

After the election:  
**POLICY PRIORITIES  
FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION**

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Last October the Cambridge Primary Review published its final report. Drawing on a considerable body of evidence, this three-year independent enquiry investigated the condition of England's system of primary education and set out a vision for the future encompassing policy, practice and the aims and priorities these should pursue.

The report acknowledged the government's considerable contributions to the cause of primary education since 1997: massive increases in funding, staffing and support for primary schools; a visionary childhood agenda centring on increased pre-school provision, *Every Child Matters* and the Children's Plan; initiatives aimed at narrowing the gap in outcomes between vulnerable children and the rest; and much else besides. At the same time, the report questioned the way governments have chosen to tackle the essential task of raising primary school standards, using high stakes tests, league tables, prescriptive national teaching strategies and procedures for inspection, initial teacher training, CPD and school improvement which require strict compliance with official accounts of what primary education is about and how it should be undertaken.

Since October, the Review has contributed to numerous regional, national and international events convened to consider the report's findings. Simultaneously, the media, politicians and public figures have joined the debate on matters within the Review's orbit: childhood, the social and cultural conditions in which today's children are growing up, the curriculum, classroom practice, standards, testing, teacher training, leadership, school organisation, educational ages and stages ... and much more.

Public reaction to the report has been overwhelmingly positive, political reaction rather less so. But in approaching the election, party leaders should be aware that the Cambridge report is widely perceived to have captured as well as prompted a general desire for change: change not just in the way primary education is conceived and practised but also in the way that those who shape and enforce educational policy go about their business.

Perhaps the most frequent and disturbing comment voiced by teachers at our dissemination events has been this: 'We're impressed by the Cambridge Review's evidence. We like the ideas. We want to take them forward. But we daren't do so without permission from our Ofsted inspectors and local authority school improvement partners.'

Fortunately, not all teachers say this and not all inspectors or SIPs give them cause; and the Review will shortly launch a network linking those who are keen to build on the report and in many cases have begun to do so – without permission. Yet the fact that some of our most senior education professionals fear to act as their training, experience, judgement and local knowledge dictate is a symptom of what has gone wrong. The Westminster reforms which parliamentary candidates are queuing up to endorse must be about much more than parliamentary expenses.

Drawing on both its final report and the discussions of the last six months, the Review has identified eleven post-election policy priorities for primary education. But here's the proviso: we commend them not just to the next Prime Minister and Secretary of State, but also to schools. For if schools assume that reform is the task of government alone, then compliance will not give way to empowerment, and dependence on unargued prescription will continue to override the marshalling and scrutiny of evidence.

Thus, from the list that follows, government can and should lead on matters like assessment reform, the long-overdue primary staffing review and enhanced teacher education. These are the keys which together can unlock the door to both a richer curriculum and higher educational standards – for, as the Review’s evidence shows, the two go hand in hand. Government must also lead, as to its credit it has done, on striving to tackle the multiple crises of childhood poverty, social disadvantage and educational underachievement, for these too are closely linked and they demand action across a much wider spectrum of public policy than education alone.

But in taking the lead on such pressing matters government must not presume that they can be fixed by setting up ‘expert groups’ from which the experts are excluded, or by dismissing evidence other than that which supports the party line. Assessment is perhaps the most prominent instance where much-needed reform has been blocked by dogma and politically-filtered evidence, and even by attempts to portray those who argue for reform as opponents of standards and accountability. This, then, takes us to the political sea-change on which much else depends: a radical overhaul of the policy process itself and the relationship between government and national agencies on the one hand and schools, researchers, teacher educators and local authorities on the other.

This political transformation will not happen voluntarily or overnight. It requires those in the educational front line to take hold of the agenda and make it their own; and it requires sustained effort and, for some, professional re-education. For, as the Review’s final report notes, ‘a process which over the course of two decades has concentrated so much power at the centre ... cannot be instantly unpicked ... Centrally-determined versions of teaching are all that many teachers know.’

