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Millions "wasted" on teaching reading

BY TIM CASTLE

LONDON Fri Nov 2, 2007 7:41pm GMT

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Welding Machine. No gas.





A child reads in a file photo. The government has spent half a billion pounds in a failed attempt to boost reading standards in primary schools in England, an academic report said on Friday.

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(Reuters) - The government has spent half a billion pounds in a failed attempt to boost reading standards in primary schools in England, an academic report said on Friday.

The independent study said the government's National Literacy Strategy had cost 553 million pounds in the seven years to 2005 but had had "almost no impact" on reading levels.

"In essence, standards have remained constant," said Durham University Professor of Education Peter Tymms in the report, part of the largest review of primary education for 40 years.

"Standards of reading have remained more or less the same over a very long time -- since the 1950s," he said in a study of existing research for the Cambridge University-based Primary Review.

The newly-elected Labour government launched the National Literacy Strategy in 1998 as one of the pillars of Prime Minister Tony Blair's mantra of "education, education, education".

The programme introduced the daily "Literacy hour" to primary schools and has been

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credited by the government with increasing the number of 11-year-olds reaching the expected Level 4 reading standard.

National test results rose strongly up to 2000 before flattening out in recent years but Tymms said there had been little actual improvement overall when measured against objective standards.

He said studies, including his own, had shown the rise in results was misleading and exaggerated the changes in pupils' actual attainment.

The literacy strategy had also been distorted by the pressure on schools to hit government performance goals, with less able pupils falling behind.

"Resources and effort were targeted at those pupils who were within range of achieving a Level 4 because that is the standard by which the success of schools was judged," he said.

"A clearer focus on those who have serious difficulty with reading would have made sense."

The Conservatives said the government should have concentrated on tried and tested teaching methods.

"Millions of pounds have been spent on education but we haven't seen the improvements to match," said Conservative Schools Spokesman Nick Gibb.

Schools Minister Andrew Adonis rejected the criticism, saying that primary reading standards were at their highest ever levels.

"This is not an opinion -- it is fact," he said. "2007 results in reading show that 84 percent of 11-year-olds achieved the expected level -- up 17 percentage points since 1997."

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

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only since National Curriculum tests were introduced that there is a solid basis of evidence showing improvement on a consistent basis."

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