

**Bristol24-7**  
City life... 24 hours a day

## Set young children free from testing says top school head



Posted by [The Editor](#) on Oct 16th, 2009 and filed under [Education](#), [Local News](#), [NEWS](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#). You can leave a response or trackback to this entry

The headteacher of one of Bristol's top schools has welcomed a significant report which says children should not start formal education until six years old.

The Cambridge Primary Review said that play-based learning featured in nurseries and reception classes should go on for another year.



Roderick MacKinnon:  
Britain has gone overboard  
on testing

It added that there is no evidence that an early introduction to formal learning has any benefit, but there are suggestions it can do some harm.

Ministers moved quickly to dismiss the findings of the report, with the schools minister [Vernon Coaker telling the BBC](#) the move would be “completely counter-productive”.

But speaking to Bristol24-7, Roderick MacKinnon, from Bristol Grammar School, said that the British education system had gone “overboard” on testing, which constrained the chances for children to be inspired by learning and led them to feel that education was a process which showed them what they couldn't do, rather than what they could achieve.

“We need to reduce the load on children of assessment and testing,” he said, “and promote more creative and inspirational education.

“This is not to say we shouldn't have any sort of testing. It's a valuable part of learning, but we have gone overboard on testing. The pendulum has gone too far, and that is constraining the opportunities for for creative and inspirational learning and teaching.”

While the report does not go as far as saying the compulsory school age should be raised to the age of six, it does recommend more informal, but still structured, learning to that age – bringing the UK into line with many other European countries.

A similar scheme is already in operation in Wales and Northern Ireland, which advocates say allows children to develop more social skills and build self-confidence before being plunged into structured education.

Mr MacKinnon said that formal testing at a young age was counter-productive – and went as far to say that GCSEs as well should be replaced with moderated teacher assessments instead.

“Children’s experience of learning is dominated by tests and exams. It’s not just the time involved, it’s the emotional energy that goes into formal testing which is detrimental to them.

“GCSEs as well can be replaced, but I am not saying that you shouldn’t assess. Tests are supposed to see what children can do and build confidence, not just to rank them and show them what they can’t do. That’s not the purpose of testing. It’s a bureaucratic nightmare and, unfortunately, the driving force of education.

“Children should be inspired by what they can learn, not how they do in tests.”

During the summer, 98% of Bristol Grammar School students passed GCSEs at A\* to C grades, but Mr MacKinnon is convinced parents would prefer children to undergo less testing.

“The parents I speak to, they want their kids to be confident young people who can interact in a variety of social situations. My feeling is that there would be a lot of support from parents to reduce the amount of testing.

“I am disappointed by the reaction when you have this weighty and considered report which suggests there are concerns. We know our education can get better and this report can show us ways to improve.”

## **Further reading**

- Cambridge Primary Review: <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/>
- Bristol Grammar School: <http://www.bristolgrammarschool.co.uk/>