

## Haringey Early Years, Primary and Special Heads Association (HEYPSHA)

30/3/23

Dear Ms Spielman,

We write to you as the Haringey Early Years, Primary and Special Heads Association (HEYPSHA), a group of head teachers from 79 settings committed to working together to achieve the very best outcomes for our children and families.

We have been deeply shocked and saddened by the death of fellow head teacher, Ruth Perry, who recently took her own life. Whilst we do not claim to know all the details of the events leading up to Ruth's suicide, her family members have made it very clear that they believe it was directly linked to Ofsted's recent downgrading of Caversham Primary School from Outstanding to Inadequate. Unfortunately, this tragedy is one that we as head teachers can identify with; so we are shocked and saddened, but not surprised.

As a group of experienced head teachers who have worked with Ofsted for many years, we are acutely aware of the disproportionate pressure that comes with a school inspection and the huge toll that Ofsted visits take on school leaders and staff, regardless of the outcome. We are all familiar with the excessive stress and anxiety that come with operating under a school inspection system which feels punitive rather than supportive, and which often ultimately works against its own goal to improve schools.

Whilst we fully support the notion that educational establishments must be held to account for pupil outcomes and well-being, we do not support the high-stakes format of the current system. Perversely, school improvement is often, in fact, stifled in the lead up to inspections as schools become wary of the risks associated with innovation, a situation exacerbated by the fact that many Ofsted visits are now massively overdue. When inspectors do finally arrive, we find ourselves in the seemingly impossible situation of having to demonstrate flawless excellence in a two-day window under successive frameworks with ever changing goalposts. Moreover, these two-day 'shows' are performed at the mercy of 'all powerful' individuals or teams of Ofsted inspectors who may never have been head teachers themselves, who bring their own subjective approaches and who, in worst cases, 'go rogue'.

We have all heard the horror stories of inspections that have been unjustly derailed either by comments or events which are totally out of the school's control, or by inspectors unable to rationally implement the Ofsted framework. We all know cases where Ofsted's correct focus on pupil safeguarding has been used inappropriately and disproportionately by misguided inspectors. These are not vague myths we have heard on the grapevine, they are the personal recounts of colleagues who have experienced these devastating scenarios. We have also all witnessed the decline which these schools can then experience as pupil numbers drop, teacher retention and recruitment become almost impossible and – ultimately – pupils, families and the wider community suffer the consequences. And, of course, it is well known that schools who have the privilege to serve in the most disadvantaged communities also face the hardest challenge when it comes to having their work understood and recognised by Ofsted.

As committed professionals, we welcome and seek out external scrutiny and challenge, but this must be carried out in a way which is collaborative, and which encourages schools to celebrate their strengths and be open and honest about their areas for development. School inspection must be carried out with the clear goal of helping schools to do their best for children. We believe that attempting to summarise overall school performance in one-word judgements undermines this goal; it's time for grades to be replaced with more detailed summaries which enable leaders, staff, parents/carers and other stakeholders to gain a more useful insight into what each school is doing well and what they need to work on.

We feel that Ruth Perry's death is a watershed moment for Ofsted who would be foolish to ignore the ramifications of this tragic suicide and the unprecedented backlash against the school inspection system currently being voiced across the country.

In solidarity with many thousands of our colleagues across the UK, we therefore call upon Ofsted to:

- halt the current inspection system;
- get back to your core purpose, to 'improve lives by raising standards in education';
- remember your own stated values, to put children first whilst being 'evidence-led, accountable and transparent';
- consider whether it may, in fact, be time not only for an evolution of Ofsted, but for a revolution, reinvention and rebrand – a complete overhaul for the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- work closely with school leaders and other key stakeholders to make these changes;
- ensure that schools are inspected by those who have walked the walk, not just talked the talk;
- make certain that the use of one-word judgements becomes a thing of the past, where it belongs;
- embark on a new era of working collaboratively and supportively with schools whilst holding them to account, more in line with what research tells us leads to sustained school improvement; and
- ultimately help us to ensure that our schools are the very best they can be for our children.

We would be more than happy to work with you to achieve all of the above and implore you not to miss the opportunity for change that the tragic death of Ruth Perry has brought about. Whilst we do not intend to attempt to block access for Ofsted inspectors into our schools, in order to protect ourselves, our staff and our pupils from the potential harm of derailed inspections we will suspend cooperation during any visit where inspectors 'go rogue', and insist that the inspection is halted whilst further advice is sought.

Yours,

HEYPSHA Head Teachers

cc

- All HEYPSHA school governing bodies, staff and parent/carer communities via HEYPSHA head teachers
- Gillian Keegan, Secretary of State for Education
- David Lammy MP for Tottenham
- Catherine West MP for Hornsey and Wood Green
- Councillor Peray Ahmet, Leader of Haringey Council
- Councillor Zena Brabazon, Haringey Cabinet Member for Children, Schools & Families
- Andy Donald, Chief Executive of Haringey Council
- Ann Graham, Director of Haringey Children's Services
- Jane Edwards, Assistant Director for Schools and Learning in Haringey
- James Page, CEO of Haringey Education Partnership
- Marc Issacs, Haringey Council Head of News
- The NAHT
- The NEU
- The Guardian
- The Times
- BBC News
- ITN News
- Channel 4 News
- Schools Week