

# Teachers demand reform of school inspections

## Educators and trade unions unite in calls for Ofsted to scrap 'harsh' rating system

BETHAN STATON

When education inspectorate Ofsted came to Bishop Stopford last June, headteacher Jill Silverthorne was optimistic. The Midlands school had previously been rated outstanding.

So when inspectors judged it “requires improvement” after a two-day visit, it was a shock. “Devastated is the word,” Silverthorne said. “The inspection felt negative, like our strengths didn’t seem to matter.”

She is not alone in her frustrations. Headteachers have long criticised Ofsted for piling pressure and unfair judgments on school leaders.

News of the death by suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry in January after a critical report by the watchdog has unleashed anger this week, with critics saying the inspection regime is damaging the education system it is supposed to improve. In a charged debate on the regulator’s role, some teachers have called for the body to scrap its grading system, put a higher value on staff wellbeing or be suspended.

“The dam has burst,” said Andrew Morrish, founder of Headrest, an organisation that provides support for headteachers. “There’s no goodwill in the system now.”

Founded in 1992, Ofsted is the arm’s-length government body that

inspects and regulates English education, from nurseries to training providers and fostering agencies. Inspectors visit primary and secondary schools every four years. Their reports give abrupt judgments: outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate.

Poorly rated schools are subject to further inspections or, in some cases, a requirement to join a grouping of schools called an academy trust, which often means a change in leadership.

The government has defended the role of Ofsted in maintaining educational standards. The Department for Education said the regulator played a “crucial role” in ensuring quality and protecting children’s safety.

Former Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw this week told the BBC the “vast majority” of schools welcomed inspections, which supported them to improve and acted as a “spur” to rising standards over the past 30 years.

But some headteachers say they dread “getting the call” alerting them of

an inspection. Alan Lee, chief executive of Bedfordshire Schools Trust, which runs 10 schools in England, said this week he had received “positive and affirming” Ofsted visits. He added these could also be “harsh” and have a “detrimental impact on careers and lives”.

Morrish said many headteachers he supports described reports as subjective, unrepresentative and difficult to challenge.

Education experts concede such complaints are not new. “There have been longstanding concerns about the validity of Ofsted judgments,” Natalie Perera, chief executive of the Education Policy Institute, a think-tank, said.

EPI has found that schools with a negative grade risk becoming “stuck” in poor performance, as they become less attractive to teachers and families. The pressures are compounded by burnout caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, reduced funding and teaching strikes.

According to the National Foundation for Education Research, a think-tank,

teacher vacancies have nearly doubled since before the pandemic. Silverthorne said the pressure of inspections was a factor in school leaders considering leaving the profession.

This year, tensions have been high after a reversal of an exemption on “outstanding” schools being inspected led to many being revisited after a long period. Some, like Bishop Stopford, were substantially downgraded.

This was the case at Perry’s school, Caversham Primary. Judged outstanding in 2009 and exempt for 13 years, its inspection in November said it was “welcoming and vibrant”. But it also identified safeguarding issues, in areas such as staff vetting or supervision in children’s breaks, which affected safety. The school was judged inadequate.

After Perry died in January, her family said it was the result of “intolerable pressure” from Ofsted.

This week, three of the four teaching unions called for Ofsted inspections to be suspended and for an official review to be carried out. Unions said Ofsted’s accountability processes must better prioritise staff wellbeing, be less punitive and replace the “blunt” grades with a more nuanced report card, an idea backed by the Labour party.

Ofsted’s chief inspector Amanda Spielman responded that the debate on removing the grading system was “legitimate” but stood firmly by inspections in their current form, saying grades were an “accessible summary of a school’s strengths and weaknesses”. She added that stopping inspections would not be in children’s “best interests”.



Unison members honour Ruth Perry and hand in a petition yesterday — PA