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## Starting school at 4 'no help to children'

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor

Last Updated: 2:30am GMT 08/02/2008

Children in England start school lessons earlier and sit more tests but still perform no better than in other countries, researchers say today.

- [Telegraph.co.uk Education Homepage](#)

They find school "stressful" as they are subjected to academic lessons in English and maths at the age of four.

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In countries such as Sweden and Finland, where children do not start school until seven, pupils often outperform English children by the age of 11.

English primaries are also bigger than in most other countries - with an average of 224 pupils against 128 in Scotland - and make pupils sit exams more often, at a younger age and in more subjects.

In a damaging conclusion, it is claimed more parents educate their children at home or in alternative Steiner schools because they believe schools are "too constrained by the imperatives of performativity".

The findings - made as part of a two-year review of primary education by Cambridge University - will fuel fears that the target-driven nature of modern schooling is

damaging childhood.

Steve Sinnott, the general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, described the findings as "devastating". He said: "When it comes to testing in England, the tail wags the dog," he said. "It is patently absurd that even the structure and content of education is shaped by the demands of the tests."

The Department for Children, Schools and Families said it had commissioned a "root and branch review of the primary-level curriculum".

This will attempt to ease the transition from early years into school and will also "consider whether it would be appropriate to allow greater flexibility in school start dates", said a spokesman.

She added: "The idea that children are over tested is not a view that the Government accepts. The reality is that children spend a very small percentage of their time in school being tested."

"Seeing that children leave school up to the right standard in the basics is the highest priority of government."

In a further conclusion, today's report shows that English schools focus more lessons on politically correct themes such as "diversity, tolerance and multi-culturalism" than in other nations.

A study by Glasgow University said this was "especially evident" in RE, history, geography and citizenship. France and Japan were more prepared to celebrate home-grown values in the curriculum.

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