

Principal's letter to Ofsted responding to the most recent 2019 report

17th February 2020

This is not a lecture on the relative strengths and limitations of the 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1992 Education (schools) Act. The marketisation of our education system works for the overwhelming majority of pupils and parents but equally, the negative consequences of these changes (on some pupils) are well established/documentated. We exist to dampen and neutralise some of the most repugnant effects of a system that *can* lend itself to putting the needs of an institution before the needs of individual pupils. This is not an appeal, neither should it be seen as a complaint, I understand the constraints within which you operate, I understand that universal inspection criteria need to be applied universally, I understand that the methodological design of a framework has to be based on the assumption that an 'ideal type' exists, but I would be doing everyone (who has a stake in my vision of education) a disservice if I didn't clearly and formally communicate my concerns about the direction in which Ofsted and the new inspection framework are heading. I welcome the noble intentions behind the latest changes to the inspection framework but its implementation may not be achieving its own objectives and the impact of this has the potential to be utterly devastating.

We work with the children and parents who have have been 'gamed', the 'silt' that has been shifted by schools judged (by you) to be outstanding. We work with those encouraged to leave, made to feel like they 'have to' leave and those who have been formally and permanently excluded. We work with the victims recovering from horrific acts of bullying that often take place at schools you deem 'safe'. We work with the ex bullies, languishing at home, in study centres or in pupil referral units, still paying for an awful mistake that they deeply regret and desperate for a second chance. We work with children struggling to manage a variety of mental health problems ranging from suicidal ideation and self harm to various eating disorders that have all developed while attending schools where the safeguarding is judged to have been of the highest quality. Of course, we also work with perfectly healthy young people who simply do not feel like they are getting the help, support and attention from existing schools/teachers. We work. Our track record speaks for itself. This is

why parents, pupils, LEA's and health professionals far and wide contact me every year. When other schools give up, we step in. When parents and pupils feel that an industrial education system, educating in 'batches', takes no account of their child's individuality, needs and interests, we step in. We are not specialist providers, we are not reinventing the wheel. We simply offer small class sizes, inspiring subject specialists (who are able to motivate and stimulate) and above all a collegiate environment underpinned by warmth, support, trust and mutual respect. And it works. This is recognised by all who pass through our doors. All but you.

To be clear, I am only able to offer children, parents and partners what they need because of my relative indifference to the college's performance statistics, position on league tables and indeed Ofsted reports. This is not to say that I am indifferent to the attainment, safety, happiness, progress and performance of my pupils, quite the opposite, nothing else matters.

Allow me to illustrate and qualify the difference between these two things. This morning, I met a pupil currently attending an 'outstanding' school. As I listened attentively to her story, I found myself scribbling, as I often do, 'TWS' on the back of her interview form, which, stands for 'Typical Wentworth Student'. Her attendance this year averages out at 20%. She is suffering from anxiety and depression and has not been able to attend as much as she would like. On the occasions that she does feel resilient enough to attend, the school and teachers 'make her feel inadequate' and this heightens her anxiety and leads to a destructive cycle of school refusal and further anxiety. Leaders have now told her (and her mother) that she should seek alternative provision, that she cannot simply pick and choose which lessons she attends and that she is in violation of the school's behaviour policy. Understandably, neither she nor her mother wish to remain where they are not wanted. Job done. Outstanding.

My experience of pupils with this type of profile informs me that she will probably join Wentworth in September. The first problem we will resolve are her subject choices, which, have been made to satisfy the interests of the institution (timetables, under populated subjects, cohort sizes etc) rather than an authentic consideration of what her interests are/were. She will spend the first two weeks of September sitting in on a variety of subjects that she has never been exposed to, choosing from a broad range of options, typically not available in many other schools. Her decision (which we will clearly help with) will, therefore, be based on a personally informed choice/experience that goes far beyond the promotional blurb of a course outline, an open day

event or what others may think is right for her. She will sign up for a one year intensive course of 3 A levels, her self esteem will flourish and she will feel safe, happy and (crucially) she will feel (for the first time in a long time) that she is making progress. She will achieve or exceed her potential in her A level exams and feel resilient enough to go on to university. She will visit us regularly with updates of how she is doing and her parents will be eternally grateful. During her time with us her attendance will probably average out at 80%, which, by any other measure, would be viewed as miraculous. Yet, as this falls significantly below the national average, your crude measurements might consider this as 'inadequate' or 'requiring improvement'.

Why did her previous school 'push her out'? Why are we in a position to meet her needs? Why will their attendance appear spectacular while ours will be found wanting? You see, I cannot question the reliability of your judgments. That is to say, reliability being about replicability and consistency, if you were to visit us again, with the same framework and a different inspector, the outcome/judgment would be the same. The same is probably true of the 'outstanding' school x referenced above. No, the reliability of your judgments are not in question, it is the *validity* of them that is so problematic. Your inspectors have not measured what they set out to measure, this report in no way reflects the educational reality of our school. It can't. Perhaps it never will. Perhaps it never can.

So, why do I care? I mentioned a *relative* indifference to your judgments. Pupil first. This does not mean that what you publish about us does not matter. It matters to the morale of my staff and students who have to live with the stigma of working in an 'inadequate' school. It matters to our partners in local authorities who may now struggle to release funds, affecting our ability to make a real difference to vulnerable young people's lives. It matters to prospective parents who will never read this letter. My fear is that there will be real world consequences of this judgment that constitute nothing less than a human tragedy. I allowed myself to believe that things were moving in the right direction following our previous inspection and the introduction of the new framework but it is now clear that your veneration of reliability at the expense of validity is incapable of seeing us for what we are.

Rest assured, I accept my obligations to ensure that all independent school standards are met and plans are already afoot to ensure that they are, indeed, some of the regulatory 'failures' that your inspectors identified were resolved before they had time to leave the building. I will endeavour to make sure that some of the more time and resource

consuming changes or a plan for them, such as a compulsory programme of PE for our GCSE pupils and the installation of appropriate showering facilities, are all in place before your next visit. I am caught, Kafkaesque, between hoping for change and longing for the ink to dry on this new framework before it changes again. Your institution and this new framework are under the microscope like at no other point in your history. As the calls for your abolition/reform grow ever more deafening from an ever more diverse range of sectional interests, you owe it to yourselves *and* those of us who still believe that you have a role, purpose and function to get this right.