UK report singles out schools with “high levels of disadvantage” for attack

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In presenting her annual report, Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman chose to target for attack schools, “which persistently fail to make progress due to high levels of disadvantage.” Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) is the regulatory government body that scrutinises the performance of all schools.

Spielman claimed that schools in poorer areas were caught in a culture of “disadvantage one-upmanship,” and that these focused “too much on their pupils’ deprivation.” Disregarding the problems schools face in highly deprived areas, after nearly a decade of austerity, she claimed schools were competing over how many pupils were on free school meals, or how many did not speak English as a first language.

She insisted that disadvantage was not an excuse for low achievement and that a school having no money and scant resources wasn’t really a big deal, asserting, “I am not someone who believes that extra funding for schools is the solution to all of our problems. Indeed, a greater focus on efficiency can sometimes help to sharpen minds about what really matters.”

Dismissing with contempt virtually every study that has been produced on the persistent and endemic causal link between poverty and educational attainment, these statements are aimed at justifying an escalation of the slashing of school budgets and teacher bashing, as well as an acceleration of the privatisation of state education through the academisation programme.

The actual numbers of schools which “persistently fail to improve” are relatively low. Over 90 percent of primary and over 80 percent of secondary schools are rated either “good” or “outstanding,” with just 80 secondary and 50 primary schools nationally that have failed the level of “good” repeatedly in inspections since 2005.

According to Spielman’s report, there are also about 500 primary and 200 secondary schools which have been rated as requiring improvement on their previous two inspections. These struggling schools were most likely to be in disadvantaged areas with a high proportion of poor white pupils, have a high turnover of staff, and heads and teachers facing “burnout.”

The report has been issued in anticipation of a drastic fall in educational standards in response to a spiralling fall in living standards, an increase in poverty and a further escalation of austerity; in order to then direct the blame onto schools and teachers.

Spielman’s report was delivered only weeks after a report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies was published, which predicted that over the next four years 37 percent of UK children will be living in relative poverty.

“Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2017,” funded jointly by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council, predicts a four percent national increase in children in families living in poverty. It means a rise of 400,000 children in poverty in families with incomes of 60 percent or less of the median. This will bring the total number of children living in poverty to a scandalous 5.2 million by 2022. This would be the highest percentage since records began in 1961.

Schools nationally will see a funding cut of 1.5 to 3 percent this year, and this will be repeated for the foreseeable future. As a result, thousands of schools are facing an unprecedented funding crisis. Many schools are being forced to ask for parental contributions for essential resources.

According to the National Education Union, 88 percent of schools face a real terms cut despite the announcement from the ruling Conservatives that there would be more funding by 2019.

Despite the Tories’ announcement of the new package of £2.5 billion increase this year, the money being provided falls far short of what is needed. Most of the funding comes internally from “efficiency” savings. Since 2015 alone, schools have suffered a real terms cut in funding of £2.7 billion.

According to the Association of School and College Leaders, schools require a further £2 billion a year between now and 2020 if they are to be able to deal with previous

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budget cuts.

Spielman's solution, in line with the government's, is to increase the number of Multi Academy Trusts (MAT's). Schools which are forced to become academies are increasingly rejecting the MAT model and merging with a single school, making it more difficult for the private sector vultures to reap the levels of profit they envisaged.

The aim of the government was to have MAT's as the dominant sector in the education system. However, over 60 percent of academies are in trusts of five or less schools, with 31.1 percent in a single school trust and only 3.3 percent in trusts which manage 40 or over schools.

Spielman, who has never been a teacher, is perfectly placed to push for Multi Academy Trusts. Between 2011 and 2016, she was chair of Ofqual, the qualifications regulator. From 2005 she was a founding member of the leadership team at the academy chain, ARK Schools, a multi-academy trust which runs 34 schools in London, Birmingham, Hastings and Portsmouth.

ARK Schools is the educational arm of an international children's charity founded in 2002 by a group of financiers. The chair of the ARK Schools board, Paul Marshall, received a knighthood in the Queen's Birthday Honours for services to education and philanthropy. He is the co-founder, with Ian Wace—chair of ARK's global board—of Marshall Wace Asset Management Ltd, a big hedge fund. Of the eight trustees of ARK Schools, five are hedge fund managers. None have any background in education.

ARK schools claim to have had a miraculous turnaround in school achievement, but this has been due to the fact that serious money has been put into securing their good results.

According to a 2016 assessment of Ark by the Local Schools Network, "At a time when the freezing of the education budget has left all schools facing a funding cut of around 8 percent, ARK academies are protected by the largesse of their sponsors. A recent report by Schools Week claims that ARK Schools received £3.6 million of private funds last year—nearly £106,000 for each school in the chain. In the brave new world of venture philanthropy, there is nothing wrong with using profits generated offshore—most hedge funds are domiciled outside the UK—to back a privately-controlled 'network' of schools, whose exam results are then held up as an example to defunded local authority schools."

A closer study of ARK and its international connections provides a glimpse of what the future education of the poor and disadvantaged may look like. Local School Networks reports, "In 2018, the trust plans to open the Pioneer Academy, 'a new all-through blended learning school with an emphasis on technology'. According to the proposal submitted to the DfE [Department of Further Education], blended learning is 'the combination of traditional classroom based teaching [sic] with online learning'. It was developed by American charter school operators like Rocketship and Carpe Diem. Rocketship, founded in Silicon Valley in 2006, runs 'a non-profit network of public elementary charter schools, serving primarily low-income students'."

"Their educational model—described by a former employee as the 'stripped-down efficiency model'—has changed a number of times since 2006. But one element remains constant: pupils at Rocketship schools, who are aged five to ten, spend a significant part of each day engaged in 'individualised learning'—in other words, intensive test preparation—on computers."

The article noted that "Rocketship staff are divided into 'master teachers'—frequently young Teach for America recruits, whose training consists of a five-week summer camp—and hourly-paid assistants ('individualised learning specialists') without any kind of teaching qualification, who supervise online instruction."

As Spielman's report confirms, Ofsted operates as a mouth piece for the government and its reactionary privatisation agenda, with its leading figures the financial beneficiaries of this process.

It is anything but a mechanism for improving "standards," least of all for the poor and disadvantaged. Ofsted's ability to pose as such is bound up with the lack of any opposition to the cuts and privatisation of education by the Labour Party and trade unions. Labour began the process of academisation, and the trade unions have dissipated and strangled all opposition to its impact and the broader attack on education.

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