

UK heads and teachers condemn Ofsted inspections after Ruth Perry suicide inquest verdict

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Following the inquest verdict into the suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry, heads and teachers are raising their voices to condemn government education inspectorate Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills).

Perry, 53, killed herself on January 8, 2023, while waiting for the Ofsted report on her Caversham Primary school to be published. The school, she knew, had been assessed as “inadequate”, a judgement later overturned.

Senior coroner at Berkshire Coroner’s Court Heidi Connor concluded that Perry’s suicide was “contributed to by an inspection carried out in November 2022”. The coroner quoted Ruth’s own description of Ofsted: “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.”

Immediately after Ruth’s death, there was a public outcry, including demonstrations outside Caversham School’s gates. More have spoken out following the verdict.

Martin Pearson wrote on X (formerly Twitter): “There will only ever be 2 words that sum up Ofsted and DfE (Department for Education) performance, Ruth Perry.”

A parent: “Ofsted have announced a 2-day inspection at my daughter’s secondary school, 3 days before the end of term. Teachers are shattered, students are shattered, horrible decision and very unfair. This needs to change.”

Another comment: “Amanda Spielman [outgoing Ofsted chief]—Shame on you for the smug, dismissive and triumphant tone on Radio 4 [defending Ofsted, Spielman apologised for the distress Ruth suffered]”

Ruth Swailes referred to the farcical few hours training Ofsted inspectors were given following the damning

inquest report to spot signs of stress, like finding it difficult to concentrate, rapid or mumbled speech, redness in the face, sweating, becoming restless or going quiet: “Well it’s good to know that some lead inspectors were trained yesterday to identify that these might be signs of stress. Top quality training that!

Perry’s tragic death highlighted the crisis gripping the education sector in the UK, bound up with decades of funding cuts. Heavy workload, staff shortages, little SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) support, crumbling schools: these are the conditions staff are expected to work under, policed by Ofsted on pain of an inadequate inspection judgement.

Ofsted is central to the marketisation of education pursued by both the Labour and Conservative parties. An inadequate Ofsted rating forces a school to join a multi academy trust—publicly financed schools but privately run and able to set their own pay and conditions. The inspections also work to place responsibility for the consequences of funding cuts on the shoulders of staff.

Head teacher Claire (all names changed by the broadcaster) told the BBC how, after her school was found “inadequate”, she “wanted to run away from my life, because I couldn’t handle the shame of this report.” Panic attacks and stress-induced rashes persuaded Claire to leave the profession after 20 years.

Another head, Tim, was prescribed anti-depressants after his school was downgraded to “requires improvement.” He explained, “That year broke me because of the fear”, and admitted contemplating suicide.

Tim’s school was forced to become an academy, while both he and Claire had to accept redundancy. The redundancy package was conditional on signing a non-disclosure agreement, which indicates why more heads forced to give up their jobs have not spoken out.

Head teacher Ruth, faced with the prospect of an imminent inspection, said, “Many mornings I seriously thought about doing something to seriously harm myself so I had an excuse not to be in work.”

A survey of 1,890 school leaders in England conducted by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) over September and October revealed a shocking 38 percent had sought professional mental health support the previous year. A further 11 percent would have sought help had they known it was available or how to access it.

Almost half who responded indicated they were considering leaving the profession in the next three years. Over half (57 percent) of heads said they would not recommend the job. Three in five assistant and deputy head teachers said they would not aspire to the role, citing the increased stress that comes with the job and worries about Ofsted. This is in the overall context of a crisis in teacher retention and recruitment.

A similar study cited by the BBC showed that of those aged under 50 and becoming head teachers in 2015, a quarter in primary schools and a third in secondary schools, had already left the job.

In response to the growing anger of educators, the Conservative government has promised an insulting £1.1 million to increase the capacity of a mental health and well-being scheme for heads. This will do nothing to address the root of cause of the crisis in education—£10 billion in funding cuts since 2010.

These cuts have fallen heaviest on the poorest neighbourhoods. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows secondary schools in more deprived areas had more than double the cuts than in the least deprived areas.

The funding crisis in schools is compounded by that in local councils. State education in the UK is funded by central and local taxation administered by local government. Overall council spending in real terms has been cut by 27 percent since 2010/11. The Local Government Association anticipates that 17 percent of local authorities will be unable to balance their budgets this and next year, facing a £4 billion funding gap with no relief from the government in its Autumn Statement.

Labour-run Nottingham City Council, for example, is proposing to address its £50 million spending gap for 2024-25 in part by cutting the city’s education budget by £1.2 million. This includes reductions in education psychology provision, subsidies on school meals, and support with the purchase of school uniforms for those on free school dinners.

Birmingham City Council, also run by Labour, proposes gutting early years education, SEND and social care by £57 million.

Conservative-controlled Thurrock-council is looking to replace school crossing patrols with volunteers.

The Labour Party nationally is doing everything possible to prove to finance and big business that it will spend nothing to address this, or any other, social catastrophe. As for the party’s attitude to Ofsted, Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson pledged a future Labour government will “stick with inspections” with a few adjustments.

The education trade unions have played a despicable role in allowing this situation to develop, overseeing decades of cuts and now refusing to fight for the abolition of Ofsted, instead appealing to the Conservative government for few ineffectual reforms.

Earlier this year, the National Education Union and NASUWT (total membership 750,000) sold out the teachers’ pay dispute for a miserable 6.5 percent pay rise. This followed their abandonment of educators to COVID-19 during the first years of the pandemic, continued today, by not demanding all schools have appropriate mitigation measures in place—including adequate ventilation, HEPA filters, and Far-UVC ultraviolet irradiation devices that kill airborne pathogens.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, set up in opposition to the trade union bureaucracy, and informed by an international socialist perspective, is fighting for:

*The immediate abolition of Ofsted.

* Funds to make schools COVID safe and structurally sound.

* Fully funded state education, financed by money otherwise given over to big business and war.

Get in touch with the Committee today.



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