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Primary schools 'have got worse'

A narrowing of the curriculum has led to a decrease in the quality of English primary schooling, says a report.



The reports say there is too much emphasis on maths and English

"High stakes" testing of pupils has led to a system "focused on literacy and numeracy at the expense of the broader curriculum", it suggests.

The Cambridge-based Primary Review's report claims this has contributed to a "state theory of learning".

The government has defended its policies and denies that children are over-tested at school.

Teachers' representatives say the government must address these issues and the way it evaluates schools.

The findings, from four primary review research reports, form part of an in-depth assessment of the current state of primary school education in England.

One, compiled by Dominic Wyse from the University of Cambridge and Elaine McCreery and Harry Torrance at Manchester Metropolitan University, looks at the effects of an increasing government control of the curriculum between 1988 and 2007.

It said: "The evidence on the impact of the various initiatives on standards of pupil attainment is at best equivocal and at worst negative.

“ While test scores have risen since the mid 1990s, this has been achieved at the expense of children's entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum ”

Dominic Wyse, Elaine McCreery and Harry Torrance, report authors

"While test scores have risen since the mid 1990s, this has been achieved at the expense of children's entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum and by the diversion of considerable teaching time to test preparation."

Their report found "some" improvements in standards achieved by many pupils in primary schools.

However, it found "a decrease in the overall quality of primary education experienced by pupils because of the narrowing of the curriculum and the intensity of test preparation".

This amounted to a curriculum dominated by literacy and numeracy.

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Funding issues

It also suggests the range of teaching methods employed is "probably even narrower now than hitherto".

Another report, by Maria Balarin and Hugh Lauder from the University of Bath, identifies the existence of a "state theory of learning" where government control has been strengthened by "high stakes testing of pupils, a national curriculum, and in primary schools' mandated pedagogy in numeracy and literacy".

On the issue of testing and the quality of primary education, a Department for Children, Schools and Families spokeswoman said: "Once again we see a collection of recycled, partial or out of date research.

"We do not accept these claims. We are currently engaged in a review of the primary curriculum, as set out in the Children's Plan, which will build on a decade of success in raising standards – success which has been validated on numerous occasions by independent experts.

"The government does not accept that our children are over-tested."

Disparities in funding - that see secondary schools attracting more money than primaries - also feature in the reports.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) takes issue with the government's interference in the education system and its "ferocious accountability systems" of pupil testing and school inspections.

“ The latest primary review reports demonstrate the damaging effects of high stakes testing, inspection and historic underfunding on primary schools ”

Steve Sinnott, general secretary, NUT

NUT general secretary Steve Sinnott said: "The latest primary review reports demonstrate the damaging effects of high stakes testing, inspection and historic underfunding on primary schools.

"I urge the government now to review its whole method of evaluating schools.

"The government has a chance to tackle historic underfunding of primary schools. Falling rolls should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat. The funding gains created by smaller pupil numbers should be fed back into primary schools and not be seen as an opportunity to cut school budgets".

The DCSF denies that primary schools are under-funded.

A spokeswoman said: "The government has hugely increased funding for pupils of all ages – from early years into sixth form – and expanded the school workforce at all levels. This means that primary standards are now at their highest ever levels.

"We don't specify centrally a ratio of primary to secondary pupil funding in each local area. This is decided locally by local authorities in consultation with local schools and heads. Seeing that all children leave primary school able to read, write and calculate confidently is our highest

priority."

'Meddling'

The Liberal Democrats have accused the government of too much interference.

Education spokesman David Laws said: "The government's attempts to micromanage schools are clearly deeply damaging.

"Ministers must stop their constant meddling in the curriculum and cease dictating to schools how they should educate our children.

"Young children should follow a broad and balanced curriculum. Too much time in primary schools is now spent on test preparation. Creativity is at risk of being squeezed out of our classrooms.

"Ministers should review the current imbalance of funding between primary and secondary schools. We need a transparent funding system which ensures that the most disadvantaged pupils come with extra funding so that they get the additional support they need."

The Primary Review is an independent inquiry which is looking at 10 major themes before publishing final recommendations in October 2008.

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