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## Primary review: school standards rise 'has been exaggerated'

Labour claims of a rise in school standards were condemned as a “myth” today as a major six-year study called for a complete overhaul of primary education.

By [Graeme Paton](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/graeme-paton/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/graeme-paton/>), Education Editor

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In the biggest review of its kind for 40 years, academics said the existing curriculum, teaching workforce, testing system and timetable were hugely outdated.

The Cambridge Primary Review said the current focus on passing exams and hitting targets at a young age was “even narrower than that of the Victorian elementary schools”.

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It called for formal schooling to be delayed until the age of six – instead of five – to give children more time to develop.

The study also suggested more local control of schools in face of “Stalinist” central Government demands, possibly cutting the six-week summer holiday, the introduction of specialist subject teachers in primary schools and a greater emphasis on humanities, science and the arts instead of a relentless focus on the three-Rs.

In a damning conclusion, the report called for the existing system of Sats tests in English and maths for 11-year-olds to be scrapped.

It said the narrow focus of the exams coupled with a culture of “teaching to the test” meant Government claims of rising school standards in England could not be substantiated.

“The report notes the questionable evidence on which some key educational policies have been based... and the use of myth and derision to underwrite exaggerated accounts of progress and discredit alternative views,” it said.

The review, which took six years to plan and write, was based on 4,000 published reports and 1,000 submissions from

around the world.

The 608-page report – funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and edited by Professor Robin Alexander, based at Cambridge University – makes 78 recommendations for reforming the English system of primary education.

It is highly critical of Labour's own review of primary schools by Sir Jim Rose, former head of inspections at Ofsted, which was published earlier this year.

The report said it supported a curriculum, testing regime and workforce "which have survived since the 19th century" and skewed the way children were taught.

It called for a complete "decentralisation" of education to give more power to individual schools. Almost a third of lesson time should be turned over to a locally-determined "community curriculum", it said.

"Central prescription of teaching methods and lesson content should now cease," the study said. "Teaching should be taken out of the political arena and given back to teachers."

The study insisted the "crisis" of modern childhood was overstated, but acknowledged that family breakdown and poverty created huge inequality.

"Social disadvantage blights the early lives of a larger proportion of children in Britain than in many other countries, and this social and material divide maps with depressing exactness on to the gap in educational attainment," it said.

Vernon Coaker, the Schools Minister, rejected the conclusions.

"We completely refute the claim that primary standards have not risen across the board," he said. "Independent Ofsted inspections shows there have never been so many outstanding and good primary schools and results show huge improvements over the last decade - a tribute to the high quality of teaching, training and heads."

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