

UK head teacher takes own life after school fails government Ofsted inspection

Margot Miller
27 March 2023

The tragic death of UK head teacher Ruth Perry by suicide in January following an inspection by government schools regulator Ofsted has led to a flood of grief and anger among educators.

Aged just 53, Ruth Perry was head teacher at Caversham Primary School in Reading where she had worked for 13 years. She took her own life while waiting for publication of an Ofsted report after the inspectorate had downgraded her school from outstanding to inadequate.

A dedicated educator for 32 years, Perry was well respected by her colleagues. Teacher Kate Wells posted online, “Ruth Perry was my boss for 10 years. She was a passionate and dedicated head teacher.”

On behalf of the family, her sister Julia Waters said her death was the “direct result” of the “deeply harmful” inspection and was in “a direct result of the pressure put on her by the process and outcome” of the inspection.

At Caversham Primary, the Ofsted report found the school “welcoming and vibrant”, staff/pupil relations “warm and supportive” but there was lack of “appropriate supervision during breaktimes” so pupils were “potentially at risk of harm.”

Apparently, Julia told BBC South, an altercation in the playground between two boys and another incident involving a boy performing a floss dance, was the “scant” and “sensationalist” evidence for inadequate safeguarding. The playground fight was interpreted by Ofsted as evidence of child-on-child abuse and the dance as the sexualisation of children.

A call on Twitter by Ms Waters, a professor in French Literature at the University of Reading, to boycott and protest against Ofsted led to many schools—such as Katesgrove Primary School and Emmer Green Primary in Reading and the Prince of Wales School in Dorchester—removing the Ofsted logo and rating from their websites.

The #ParentsagainstOfsted organisation protested Thursday outside the inspector’s headquarters in London. A memorial walk from Caversham Primary School to Reading town centre will be held on April 8.

Flora Cooper, a head teacher at the John Rankin federation of nursery, infant and junior schools in Berkshire, with an Ofsted inspection imminent, declared on social media that inspectors would not be allowed entry and called for solidarity.

Such action would incur a £2,500 fine and no doubt her job. After pressure from the council, the inspection went ahead.

On the day of the inspection, however, Cooper, teachers and support staff staged a protest at the school gates, wearing black armbands. A picture of Ruth Perry was displayed on the school gates and teachers held placards saying RIP RUTH. The inspectors turned up accompanied by the police.

By Monday, an online petition begun by freelance school business manager Rona Metters demanding Secretary for Education Gillian Keegan grant an inquiry into the inspection at Caversham Primary School had reached 219,000 signatures.

Perry is not the first tragic victim of Ofsted inspections. Carol Woodward was the head of Woodward Primary School near Plymouth and took her own life in 2015 after a negative Ofsted inspection.

The *Observer* newspaper cited research by the Hazards Campaign charity and University of Leeds that implicated Ofsted in coroners’ reports into the deaths of 10 teachers over the past 25 years. It reports teachers suffering heart attacks, strokes and nervous breakdowns due to the stress of inspections. On Monday, the *Mirror* newspaper cited one specific example of a deputy head teacher having a heart attack in the school toilets after being told their school had been downgraded.

Andrew Morrish, a former head and inspector and

founder of the helpline Headrest, said most calls from stressed heads are about Ofsted.

According to the Education Support 2022 charity, 84 percent of school leaders said they were stressed. A Teacher Tapp survey found that 61 percent of teachers registered responded 1-3 in a score of 1-9 when asked how positively they felt about Ofsted.

The body has come to epitomise successive governments' punitive and dictatorial policies in education. It can end careers with a single "inadequate" rating, with teachers vilified and schools rubbished, after an inspection which may only last a day.

Established in 1992, Ofsted was part of a major overhaul of education under John Major's Conservative government, including the introduction of the National Curriculum, Local Management of Schools—under which schools would control their own budgets—and tests in primary schools known as SATS. From 1997, the Labour government under Tony Blair continued and extended these "reforms", introducing the Academies scheme whereby schools were taken out of local authority control and run as independent businesses.

The reforms were justified in the name of raising standards in education, especially in areas of poverty and deprivation. In fact, they imposed a market model on schools, pitted against each other in competition for pupils, and furthered a privatisation agenda whereby ancillary services like school dinners were hived off.

An Ofsted rating of "inadequate" can send a school into a downward spiral, with teachers leaving and parents looking to remove their children. Poor ratings are also used as a pretext to force school to join a multi-Academy trust (MAT) if they are not already in one.

They are increasingly a mechanism for holding educators responsible for the actions of the government. Schools have been starved of resources for decades, with deep real-terms cuts made to help pay for the bank bailouts of the 2008 financial crash, the corporate bailouts of the pandemic and energy crises, and now the cost of ramped up military spending to fight the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine.

Staff pay has been slashed and workloads increased immeasurably, with workers driven to leave in droves by the stress. Ofsted's inspections are often the final kick in the teeth.

The education unions have allowed these attacks to take place over decades and have made only the most tokenistic response to popular outrage at Perry's death, handing in a petition (dating from before the tragedy)

calling for Ofsted to be replaced to Downing Street on March 23.

Paul Whiteman, leader of the National Association of Head Teachers, said the union was "not against inspections per se." Geoff Barton, who heads the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), said, "We have not asked Ofsted to halt inspections entirely, but merely to pause them."

The Labour Party has made similar half-hearted noises.

The unions advocate futile appeals to the government against mobilising educators for a fight to improve their intolerable conditions. The National Education Union has called for Ofsted to be replaced with a "supportive, effective and fair accountability system" while sitting in "intensive talks" with the government designed to bring about an end to its mandated strike action over pay with a sellout deal.

Ofsted head Amanda Spielman dismissed calls to pause inspections, saying "our aim [Ofsted's] is to raise standards, so that all children can get a great education."

The government has said nothing, responding with the same cruel indifference it has shown to school workers' wellbeing during the pandemic, with many killed by the COVID-19 virus and many more suffering long-term damage to their health. To this day, no mitigations are in place in schools. UV disinfection appliances, which effectively kill viruses, are used in Parliament but absent from classrooms.

Taking up the fight for a fully resourced, child centred education system which guarantees the safety and wellbeing of staff and children requires new representative organisations for educators independent of the unions. We encourage all school workers to contact and follow the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact