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Test results for third of primary students wrong, says study

- Research fuels opposition to Sats-based strategy
- Report rejects claims that literacy rate has improved
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Polly Curtis, education editor
The Guardian, Thursday 1 November 2007

As many as one in three primary school children is given the wrong marks in national tests, according to a report on standards in primary schools.

Sats for seven- and 11-year-olds, which are used to assess their progress and feed into national school league tables, are unreliable, put pupils under psychological pressure and have had little impact, the report says.



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The researchers accuse the government of ignoring academic evidence, backed by the then Statistics Commission, that the dramatic rises in results in the run-up to 2000 were "exaggerated".

The report commissioned for Cambridge University's review of primary education comes after the prime minister pledged to put testing at the heart of the next phase of the government's plan to eradicate failure. Ministers believe that without nationally comparable tests teachers are not able to target pupils who are falling behind.

The reports document research showing that up to one in three pupils is given the wrong mark at the end of the tests. Short papers with questions that have a narrow range of possible answers mean that pupils' skills are not rigorously tested, leaving a wide margin of error.

"It is estimated that for the end of key stage tests in England this means that as many as one third of pupils may be given the wrong 'level'," the report says. "Only an increase in length of test beyond anything that is practicable would materially change this situation. Thus there are limits to how accurate the results of tests can be."

The report concludes that levels of literacy have remained almost static since the 1950s, while there has been a steady improvement in maths. Over the same period, enjoyment of reading has declined among pupils preparing to move to secondary school.

"Massive efforts to bring about change have had a relatively small impact," the report says. "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."

It claims that the use of Sats to measure progress year to year is fundamentally flawed. The rapid rise from 1995 to 2000, often cited as evidence that the tests work, was a reflection of schools getting better at teaching pupils to take tests.

In 2005, the Statistics Commission backed academics' claims that the rise had "overstated" the improvements in education.

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Robin Alexander, who is leading the Primary Review, the first comprehensive study of the schools in 40 years, said: "There are serious concerns here - we request that the analysis is carefully studied and acted upon, particularly because it resonates so strongly with other research we've seen."

The introduction of a national curriculum in 1988 led to more whole-class directive teaching, and failed to promote better interaction in the classroom, the research says. By 2002, evidence showed the curriculum had significantly narrowed.

"A consistent and disturbing factor in England's results across all ... subjects is a wide spread of scores, signifying a bigger gap between high and low attaining pupils than in many other countries."

The findings add to teacher unions' vehement opposition to the tests, backed by the General Teaching Council for England.

Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said: "The finding that tests narrow the curriculum just when pupils are getting ready for secondary schools is another nail in the coffin of an unsupportable assessment system."

Martin Ward, deputy general secretary of the Association of Schools and College Leaders, said: "We know that the current exam system demotivates teachers, places unwarranted stress on pupils and does not help to raise standards. Everyone except the government seems to have acknowledged that the assessment system is no longer fit for purpose. I hope that the clear evidence in the review will persuade ministers that urgent change is needed."

Nick Gibb, the shadow schools minister, said: "Millions of pounds have been spent on education but we haven't seen the improvements to match. As a result, many children, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, are not getting the opportunities they deserve, and the British economy is less prepared than it needs to be for an increasingly competitive future global economy."

David Laws, the Liberal Democrat schools spokesman, said: "There

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should be a real concern that the report shows that enjoyment is being squeezed out of learning. We must not turn our schools into factories producing test results, they must be places where creativity and ambition are allowed to flourish."

But the schools minister, Andrew Adonis, said: "Primary standards are at their highest ever levels. This is not an opinion: it is fact. 2007 results in reading show that 84% of 11-year-olds achieved the expected level - up 17 percentage points since 1997.

"We know that in the postwar 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 has worked. In recent years there have been unambiguous rises in results using standardised tests. It is only since national curriculum tests were introduced that there is a solid basis of evidence showing improvement on a consistent basis."

A spokesperson for Lord Adonis's department added: "The testing process is rigorously monitored by external authorities. If there was a problem, this close scrutiny and monitoring would pick that up."



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