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Wellbeing of pupils ‘sacrificed for results’

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Labour has exaggerated the progress made in schools over the past decade and sacrificed pupils’ wellbeing by placing too much importance on tests, according to a leading government adviser.

In a critical review of Tony Blair’s legacy, Alan Smithers, of Buckingham University, today accuses the Government of manipulating test results.

Professor Smithers says that not only has the demand for independent schooling risen since 1997 but more pupils are dropping out of school at 17 and truancy has increased.

The report, commissioned by the Sutton Trust, one of Britain’s leading educational charities, also claims that it is impossible to judge how schools compare on the world stage and calls for an independent body to monitor the performance of England’s school system.

“Education, education, education” might have been the Prime Minister’s slogan, but Professor Smithers says that his mistake was treating schools like businesses and setting them performance-style targets.

“Results became very highly politicised, because the Government took responsibility for micro-managing the system and the effectiveness of ministers was judged on how well pupils score, which made it very hard to judge them dispassionately,” he told *The Times*.

“It illustrates the harm you can do from the best of motives. Tony Blair was a person who wanted things to get better. He was persuaded that targets was the way to do it – and on the way a lot of energy and importance went into them, while the roundedness of education got lost . . . with worrying results.”

In Blair’s *Education*, the director of the Centre for Education and Employment at Buckingham found that while improvements had been made in schools’ performance, the constantly rising results in national curriculum tests since 1997, especially in maths, were not borne out by the international league tables.

Although the Government was happy to accept the positive test results of a study of 30 countries in 2000 by the Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development (OECD), he said, it rejected a similar study in 2003 as unrepresentative. England dropped from 9th equal in 2000 to 16th place in 2003 in the international rankings.

“Whatever can be read into the results, it does not look as though they can be interpreted as showing that England’s performance in maths has been improving relative to other OECD countries; rather the reverse. The picture in reading would seem to be similar,” he wrote.

At GCSE and A level, pass rates have risen year on year. But at GCSE, where 58.1 per cent of secondary school pupils reportedly gained five good passes last year, much of this was due to them taking vocational qualifications worth four GCSEs.

At A level, where the pass rate has risen every year since 1982 to 96.6 per cent, he says that studies also show that the exams have been “more leniently graded” over the years.

As a result, says Sir Peter Lampl, chairman of the Sutton Trust, schools urgently need an independent body, such as the National Audit Office, to monitor results objectively. “I don’t think targets are a bad thing,” he told *The Times*. “But the Government have set targets and not made them and that’s part of

the problem because it's human nature to say that you are on track to achieving them. If we really want to improve the education system, we need to have objectively monitored performance and then we can agree on realistic targets."

To counter the "horrendous" overemphasis on testing, he believes that schools should also be given more freedom to look after pupils' wellbeing, teaching and recruitment.

Jim Knight, the Minister for Schools, said Professor Smithers had underestimated the improvements made. Not only were there more than 1,000 new schools, 36,000 extra teachers and 150,000 support staff, but there were now twice as many computers and sports facilities had been improved. He added: "There are 95,000 more 11-year-olds achieving the target level for their age in English and 83,000 more in mathematics compared with 1997; 104,000 more 14-year-olds are achieving the target level for their age in maths and over 94,000 in English compared with 1997, with 62,000 more 16-year-olds gaining GCSEs in English and maths."