



## Underfunded primary schools fail to teach basic literacy, says key review

- Spending on early years 20% behind secondaries
- Teacher-pupil relationship eroded by national tests

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Polly Curtis, education editor  
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[The Guardian](#)

The government should increase primary school budgets to match those in secondary schools to pay for specialist teachers to tackle illiteracy, experts say. The multibillion pound investment in education since 1997 has been undermined by a failure to teach pupils the basics by the time they are 11, according to the biggest review of primary education in 40 years.

The Cambridge University-led Primary Review today publishes a series of papers which report that higher test results have been at the expense of the quality of primary education, with a 20% funding gap between primary and secondary schools. Teacher-pupil relationships have been eroded by a focus on whole-class teaching and preparation for "high stakes" national tests, it claims.

The funding gap between secondary and primary schools has grown since 2002, the researchers found. Anne West of the London School of Economics, co-author of the funding report, said: "There is no sound justification for children aged 11 to be getting more than children aged 10 when it's crucially important that children at the end of primary school are functionally literate and numerate. Later attainment is clearly reliant on early attainment. If you get children literate at an early age it allows them to access the rest of the curriculum at secondary school."

The findings come after the government this week published data on test results for 14-year-olds which suggested a quarter are not reaching expected levels in English, maths and science, falling substantially short of government targets.

Although more money has been spent on education since 1997 than at any other period in history, primary schools receive only 80% of the funding given to secondaries. In comparison, some Scandinavian countries, which have far better literacy rates, allocate more than 100%. Spending varies wildly across the country: in Northumberland primary school budgets are 94% of the secondary school budget a pupil, while in Middlesbrough it is 66%.

Prof West said: "There does seem to be less public concern about primary schools than secondary schools.

There haven't been as many initiatives for primary schools since 1997 compared with secondaries." She cited the government's flagship academy programme and plans to rebuild every secondary in the country.

A second report, by academics at Cambridge and Manchester Metropolitan Universities, 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 and by the diversion of considerable teaching time to test preparation."

It surveyed data on national testing and concluded that the "high stakes" testing has led to a "narrowing of the curriculum". It added: "There is also evidence that the quality of the teacher-pupil interaction has been negatively influenced."

Mick Brookes, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: "The funding gap is not acceptable, but it has to be plugged with new money, not taking money from secondary schools ... We are in danger of sending children into secondary schools already switched off. Some have already lost the joy of learning."

A spokeswoman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families, said: "The government has hugely increased funding for pupils of all ages - from early years into sixth form ... 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. That is why we are prioritising funding over the next three years for primary school children who need extra help on the basics, through the national rollout of Every Child a Reader and Every Child Counts."

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