

Inquest into suicide of UK headteacher Ruth Perry demonstrates that school inspectorate Ofsted must be abolished!

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After hearing evidence over six days, the inquest at Berkshire Coroner’s Court into the suicide of UK headteacher Ruth Perry produced a damning verdict on school inspectorate Ofsted.

Senior coroner Heidi Connor concluded that Perry’s suicide was “contributed to by an Ofsted inspection carried out in November 2022” at her school in Reading. Connor found the inspection to be “rude and intimidating”, and that “during and after this inspection, Ruth’s mental health deteriorated significantly” to such a degree that she took her own life on January 8 this year.

The coroner’s addendum that “while the outcome of the inspection was a part of this, it was not the only cause”, in no way detracts from the culpability of Ofsted in the death of an outstanding school leader.

The tragic case of Ruth Perry highlights the punitive role of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills)—set up by John Major’s Conservative government under the Education (Schools) Act 1992 to police government education policy. Ofsted must be abolished as part of a fight for a fully funded education system.

Educators are expected to teach an increasing number of impoverished children, with dwindling SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) support in oversized classes housed in crumbling schools, many of which are in danger of collapse. Education has seen its funding squeezed for decades, yet schools are expected to achieve good exam results, to churn out the cheap labour force of the future. Things are so bad that teachers are leaving the profession in droves.

Ruth Perry died while waiting for the Ofsted report on Caversham Primary School to be published and was unable to discuss the findings with either colleagues, her family or GP according to Ofsted protocol—leaving her totally isolated. She was only 53, and left behind two daughters and a husband, a family bereft from the loss of a daughter and sibling. She had led the school for 13 years and was by all accounts a talented and dedicated head, loved by pupils, staff, and parents alike.

Her sister, professor Julia Waters, read out a statement on behalf of the family after the verdict. “The inquest into Ruth’s death has shown the brutal inhumanity of the system of Ofsted

inspections,” she said. “Ofsted likes to judge people with single-word labels. We could judge the current Ofsted system with our own labels: callous, perverse and inhumane.

“... Ruth took her own life as a direct result of the processes, outcome and consequences of an Ofsted inspection.”

In a single-word judgement, Ruth’s school Caversham Primary was downgraded from being previously “outstanding” to “inadequate”. Inspectors failed the school on its leadership and management on the most spurious of grounds. This category includes duties in relation to the government’s counter-terror Prevent strategy and safeguarding. Failure in any category condemns a school to overall inadequate, a word which was to haunt Ruth in the days that followed, threatening her career.

Julia Waters told *BBC South* an altercation in the playground between two boys, and a boy performing a floss dance, was the “scant” and “sensationalist” evidence for the school’s inadequate safeguarding.

The inquest heard how on the first day of the inspection Ruth was reduced to tears and was visibly shaking after lead inspector Alan Derry criticised the school’s record on safeguarding. In the final meeting, she broke down after learning the school was graded good in all areas but safeguarding.

After her death, Ruth’s family discovered a diary entry written in the early hours of Christmas Day indicating her anguish: “I.N.A.D.E.Q.U.A.T.E keeps flashing behind my eyes.” They found a note: “Every space is filled with my feelings of wretchedness and desperation. I wake from restless sleep absolutely panic-stricken.”

The coroner read out further comments by Ruth: “This is the most untherapeutic and inhumane system, to have this on one person’s shoulders. I am amazed there are not more heads killing themselves... the shame, the pressure, loss of income, where do I go next, I am too young to retire.”

In concluding the inquest, the coroner Connor outlined a series of concerns which she hoped “will be used by the parliamentary inquiry process to review how inspection should work going forward”:

* The conduct of the inspection process, which “was at times rude and intimidating.”

* The single word judgement of a school as outstanding, good or inadequate. Before a report is published, schools should be given the opportunity to improve.

After the public outcry at Ruth Perry’s death, including demonstrations outside her own school, Caversham was reinspected and received a rating of good.

* The “confidentiality requirement”, suggesting head teachers are allowed to discuss the findings of an inspection with staff, family but not parents before publication.

Connor noted that coroner’s recommendations tend to be ignored. This was evidenced by a “preventable deaths tracker” created by an Oxford epidemiologist, showing “a tendency for some secretaries of state to ignore coroners’ regulation 28 [coroners’ reports to prevent future deaths]”.

She also noted an “almost complete absence” of Ofsted training to deal with signs of stress during the inspection process.

For decades, teachers have been demanding not the reform of Ofsted but its abolition.

In response to the inquest’s verdict, outgoing Ofsted chief Amanda Spielman announced that scheduled inspections would be put back a day to permit extra training for inspectors on “recognising and responding to visible signs of anxiety” so inspections can be paused. Spielman confirmed minimal reforms—a complaints hotline to a senior Ofsted official, and head teachers able to share inspection findings with colleagues/family/GP

Spielman apologised to Ruth Perry’s family, for the “distress” her death had caused. She remained unrepentant about the role of Ofsted, remarking that critics were using the tragedy “as a pivot to try and discredit” Ofsted.

At the end of her tenure, Spielman will be replaced in January by Sir Martyn Oliver. He leads the Academy chain OGAT (Outwood Grange Academies Trust) overseeing 41 schools. Oliver was caught out by online newspaper *Schools Week* for excluding twice as many pupils than many schools, to boost exam results.

Neither the Conservative government or the Labour Party opposition have any intention of abolishing Ofsted and punitive inspections. While shedding a few crocodile tears, Tory Education Secretary Gillian Keegan said, “Ofsted was fundamental to making sure children are safe and receive the education they deserve”. This, after years of funding cuts, and endangering children’s future health during the ongoing pandemic!

Ofsted is crucial to the government’s marketisation plans throughout education, forcing schools to become academies if they fail inspections. Set up by Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997-2010) to end local authority control and run schools as businesses, Academies set their own pay rates, terms and conditions.

The education unions, fresh from selling out the national teachers’ pay dispute with a rotten 6.5 percent, below-inflation deal, made their usual pro forma statements.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers said the coroner’s verdict was “a clear and damning indictment” of Ofsted’s inspections. He continued, “Ofsted has no choice but to seriously reflect and make changes to ensure a tragedy like this never happens again.”

The National Education Union (NEU) and NASUWT (combined membership 750,000) responded likewise with futile appeals to the government which continues to slash the public education budget. In a press release, NEU Daniel Kebede said, “We expect statements from government and Ofsted that respond promptly and meaningfully to the Coroner’s verdict... to give schools relief from the pressures that the Inquest has so tragically revealed”.

NASUWT Leader Patrick Roach, called for a few miserable reforms, saying, “The reality is that the Government could move immediately to build confidence by insisting on abandoning the current 'one word' grading system.”

Labour’s Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson is on record that a Labour government would “stick with inspections” with a few adjustments.

To fight for justice at the inquest, Ruth Perry’s family applied for legal aid but were turned down. The family turned to crowdfunding, raising £50,000. This shows the enormous feeling for a fight in the working class, like the teachers’ ballot results for industrial action during the national pay dispute.

The main issue is the need to build a new, socialist leadership to take forward the fight to defend public education. The Educators Rank-and-File Committee, set up to break the stranglehold of the unions, demands that Ofsted must be abolished and the crisis in education solved through massive funding increases of tens of billions for schools, paid for by diverting funds otherwise handed over to big business and the military.



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