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UK study says children starting school too early

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By Andrew Hough

LONDON (Reuters Life!) - Starting school at the age of four is "stressful" to children and does not help their education, according to a major review of English primary schools which also concluded kids take too many tests too early.

The Cambridge University review noted that some English children start at primary school two years earlier than in other countries.

By law, they must start full-time education in the term after their fifth birthday -- although the report found many start at the age of four.

In Denmark and Finland, for example, they start school at the beginning of their seventh year.

The review, incorporating several reports from other research organizations and universities, also found a negative culture of testing in English schools, which it said was because the system is too preoccupied with standards.

Testing happens more often, at a younger age and in more subjects, putting unprecedented pressure on students while having questionable benefits, it concluded.

It was also critical of increased uniformity of school curriculums, teaching methods and assessment.

In one report, from the National Foundation for Educational Research, the practice of allowing children to start school at such an early age was found to be "stressful".

The authors, Anna Riggall and Caroline Sharp, concluded that in some of those countries where students start their education later, many will outperform their English peers.

"While the value of high-quality pre-school education is beyond dispute, the assumption that an early primary school starting age is beneficial for children's later attainment is not well supported by the research evidence," they concluded.

"Meanwhile, there are concerns about the nature of what is provided for four-year olds -- the youngest pupils -- in primary school reception classes."

An education department spokeswoman said in a statement a "root and branch review" was already under way that would ease the transition from

early years into school.

She said while department research found no clear links between starting age and attainment, some students born in summer months seem to perform worse in their first years.

She added the review was considering introducing greater flexibility in school start dates.

(Editing by Stephen Addison and Paul Casciato)

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