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Cash boost fails to lift standards in reading

By Tony Kearney 7:00am Friday 2nd November 2007 in News

THE Government has spent half a billion pounds to improve literacy in the country's primary schools with virtually no impact on children's reading ability, according to a major study published today.

Instead, an influential North-East academic warned, the drive to raise standards has left children feeling increasingly stressed about school tests while they are losing their love of books.

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Professor Peter Tymms, of Durham University said that despite massive Government investment which had seen 500m spent on the National Literacy Strategy between 1998 and 2005, reading standards were largely unchanged since the 1950s.

His report was one of three which make up the Primary Review study, the biggest inquiry into primary education in decades.

But last night the Government strenuously defended its record on primary education. Schools Minister Andrew Adonis said: "Primary standards are at their highest ever levels. This is not an opinion: it is fact."

The report by Professor Tymms, one of the country's leading experts on school testing, concluded that The National Literacy Strategy, which includes daily literacy hour English lessons in schools, had made a barely noticeable impression on reading standards.

Results from this year show that 84 per cent of 11-year-olds achieved the expected reading levels, up by 17 per cent since 1997.

However, Prof Tymms' study said the apparently dramatic rise vastly overstated the true scale of improvements, exaggerates the changes in pupils attainment levels and were seriously misleading.

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Speaking to The Northern Echo last night, Prof Tymms, head of Durham University's Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre, said: "There has been an enormous amount of money spent on reading, but it has had very little effect on children. It's surprising and very worrying.

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"It's a hard nut to crack. I think the Government should be moving towards projects focused on the small number of children who find reading difficult."

He added: "The Government has been trying very hard and putting a lot of money and a lot of people on reading, but it hasn't been working and we need to learn the lessons from that.

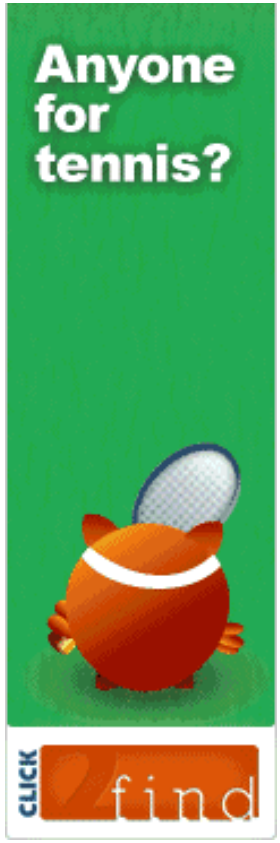
"We must be more efficient and careful in the way we spend our money. Throwing money at things doesn't work."

The overall Primary Review highlighted a number of concerns including: * Increasing test-induced stress among pupils and growing pressure on their teachers * A narrowing of the curriculum as teachers concentrate on preparing children for tests * Improvements of reading standards being pursued at the expense of pupils' enjoyment of books.

The review calls for changes including judging schools on children's development rather than test results and allowing teachers' judgement to play a bigger role in assessing pupils' skills.

But Lord Adonis said: ""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 has worked. In recent years there have been unambiguous



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rises in results using standardised tests."

The minister said that improvements had been validated many times by independent experts and added: ""e are going further with a more personal approach - providing extra one-to-one tuition and 'reading recovery' programmes, free books for young children and 11 year olds, special boys' bookshelves in school libraries, and next year's National Year of Reading."

Steve Sinnott, general Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said the current testing system must be changed.

He said: "With the publication of this report, there is now every reason to act to dismantle a testing system whose only effect seems to be to create stress for pupils and teachers."

Shadow Schools Minister Nick Gibb 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."

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