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ALEXANDER ISSUES POST-ELECTION CHALLENGES - 11 MAY 2010

The political leaders of the UK have been challenged to “respond constructively” to a list of 11 post-election priorities for primary education policy.

After the Election: Policy Priorities for Primary Education has been published by Professor Robin Alexander, director of the Cambridge Primary Review and has been sent to Gordon Brown, Nick Clegg and David Cameron, as well as other political leaders.

Among his hard-hitting calls, Prof Alexander says that the next government has to “abandon” the notion that there is no alternative to SATs and instead undertake “radical reform to ensure that assessment does its job validly and reliably”.

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He explained: "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."

In another of his priorities, Prof Alexander identifies the importance of reducing what he terms as "England's long tail of underachievement".

He continued: "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."

Other priorities tackle curriculum reform, primary school staffing, pedagogy, professional standards for teachers, and partnership working.

The Cambridge Primary Review was a three-year enquiry into the state of Britain's primary education which made 75 recommendations in its final report, published in October 2009. The 11 priorities have all been drawn from these, although Prof Alexander says they are by no means exclusive.

Prof Alexander has told the political leaders that the shelving of the Rose curriculum proposals in the pre-election wash-up should be viewed as "an opportunity, not a setback".

He said: "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 imaginations and kindling their commitment to lifelong learning."

The final of the 11 priorities calls on government to "rebalance" the relationship between schools and national agencies.

Prof Alexander added: "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 advisors, rather than political cheerleaders.

"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."

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Since the Cambridge Review's final recommendations, Prof Alexander said that primary heads have told him they "feared" taking forward his proposals.

He explained: "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. We stress that 'fear' and 'permission' were their words not ours.

"Children will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected merely to do as they are told," he said.

Prof Alexander added: "The Cambridge Review is the most comprehensive enquiry into English primary education for half a century, it is genuinely independent, and its finding and recommendations are widely supported, so we expect political leaders to respond constructively."

For more information, visit www.primaryreview.org.uk

- We will have a full analysis of what the election result means for primary education in the June issue.