

Abolish UK's Ofsted school inspectorate—Spend money on education, not war!

Educators Rank-and-File Committee (UK)
2 May 2024

Britain's conservative government has responded to the education select committee's report, "Ofsted's work with schools", by ignoring its main recommendation that schools must no longer be judged by the Ofsted inspectorate with a single grade.

The select committee is comprised of Conservative and Labour MPs with a Conservative majority.

The single-word judgement awarded by the schools' watchdog after an inspection, that a school is either outstanding, good, requires improvement or is inadequate, will remain, the government announced in an April 25 report. The single-grade judgement epitomises everything abhorrent about Ofsted's punitive role.

As expressed in the votes of delegates at conferences of the two largest education trade unions in the last year, the majority view of the teaching profession is that Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) should be abolished.

Ofsted was set up by John Major's Conservative government under the Education (Schools) Act 1992 to police government education policy. It was embraced by the Blair/Brown Labour governments (1997-2010) and used to promote Labour's flagship academisation of schools. Schools that fail inspections are taken out of local authority control and forced to become academies—publicly funded but privately-run.

Ofsted is totally discredited in the eyes of teachers, who have been calling for it to be abolished for years. The suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry in January 2023 after an Ofsted inspection was the final straw. The public outcry that followed Ruth's death, and a campaign by her sister Professor Julia Walters, compelled the Sunak government to set up an inquiry into Ofsted.

Ruth was driven to take her own life while awaiting publication of an Ofsted report on her school, Caversham Primary in Reading. Inspectors failed the school, which was found good in all areas except "safeguarding". Caversham

was downgraded from outstanding to inadequate.

The safeguarding issue was a minor altercation between pupils and a boy performing a "floss dance". After protests outside the school by staff and media publicity following Ruth's death, the school was re-inspected and the initial judgement overturned.

The inquest into Ruth Perry's death was damning. Berkshire Coroner's Court found that her suicide was "contributed to by an Ofsted inspection carried out in November 2022", and that following the inspection her "mental health deteriorated significantly". The senior coroner sent a Report to Prevent Future Deaths to Ofsted, Reading Borough Council and the Department for Education.

The education select committee published its report on January 29. It did not deal with Ruth's death on the grounds that it might show parliamentary interference with her inquest, but took "careful note of the issues raised in the coroner's report."

While the select committee report suggested the single-word grade be replaced, the main thrust was that Ofsted should be strengthened, with more funding in the long-term and a few reforms to restore its tarnished image.

The government stated in its response that one-word judgements were here to stay due to "strong parental awareness of the Ofsted overall grade, and that the grade provides a succinct and accessible summary for parents."

Speaking on the BBC's *Today* radio programme this week, Sir Michael Wilshaw—Ofsted chief from 2012-2016—reiterated his support for Ofsted. His remarks, nevertheless, were an indictment of the system.

"I struggled with the single-word judgement," he declared. "Ministers have made the wrong decision... we should only keep that one-word judgement if we are absolutely sure that the judgements are secure and made by people who know what they're doing and ... have sufficient time to gather the necessary evidence... but we haven't got that... inspection

takes place over a one and a half day period, we haven't got inspectors with sufficient experience of the sectors they're inspecting... 40 percent have never been a head teacher."

After this year's National Education Union annual conference, which passed a motion to abolish Ofsted, General Secretary Daniel Kebede said, "Suicides have been linked to unmanageable workloads, national assessment procedures including inspections and league tables, and long working hours."

Kebede declared the government's retention of the single-word judgement a "missed opportunity and a kick in the teeth," calling for the abolition of Ofsted in the same breath as its "root and branch reform".

He continued, "We need a new accountability system, which is supportive, effective and fair." In November the Beyond Ofsted Inquiry, commissioned by the NEU, published its findings and proposed "to bring trust back in the system so that it can work," including a hybrid of schools' self-evaluation and Ofsted inspections.

The other main teaching union, the NASUWT, welcomed the education select committee's proposal on scrapping single-word grading and endorsed the *Beyond Ofsted* report. At the same time, the union supports Ofsted's government-promoted consultation exercise, running until May 31. Named the *Big Listen*, its remit is seeking opinions, including from school children, on how Ofsted can improve in the light of the select committee's findings.

Instead of boycotting this cynical exercise, the NASUWT is encouraging its members to participate. Its website has a guide to each question in the consultation and suggests model answers.

The NEU and NASUWT are deceiving their members with illusions that a Labour government (the probable outcome of the next general election) can resolve the crisis in education, and the idea that Ofsted can be reformed or replaced with something acceptable to the teaching profession.

At the NEU's conference, Kebede praised Labour's education promises, including an increase in teacher numbers by 6,500 and replacing single-word Ofsted judgements with report cards. Kebede, who was supported in his election campaign by pseudo-left groups like the Socialist Workers Party, failed to mention Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer's condemnation of last year's teachers' strikes.

The union was "ready to work with a Labour government to embark on a journey of renewal." Briefly putting on a militant guise, he added, "Austerity policies have destroyed education... we didn't tolerate Tory cuts and we won't tolerate Labour cuts either."

The NEU and other unions have not just tolerated cuts, they have collaborated in their imposition for years.

Education is in a parlous state, with funding squeezed for decades and the unions not lifting a finger to fight back. Last year's pay struggle was sold out by the unions, which pushed through a below inflation pay deal. Poor pay and conditions have led to teachers leaving in droves.

New research reported in the *Guardian* revealed that hundreds of thousands of pupils in England and Wales are being taught in oversized classes by teaching assistants because of the shortage of qualified teachers. SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) support has been particularly run down.

Schools are not safe places, either due to structural defects after years of neglect, or lack of basic mitigation measures such as HEPA filters and far-UVC lighting to combat the spread of COVID and other viruses.

Labour and the Tories are committed to NATO's expanding wars in the Middle East, Ukraine and against China, which means a "war footing" economy. The Tories recently upped military spending to 2.5 percent of GDP, with Labour's complete agreement. This means more cuts in welfare and education spending, which a Labour government is pledged to carry out. Whichever government is elected, Ofsted will remain.

Teachers and support staff have shown time and again, in votes for industrial action as well as strikes, that they are prepared to fight. But the education unions are suppressing strikes and directing their members towards the election of a Labour government. The NEU is at present sitting on an indicative ballot that delivered an overwhelming mandate for strike action over pay in January.

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee is fighting to mobilize educators independently of the unions for the abolition of Ofsted and a fully-funded education system providing:

- an increase in staff numbers to cut class sizes in half;
- ongoing staff training based on child-centred pedagogy, not targets and tests;
- adequate funds for SEND support;
- all the necessary measures to make schools structurally sound and COVID safe.

Society's wealth must be diverted from war spending and the profits of the super-rich to provide for the necessities of life. This is bound up with the struggle for socialism. Contact the committee today.



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