every one of our 31 carefully researched interim reports and now our 600-page final report, and has "failed to mention" in its own work our evidence from over 4,000 cited publications, 28 specially commissioned research surveys, and the views and experience of the thousands of individuals and organisations who through written submissions, emails and face-to-face meetings gave evidence to the Cambridge Primary Review in the hope that it would make a difference.

Nobody expects ministers to have the time to read every massive report that lands on their desks, not overnight anyway. 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 that refuses to listen, engage and learn.

Children, parents and teachers deserve better than this.