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Failed! Political interference is damaging children's education, report claims

By Sarah Cassidy, Education Correspondent
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This was the Government that promised its priority would be education, education, education. Instead, as a slew of extraordinary reports are making clear, it will be remembered by schools as the Government that could not leave well alone.

The biggest inquiry into primary education for 40 years concluded yesterday that Labour's tight, centralised control of England's primary schools has had a devastating impact on children's education. Micromanagement, meddling and a succession of ministerial edicts have killed the spontaneity in the nation's classrooms. Teachers have been stripped of their powers of discretion. And the net result of a decade of new Labour "reform" has almost certainly been a decline in the quality of education that the young receive.

It would have been better, concludes the Cambridge University-based Primary Review – an ongoing inquiry into primary education in England – if the Government had done nothing at all.

The four reports published today follow 18 earlier reports that have painted a devastating picture of government interference in primary schools and laid bare ministers' obsession with testing and desire to dictate the minutiae of classroom practice.

They say government influence in the classroom has increased since 1997 to such an extent that English primary schools are now subject to a "state theory of learning" in which teachers are not only told what to teach but how they should teach it.

The quality of primary education has declined in the past 20 years because of the "narrowing of the curriculum and the intensity of test preparation", the research warned. The result is that educational standards may actually have fallen in recent years as teachers become experts in coaching children for tests.

The latest report follows yet more government announcements that have called on schools to squeeze even more into their curriculum. Schools will now be expected to provide five hours of cultural activities a week as well as five hours of sport, including after-school clubs. Yet the lesson emerging from the Primary Review is that schools need less, not more, interference.

The reports conclude that government control of primary classrooms began in 1988 under the Conservatives with the introduction of the national curriculum but has strongly increased since Labour came into power in 1997.

One study, by Dominic Wyse, from Cambridge University, and Elaine McCreery and Harry Torrance at Manchester Metropolitan University, concluded: "Government control of the curriculum and its assessment strongly increased during the period from 1988 to 2007, especially after 1997.

"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, that 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."

The quality of interaction between pupils and teachers has been particularly "negatively influenced" by Labour's national strategies, introduced from 1998 onwards, which tell teachers exactly how to teach literacy and numeracy in primary schools, the study found. Teachers are no longer thinking on their feet, adapting lessons to particular needs. Instead, the school day is choreographed from Whitehall.

The introduction of high-stakes testing – which sees primary schools ranked in national league tables according to the performance of their 11-year-old pupils in English, maths and science tests – has also led to a narrowing of the curriculum as schools focus on literacy and numeracy at the expense of other subjects.

Even primary science – which had been one of the success stories of the post-1988 national curriculum – has been in "marginal decline" since 1997 because of the excessive focus on literacy and numeracy.

The focus on the tests in English, maths and science taken by pupils aged 7 and 11 is "driving teaching in exactly the opposite direction to that which research indicates will improve learning".

Instead of using a variety of teaching methods such as working with small groups of pupils, primary school lessons now constitute little more than whole class sessions where children are drilled for the tests.

Results for the national SATs (standard assessment tests), taken by 1.2 million primary pupils every summer, improved rapidly between 1995 and 2000 but then "largely levelled off".

That was probably because "teachers were initially unprepared for national testing, learnt very quickly how to coach for the tests, hence results improved, but any benefit to be squeezed from the system by such coaching has long since been exhausted", the study found.

A second study for the Primary Review by Maria Balarin and Hugh Lauder, from Bath University, reinforced the depressing findings. "Since the arrival of New Labour, central control in key areas of educational action has been strengthened," it concluded. "The Government has strengthened its hand through what may be called the "state theory of learning"."

This reflected a belief by the Government that a combination of "the repeated high stakes testing of pupils", a national curriculum and "mandated" teaching methods in English and maths would raise standards.

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