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School literacy scheme attacked

Costly literacy schemes in England have not paid off, with children's reading skills barely improved since the 1950s, an independent inquiry suggests.

The £500m spent has had a "relatively small impact", according to the Cambridge-based Primary Review.

Interim reports for the two-year inquiry also criticise national tests, saying teachers' views should be used.

Schools Minister Andrew Adonis rejected the claims, saying primary standards had never been higher.

These latest Primary Review reports were made by assessing existing research on England's primary schools.

Authors Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell said: "Five



The authors question the validity of rising national test scores

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Education minister defends literacy spending

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hundred million pounds was spent on the National Literacy Strategy with almost no impact on reading levels.

"Standards of reading have remained more or less the same over a very long time - since the 1950s.

"There was a rise following the immediate post-war period and there was a slight drop followed by a recovery after the introduction of the National Curriculum, but in essence standards have remained constant."

Maths had shown moderately rising standards, compared to a very slight improvement in reading.

However, the report goes on: "Massive efforts to bring about change have had a relatively small impact.

"These policies have cost many hundreds of millions of pounds but they have generally not had a sound research base and have not been systematically evaluated."

'Good deal'

The report, drawing on previous research, questions the reliability of national test scores for 11-year-olds from 1995 to 2000, which showed a big rise.

It says as many as a third of pupils may be assigned the

time

- Pupils positive about learning
- Modest improvement in maths, especially since 1995
- High reading standards when compared to other countries
- Limited impact of the national strategies on reading standards
- Gains in reading skills at the expense of enjoyment
- Increase in test stress
- Curriculum narrowing due to test regime

Reading standards: the evidence

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wrong attainment level.

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Despite their criticisms, the authors of the reports conclude that primary pupils in England "get a good deal" overall.

"A typical pupil has a good quality of life in school, and learns to read well and to get on with fellow pupils," they say.

The Primary Review reports also point to children having a "positive attitude" to learning, high standards in reading compared to those in other countries and to "considerable improvements" in primary science and maths compared to other countries.

“ Standards of reading have remained more or less the same over a very long time - since the 1950s ”

Primary Review interim report

But the gap between high and low attaining pupils in England in reading, maths and science was "much bigger" than in many other nations.

The review criticises national tests, saying they cause stress to pupils, pressure on teachers and a narrowing of the curriculum.

Instead, pupils' progress should be monitored through sampling of work and greater use of teacher assessment.

Schools Minister Andrew Adonis accepted that nearly one in five children was not reading as well as expected for their age, but said standards were higher than ever.

"This is not an opinion: it is fact. 2007 results in reading show that 84% of 11-year-

“ In recent years there have been unambiguous rises in results using

olds achieved the expected level - up 17 percentage points since 1997.

standardised tests



Andrew Adonis, Schools Minister

"We know that in the post-war period improvements in reading were static.

"It was precisely this analysis that led us in 1997 to seek a step-change in literacy through the introduction of the national strategies and daily literacy hour, an emphasis on phonics, and training for every teacher in literacy."

This had worked, he said.

"In recent years there have been unambiguous rises in results using standardised tests."

Steve Sinnott of the National Union of Teachers said there was now every reason to dismantle the testing system.

HAVE YOUR SAY

“ **Ditch all the pointless initiatives, targets and publicity campaigns** ”

S Smith, Bucks

Mick Brookes of the National Association of Head Teachers said the report raised serious questions about current strategies imposed on schools.

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Testing was "crushing the life out of children's love of learning", while "lazy entertainment" had put the joy of a good book into third place behind TV and video games.

"A good start would be the re-introduction of quiet reading time into the school day, along with diversion of funds so that the millions of pounds spent on preparing and policing national testing can be diverted into books."

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