Thus, many of the priorities listed below will be advanced only if teachers, and the communities they serve, seize the opportunity and the evidence provided by initiatives such as the Cambridge Primary Review, and use them to debate the central educational questions which too often go by default: what primary education is for; what constitutes an enabling and balanced curriculum; how research on learning and teaching can be translated into effective classroom practice that engages every child; in what kinds of decisions about their lives and learning young children can or should be involved; how educational quality and standards should be defined and assessed; and how - individually and in partnership - schools should be organised. Equally, these questions are the stuff of an initial teacher education which, while not deviating one jot from the vital task of building young teachers’ classroom knowledge and skill, helps them to become thinking professionals rather than unquestioning operatives.

So the alternative to prescription and micro-management is not unaccountable license. The Review is very clear that teachers should always be able to give a coherent justification for their decisions, citing evidence, principle and aim, and this requires reforms in their training, continuing development and leadership to produce a more convincing articulation of research and practice.

Here, then, is our list of policy priorities from the 75 recommendations with which the Cambridge Primary Review’s final report ends. It is not exclusive, for the report identifies much more that needs to change than can be summarised here. But this, we suggest, is where reform should concentrate its attention.

1. **Accelerate the drive to reduce England’s gross and overlapping gaps in wealth, wellbeing and educational attainment**, all of them far wider in England than most other developed countries. Understand that teachers can do only so much to close the attainment gap for as long as the lives of so many children are blighted by poverty and disadvantage. Excellence requires equity.
2. **Make children’s agency and rights a reality in policy, schools and classrooms**. Apply the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in ways which reinforce what we now know about how children most effectively learn, but do so with common sense and an understanding of context so that ‘pupil voice’ does not degenerate into tokenism or fad.
3. **Consolidate the Early Years Foundation Stage**, extending it to age six so as to give young children the best possible foundation for oracy, literacy, numeracy, the wider curriculum and lifelong learning. And if there is still any doubt about what the Cambridge Review said on this matter, let it be

understood that this is about the character of the early years and early primary *curriculum*, not the school starting age.

4. **Address the perennially neglected question of what primary education is for.** The Mrs Beeton approach - first catch your curriculum, then liberally garnish with aims - is not the way to proceed. Aims must be grounded in a clear framework of values - for education is at heart a moral matter - and in properly argued positions on childhood, society, the wider world and the nature and advancement of knowledge and understanding. And aims should *shape* curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the wider life of the school, not be added as mere decoration.
5. **Replace curriculum tinkering by curriculum reform.** Seize the opportunity presented by the dropping of the primary curriculum clauses from the Children, Schools and Families Bill. Understand that the Rose review's narrow remit prevented it from addressing some of the problems of the primary curriculum which are most in need of attention, especially the counterproductive sacrificing of curriculum entitlement to a needlessly restricted notion of 'standards', the corrosive split between the 'basics' and the rest, the muddled posturing on subjects, knowledge and skills, and the vital matter of the relationship between curriculum quality, expertise and staffing; and that the curriculum debate therefore remains wide open. But don't think that the minimalism of the 1950s (or 1870s) is an adequate alternative. Look instead at the Cambridge model: an aims-driven entitlement curriculum of breadth, richness and contemporary relevance, which secures the basics and much more besides, and combines a national framework with a strong local component.
6. **Ditch the discredited dogma that There Is No Alternative to SATs.** Stop making Year 6 tests bear the triple burden of assessing pupils, evaluating schools and monitoring national performance. Stop treating testing and assessment as synonymous. Abandon the naive belief that testing of itself drives up standards. It doesn't: good teaching does. Initiate wholesale assessment reform drawing on the wealth of alternative ideas and models now available, so that we can at last have systems of formative and summative assessment which do their jobs validly, reliably and without causing collateral damage. Adopt the Cambridge Review's definition of standards as excellence in *all* domains of the curriculum to which children are statutorily entitled, not just the 3Rs. And understand that those who argue for reform are every bit as committed to rigorous assessment and accountability as those who pin everything on the current tests. The issue is not *whether* children should be assessed or schools should be accountable – they should – but *how* and in relation to *what*.
7. **Replace the pedagogy of official recipe by pedagogies of repertoire, evidence and principle.** Recognise that this is no soft option, for in place of mere compliance with what others expect we want teachers to be accountable to evidence so that they can justify the decisions they take. Note that the Cambridge review's evaluation of over 4000 published sources shows how far that evidence differs from some versions of 'best practice' which teachers are currently required to adopt. As the Cambridge report says: 'Children will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected merely to do as they are told.'
8. **Replace the government's professional standards for teachers**, which have limited evidential provenance, by a framework validated by research about how teachers develop as they progress from novice to expert. Retain guidance and support for those who need it, but liberate the nation's most talented teachers – and hence the learning of their pupils – from banal and bureaucratic prescriptions. Balance the need to give new teachers the necessary knowledge, skill and confidence for their first appointment with the vital ingredient that teacher educators have been forced to drop: critical engagement with the larger questions of educational context, content and purpose.
9. **Grasp at last the primary school staffing nettle.** Recognise that the generalist classteacher system inherited from the nineteenth century confers undoubted educational benefits, but that in terms of the range and depth of knowledge required by a modern curriculum it may demand more than many teachers can give. Initiate a full review of primary school staffing, assessing expertise, roles and numbers against the tasks which primary schools are required to undertake. Consider more flexible ways of staffing primary schools using a mix of generalists, semi-specialists and specialists, and exploit opportunities for professional partnerships and exchanges, especially for small schools. Re-

