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Cambridge Study Says 5-year-olds Too Young To Start School

By Thaddeus M. Bakllinski

LONDON, October 21, 2009 (LifeSiteNews.com) - A study of primary education by Cambridge University recommends that formal schooling of children should begin at the age of six, a year later than the present norm in the UK.

The 608-page Cambridge Primary Review, which was based on 28 surveys and 1,052 written submissions by 14 authors, 66 research consultants and an advisory committee, said there was no evidence suggesting formal teaching environments benefited young children, and that introducing children at the age of five into the structure and discipline of a classroom could even be harmful.

Dame Gillian Pugh, chairwoman of the review, said: "Four and five-year-olds tended to be at a stage where they were just 'tuning in' to learning and that they could be 'turned off' if they were made to follow too formal a curriculum, too early on."

"If you introduce a child to too formal a curriculum before they are ready for it," she continued, "then you are not taking into account where children are in terms of their learning and their capacity to develop.

"If they are already failing by the age of four-and-a-half or five it's going to be quite difficult to get them back into the system again. They are not going to learn to read, write and add up if you have alienated them," Pugh said.

The report recommends that children up to the age of six should instead continue the more informal, play-based education typically found in nurseries.

In Finland, as in Germany and Sweden, children begin school in the year they turn seven. In France, children begin formal education at six. Finland is regarded as having Europe's best education system, with the country's students regularly achieving top marks for reading literacy and science in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

England's custom of starting school at five, shared in Europe only by Wales, Scotland and the Netherlands, dates from the requirements of Victorian factory owners, the report states, and warns of the "Stalinist overtones of a 'state theory of learning'" enforced by the "machinery of surveillance and accountability."

The government dismissed the review as "disappointing" and out of date.

Schools Minister Vernon Coaker said the recommendations would actually disadvantage British school children.

"It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed on many major changes in primaries," he said.

"The world has moved on since this review was started. We want to make sure children are playing and learning from an early age and to give parents the choice for their child to start in the September following their fourth birthday."

Teachers' unions, however, endorsed the review and criticized the government's response.

"It is absolutely extraordinary that the government has decided to ignore the Cambridge Review recommendations," said Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers.

"Any government worth its salt, particularly in front of an impending general election, would have embraced this immensely rich report as a source of policy ideas."

A previous study, released in 2007 by Durham University's Curriculum, Evaluation and Management (CEM) Centre and presented at the European Association for Learning and Instruction (EARLI) conference, is substantiated by the Cambridge University report.

The Durham study found that, although there have been massive changes in early years education in the last decade in the UK, children's development and skills at the start of school are no different now than they were before the introduction of the early childhood curriculum.

"Our aim with this study is to provide a single perspective on the changing profiles of children starting school in England during a time of rapid change," said Dr. Christine Merrell of Durham University.

"One would have expected that the major government programmes would have resulted in some measurable changes in our sample of almost 35,000 children," though no benefit was evident.

Other studies have found marked negative effects from the introduction of 3 to 5 year olds to formal schooling, including brain chemistry damage, aggression, negative social and emotional development, and illness.

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