

Abolish UK school inspectorate Ofsted—fully funded schools not punitive inspections!

Margot Miller
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Following protests against the punitive system of school inspections in England which drove head teacher Ruth Perry to take her own life, the school inspectorate Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) announced minimal reforms.

The Conservative government has set up an inquiry into Ofsted. It was forced to respond, fearful that the outcry against the inspectorate would coalesce with the current struggle of teachers over pay, workload and education funding, which the education unions are desperately trying to contain.

Ruth Perry, aged 53, had been head teacher at Caversham Primary School in Reading for 13 years when she committed suicide after Ofsted downgraded her school from “outstanding” to “inadequate”. Her sister, Professor Julia Waters, said Ruth’s death was the “direct result” of the “deeply harmful” inspection and “the pressure put on her by the process and outcome.”

Inspectors decide a score after assessing the quality of education, behaviour and attitudes of pupils, personal development and leadership and management. The leadership and management category includes duties in relation to the government’s counter-terror Prevent strategy and safeguarding. A score in any category below “good” means the school will fail its inspection.

Ruth’s tragic death lifted the lid on the pressures educators endure in oversized classrooms in underfunded schools, underpaid and overworked, teaching children increasingly from deprived backgrounds.

Teachers took to social media to express their grief and anger; petitions were launched, and protests organised. The government’s response, however, in no measure addresses their concerns.

On June 12, Ofsted published lukewarm changes to its inspections process, writing, “[W]e have been in regular discussion with union leaders, other sector representatives and the DfE [Department for Education] about a package of measures to improve aspects of our work with schools.” These include:

- Safeguarding—if a school is “good” in other areas but like Ruth Perry’s fails its inspection because of “safeguarding”, Ofsted will return in three months for a further inspection. A handbook will be available to schools to clarify what constitutes effective safeguarding. If the school then scores good, it will not face enforced academisation (academy schools are publicly funded but privately run).

- Complaints procedure—out for consultation until September 15 to supposedly make it easier for schools to challenge Ofsted’s judgements.

- Notice of inspection—schools will still only have 24 hours’ notice but will know the inspection year.

- Sharing draft Ofsted reports—the head teacher can choose with whom to share the Ofsted report apart from parents, until it is finalised.

- Language in reports will be “depersonalised”—the school rather than individuals will be named when locating responsibility for weak areas.

Secretary of State for Education Gillian Keegan made clear the government has no intention of abolishing Ofsted, in opposition to the demands of the teaching profession, saying “Ofsted is central to this government’s success in raising school standards”.

She announced the expansion of the DfE’s totally inadequate mental health and wellbeing package to support an extra 500 head teachers by March 2024—itself an indication of the pressures on schools. The DfE reports 40,000 teachers resigning last year, on top of the 4,000 teachers who retired. Teaching begins as a vocation and ends in burnout. Unfilled teacher vacancies also reached a record high at 2,300.

Speaking to the BBC, Ruth Perry’s sister Professor Waters said the government had not addressed their main concern: that a school could fail an Ofsted inspection after failing in one area. “It was the thing that preyed on Ruth’s mind for those 54 days, that one-word judgement summing up 32 years of dedication to the education profession,” she said.

Caversham Primary failed its Ofsted inspection on

spurious grounds. Professor Waters told *BBC South* an altercation in the playground between two boys, plus a boy performing a floss dance, was the “scant” and “sensationalist” evidence for inadequate safeguarding. Ofsted considered the playground fight evidence of child-on-child abuse and the dance the sexualisation of children.

According to Ofsted, “[I]n the last 18 months only 12 state schools have been judged good or better in every area apart from safeguarding.”

The day after Ofsted published its revisions, parliament’s Education Committee of seven Conservative and six Labour Party MPs announced an inquiry to investigate the impact of Ofsted on school standards and staff well-being. UK governments are notorious for diverting public discontent into toothless inquiries that may last for months if not years, leading to reports destined to do nothing but gather dust on the shelves of the House of Commons Library.

Ofsted plays an integral role in the marketisation of education, forcing schools to become academies if they fail inspections. Academies were set up by Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997-2010) to end local authority control and run schools as businesses. They set their own pay rates, terms and conditions.

Academisation is pursued under the cover of raising standards, closing the attainment gap between deprived and better off areas, and safeguarding children.

Such posturing over the welfare of children was well and truly quashed during the pandemic, when the ruling class revealed its total indifference to the lives and health of future generations by insisting, with the aid of the education unions, that schools reopen before COVID-19 was eliminated.

There are still no mitigation measures in schools, such as UV lighting that kills the virus or HEPA filters that clean the air, leaving children at risk. Scientists now link COVID infection to neurological damage, one possible reason why children’s ability to concentrate has reportedly deteriorated so drastically. Another possible explanation is the traumatising impact the pandemic has had on a whole generation. To lose a parent, caregiver, grandparent or teacher leaves deep psychological scars.

One way or another, the first years of the pandemic have also seriously damaged school attendance. Latest figures from the Department for Education reveal that 125,000 children spent more time out of school than in during the first term of this academic year, double the number before the pandemic.

Absences were highest in deprived areas. The DfE’s school census revealed one in four (two million) children were eligible for free school meals this year, an increase of 122,000 from 2022. Three times as many children on free

school meals are absent than their counterparts.

Besides the occasional angry accusation, the government has not given a moment’s thought to this problem.

Successive governments have relentlessly cut public spending, including in education, to claw back hundreds of billions in bank and the pandemic bailouts and aid the enrichment of a super-rich minority, all the while implementing privatisation throughout the school sector. Backed by Labour and the unions, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is preparing deeper cuts to pay for NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine.

Ofsted creates the impression of concern for children’s education while doing next to nothing to actually solve failings made inevitable by this woeful underfunding, except to pass the blame onto workers. Its minimal “reforms” and the “inquiry” are designed to preserve this important function.

They have been responded to positively by the education unions, minus a few pro-forma caveats. Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union Mary Bousted said, “The NEU welcomes this inquiry into Ofsted... inspections need to change... much more substantially than the piecemeal reforms announced by Ofsted this week.”

Paul Whiteman, general secretary at school leaders’ union NAHT, said, “While these individual measures are sensible and somewhat helpful, they go nowhere near far enough in addressing the profession’s concerns.” But he went on lamely, “We hope the Education Select Committee will listen carefully to the experiences and concerns of the profession and help bring about much needed change.”

The opposition Labour Party reiterated its support for Ofsted, merely committing to end the one-word grading system.

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee insists that Ofsted must be abolished and the crisis in the education system solved through massive funding increases for schools, paid for with the funds otherwise handed over the big business and the military.



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