assess, too, the balance of teachers, teaching assistants and other support staff. Give head teachers time and support to do the job for which they are most needed: leading learning and assuring quality.

10. **Help schools to work in partnership** with each other and with their communities rather than in competition, sharing ideas, expertise and resources – including across the primary/secondary divide - and together identifying local educational needs and opportunities. End the league table rat race and - since Finland is the country whose educational standards policy-makers seek to match - note Finland's paramount commitment to social and educational equity through a genuinely comprehensive school system of consistently high quality.
11. **Re-balance the relationship between government, national agencies, local authorities and schools.** Reverse the centralising thrust of recent policy. End government micro-management of teaching. Require national agencies and local authorities to be independent advisers rather than political cheerleaders or enforcers, and to argue their cases with due rigour. Re-invigorate parental and community engagement in schools and the curriculum. Abandon myth, spin and the selective use of evidence. Restore the checks and balances which are so vital to the formulation of sound policy. Exploit the unrivalled compendium of evidence and ideas which the Cambridge Review has provided on this and the other matters above.

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## TO FIND OUT MORE

The Cambridge Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation from 2006-12, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

**THE FINAL REPORT.** *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, 608 pp, Routledge, October 2009. ISBN 978-0-415-54871-7 (pb), 978-0-415-54870-0 (hb). Editor: Robin Alexander. Authorial team: Robin Alexander, Michael Armstrong, Julia Flutter, Linda Hargreaves, Wynne Harlen, David Harrison, Elizabeth-Hartley-Brewer, Ruth Kershner, John MacBeath, Berry Mayall, Stephanie Northen, Gillian Pugh, Colin Richards and David Utting. Order a copy at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717>.

Profits from the sale of the final report are being placed in trust to support the education of some of the country's most marginalised and disadvantaged children.

**BUILDING ON THE FINAL REPORT: THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW NETWORK.** The Review is in the process of setting up a network to link and support those who are taking forward ideas and proposals in the Cambridge Primary Review final report, or who are keen to do so. There will be a National Co-ordinator, a national office and up to eight regional centres. We hope to make an announcement on these matters in June 2010. Meanwhile, those who wish to be on the network's mailing list should email Julia Flutter: [jaed100@cam.ac.uk](mailto:jaed100@cam.ac.uk).

**COMPANION RESEARCH VOLUME.** *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, 850 pp, Routledge, October 2009. ISBN 978-0-415-54869-4 (hb only). Editors: Robin Alexander, with Christine Doddington, John Gray, Linda Hargreaves and Ruth Kershner. 66 contributing authors from 21 university departments. Order a copy at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717>.

**BOOKLET.** *Introducing the Cambridge Primary Review*, 42pp, October 2009, ISBN 978-1-906478-9. Edited by Diane Hofkins and Stephanie Northen. Download at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

**LEAFLET.** *The Final Report*, October 2009, 4pp. The bare essentials. Download at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

**INTERIM REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS.** 31 interim reports were published between October 2007 and February 2009. Those which have not been revised for inclusion in the research volume may still be downloaded from the Review website, as may individual briefings on every report published to date. Download at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

**GENERAL ENQUIRIES.** The Cambridge Primary Review, Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ. Phone: 01223 767523. Email: [enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk). Website: [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

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**Note: the views expressed in Cambridge Primary Review reports and briefings do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.**