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Start school at six, key schools report recommends

- Education 'narrower than in Victorian era'
- Labour accused of 'Stalinist' approach
- Scrap Sats and league tables says biggest study

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Children playing during school break. Photograph: Shout / Rex Features

Schoolchildren should not start formal lessons until they turn six, and Sats should be scrapped to relieve the damaging pressure England's young pupils face, the biggest inquiry into primary education for 40 years concludes today.

In a damning indictment of Labour's education record since 1997, the Cambridge University-led review accuses the government of introducing an educational diet "even narrower than that of the Victorian elementary schools".

It claims that successive Labour ministers have intervened in England's classrooms on an unprecedented scale, controlling every detail of how teachers teach in a system that has "Stalinist overtones". It says they have exaggerated progress, narrowed the curriculum by squeezing out space for history, music and arts, and left children stressed-out by the testing and league table system.

The review is the biggest independent inquiry into primary education in four decades, based on 28 research surveys, 1,052 written submissions and 250 focus groups. It was undertaken by 14 authors, 66 research consultants and a 20-strong advisory committee at Cambridge University, led by Professor Robin Alexander, one of the most experienced educational academics in the country.

Last night the review's conclusions were backed by every education union in England, but rejected by ministers, who were immediately accused of rejecting independent rigorous research.

The report sets out an analysis of the problems and recommends:

- Delaying formal lessons until after a child turns six, to allow them to focus on play-based learning, so those who struggle at the age of four or five are not put off for

life. The government currently plans to bring forward the school starting age from five to four.

- Scrapping Sats and league tables and replacing them with teacher assessments in a wider range of subjects than just the 3Rs, to encourage primaries to focus on the broader curriculum.
- Reviewing the system of general primary teachers to introduce more specialist teachers in history, music and languages. Funding should be increased to match that spent in secondaries on extra staffing. Teachers should have two years post-graduate training, instead of one.

The researchers are highly critical of politician's decision-making processes, saying: "The report notes the questionable evidence on which some key educational policies have been based; the disenfranchising of local voice; the rise of unelected and unaccountable groups taking key decisions behind closed doors; the 'empty rituals' of consultations; the authoritarian mindset, and the use of myth and derision to underwrite exaggerated accounts of progress and discredit alternative views."

It accuses the Labour government of reaching ever deeper into the "recesses of professional action and thought". The government's standards agenda has not only been unpopular, but "less successful and more problematic than government is willing to admit", it says.

That standards agenda includes Labour's literacy and numeracy hours, which instruct how primaries teach the 3Rs, as well as the use of Sats to judge pupils' progress, rate schools in league tables and provide a verdict on the rate of improvements in the system.

Alexander said: "We do argue for a rolling back of the powers of the state and reversal of the centralisation of how teachers teach ... In respect to day-to-day teaching, government should step back."

The report says there is a growing "pervasive anxiety" about children's lives, with teachers and parents concerned about the pressures children face from Sats and the damaging effect of starting formal lessons at four on children, particularly boys, who are not ready to learn to read and write.

It notes that other countries do not start academic lessons until children are six or seven, and most overtake England in performance at some point as the children grow older.

Gillian Pugh, the chairwoman of the review, warns: "If you introduce a child to too formal a curriculum before they are ready for it, then you are not taking into account where children are in terms of their learning, and their capacity to develop.

"If they are already failing by the age of four and a half or five, it's going to be quite

difficult to get them back into the system again."

But the review also stresses that fears about the decline in the state of childhood have been exaggerated in some cases – children report being happier than their parents think they are.

The biggest problem children face is the link between educational underachievement and poverty, it argues, concluding: "What is worrying is the persistence of a long tail of severely disadvantaged children whose early lives are unhappy, whose potential is unrealised and whose future is bleak."

Vernon Coaker, schools minister, said the government was already reforming the curriculum and testing, and accused Alexander's report of suggesting a "woolly" accountability system.

"It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed on many major changes in primaries. The world has moved on since this review was started. If every child making progress and reaching their potential is what matters, then Professor Alexander's proposals are a backward step," he said.

The Conservative shadow schools minister, Nick Gibb, said: "We agree that the wave of bureaucracy over the past decade has been deeply damaging and we must trust teachers more.

"We agree that we need more specialist training for primary teachers, as we have been saying, and which the government unfortunately has opposed. However, we do not agree with all its proposals for changing the curriculum, or that politicians should end school for four to six year olds."