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Fresh look at primary schooling

An independent inquiry into England's primary schools - claimed to be the biggest since the 1960s - has started.

The two-year review, led by Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, will look at how to improve teaching.



Primary education is too target-focused, critics say

A team of 60 researchers and a 20-member advisory committee is also to study the impact of government policies over the last 20 years.

The Department for Education said primary schools had never been better but ministers were "never complacent".

The review is said to be the most comprehensive of its kind since the Plowden Report of 1967, which advocated more focus on the individual pupil, rather than just teaching by age group.

'Taking stock'

It called for an emphasis on "children's intrinsic interest in learning", instead of using "fear of disapproval or desire for praise" to motivate them.

The current primary school system in England, under which pupils take national tests at ages 11 and 14 - and until recently age seven - has been criticised for being too target-focused.

But ministers say the system, including school league tables based on results, is needed to raise standards.

Professor Alexander, a fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, said: "Forty years on from the last major inquiry into primary education and with two decades of government initiatives behind us, it's time to take stock.

"How well are we doing? Where are we heading? What kind of education should young children receive?"

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"This is an independent review and it will ask the questions that need to be asked, without fear or favour.

"We urge all who are concerned about the education which young children receive and the world in which they are growing up to take advantage of the opportunity which the review provides."

'Long overdue'

The review is supported by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, an independent grant-making body.

National Union of Teachers general secretary Steve Sinnott said: "Such a review is long overdue.

"The primary curriculum is overloaded and over-prescriptive and wastes teaching and learning time. It is a regime that has needed major re-examination for a long time."

A Department for Education and Skills spokesman said primary school standards were higher than ever.

He added: "Our Primary National Strategy has delivered a substantial and sustained improvement in primary results since 1997."

However, the department was "never complacent" and had recently implemented the results of a review into reading skills, he added.

The general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Dr Mary Bousted, strongly supported the review.

"Currently primary schooling is far too rigid and is focused too much on force-feeding children information," she said.

"Children are struggling with over-testing and an inappropriate curriculum, which concentrates too narrowly on teaching them to pass tests rather than on learning skills in the right environment and at the right pace for the children involved."

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