

Children at 5 “too young” to start school

reuters, 2009/10/16 09:48



By Tim Castle

LONDON (Reuters) – Children should delay the start formal schooling to the age of six, a year later than at present, the largest review of primary education in England for 40 years recommended on Friday.

The 608-page Cambridge University study said introducing children at the age of five into the constraint and discipline of a classroom — a throwback to Victorian days — provided

little benefit and could even be harmful.

“They are not going to learn to read, write and add up if you have alienated children by the age of four and five,” said Gillian Pugh, chairwoman of the Cambridge Primary Review’s advisory committee.

“That’s the stage at which we are tuning children into learning ... If they are already failing by the time they are 4-1/2 or five, then it’s going to be quite difficult to get them back into the system again,” she added.

The government called the review “disappointing” and out of date.

Although the authors of the report stopped short of recommending a rise in the starting age of compulsory schooling from five, they called for an “open debate” on the issue.

They said children up to the age of six should instead be given the more informal, play-based education typically found in nurseries.

It said England’s tradition of starting school at five, shared in Europe only by Wales, Scotland and the Netherlands, dated from the requirements of Victorian factory owners.

Schooling starts at the age of six in 20 out of 34 European countries, with eight nations, including Sweden, waiting until children are seven.

The Cambridge review, based on three years' research and 31 interim reports, found that primary schools in England were "in good heart and in general doing a good job."

But it found that more than a decade of central policy initiatives under three successive Labour governments had created a "state theory of learning."

The study called for ministers to step back from trying to control classrooms from Whitehall.

"The principle that it is not for government or government agencies to tell teachers how to teach, abandoned in 1997, should be reinstated," it said.

National SATS exams taken by primary pupils should be replaced by teacher assessment and that the school league tables based on them should be abandoned, it added.

School performance and pupils' national attainment should instead be monitored by sample testing.

Schools Minister Vernon Coaker said abolishing SATS would be a backward step and that a school starting age of six would be counter-productive.

"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."

Teaching unions welcomed the review and criticised 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."

(Additional reporting by Michael Holden; Editing by Steve Addison)

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