

Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum

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The Rt Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
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Dear Secretary of State

When the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading was published the Secretary of State at the time asked me to report on how well the recommendations were being implemented. This letter is my response. It is based on a series of visits to schools, discussions with local authorities and attendance at Primary National Strategy training events.

It is an obvious truth that if world class reading standards are to be achieved then world class teaching must be provided. The indications are that good progress has been made in raising the quality of teaching for beginner readers such that the leading edge work in our schools is excellent by any standard. It is also clear that schools are responding very positively to the first recommendation of the Review: to strengthen children's speaking and listening skills as important in their own right, and as a basis for reading and writing.

Following acceptance of the review recommendations the National Curriculum has been amended and the Primary Literacy Framework has been renewed so that high quality phonic work is the prime approach to teaching reading. A Communication, Language and Literacy Development (CLLD) programme has been developed to improve the teaching of phonics, and a free phonics teaching resource, 'Letters and Sounds', has been produced. In addition, the new Early Years Foundation Stage will reflect the Review's recommendations. I have kept closely in touch with these developments.

Overall, the message is positive, and schools are reporting that many children are making faster progress in learning how to read and to spell than was previously the case. As a broad estimate, at least three-quarters of our primary schools are implementing phonic work as recommended by the review. However, as might be expected, there is considerable variation in the quality of teaching and children's progress as schools come to terms with implementing the recommendations from different starting points.

High quality, systematic teaching of decoding and encoding skills, i.e. phonic work, is a key factor in securing children's progress in reading and writing. Notable features of success which underpin such teaching include:

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- *Opportunities for professional development and consistency of message* – all those responsible for the briefing and training to settings and schools were themselves trained and fully conversant with the Review's recommendations.
- *Linking principles to practice* – the “simple view of reading” is the rationale recommended by the Review which enabled the training to make clear *why* it is important to teach high quality phonic work and *how* to teach it.
- *Coaching and feedback* – teachers reported the value of observing their own class being taught word recognition skills expertly by a National Strategies consultant. They also valued opportunities for feedback on the quality of their own teaching, and for coaching on points which called for improvement.
- *Robust leadership* – as ever, the best teaching was where head teachers were fully committed and pressed relentlessly for a consistent, school wide approach.
- *Lead teachers* – having teachers who, irrespective of their job titles, took a strong lead, were knowledgeable in the teaching of reading, to whom others could turn for advice and support.
- *Teaching assistants* – who had received thorough training and were able to support teachers, and help children with their reading.
- *Teachers as ambassadors* – in implementing the recommendations on the teaching of reading teachers drew considerable professional satisfaction from their success and especially that of the children. They were willing advocates of the approach to a wider audience.

Although much excellent progress in the teaching of early reading and writing is evident, I do not believe we have yet reached the point where such teaching is the norm for all children. For example, not all settings and schools are yet self-sustaining in teaching phonic knowledge and skills essential for reading and making sure that children apply these skills to comprehend what they read. This strongly suggests that in-service support for serving teachers, practitioners and teaching assistants should continue to focus on phonics in the context of a broad and language rich curriculum. It would also be prudent to keep the various forms of initial teacher training under review to ensure that trainee teachers are well prepared to teach reading effectively.

These issues are being addressed through the CLLD programme and other initiatives. I hope to comment further on the standards and quality of teaching reading in the review of the primary curriculum which you have asked me to undertake.

Yours sincerely



Jim Rose