# National Education Union condemns Ofsted inspections as unsafe and calls for radical reform



The National Education Union (NEU) has voiced strong criticism of the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted), warning that the inspection body places teachers in "imminent serious danger" and that its proposed new report cards will fail to resolve the "crisis in trust and reliability" felt by education professionals. These concerns were prominently raised during the union’s annual conference held in Harrogate on Wednesday.

A significant motion passed at the conference calls for the NEU executive to intensify its campaign to "expose the harm, damage and cover up" attributed to Ofsted. The motion advocates for the establishment of an "effective and fair" school improvement system that eliminates "ranking and shaming" practices associated with the current inspection model. It also asserts that union members who take protective action due to evidence of serious danger posed by Ofsted inspections to their safety should receive the union’s full support.

In 2023, government policy saw the scrapping of the traditional Ofsted headline grades for overall school effectiveness, which had categorised schools as outstanding, good, requires improvement, or inadequate. This decision followed widespread criticism after the death of headteacher Ruth Perry, who took her own life in January 2023 after Ofsted downgraded Caversham Primary School in Reading from the highest to lowest rating. The downgrade was based on safeguarding concerns. The incident cast a spotlight on the pressure Ofsted inspections can place on school leaders.

Jennifer Cooper, an NEU executive member, spoke at the conference about the continued dissatisfaction with the inspection process. Speaking to mylondon.news, she said: "We hoped that Ruth Perry’s death would result in change. But instead, the new Nando-style spice chart with its patronising ratings just reinforces to us that we and our children are judged as data, numbers and colours on an AI chart. Let’s be clear, Ofsted hasn’t listened, the Government hasn’t listened."

Ofsted is currently consulting on plans to introduce a new colour-coded report card system for grading schools across various areas such as attendance, inclusion and behaviour. The system would grade schools from "causing concern" (red) through stages requiring "attention" and finally to levels described as "secure," "strong," and "exemplary" (shades of green). Critics within the education sector argue this system does not address their primary concerns.

Adding to the controversy, Amanda Spielman, who was Ofsted’s chief inspector during the period which included the scrutiny following Mrs Perry’s death, has recently been awarded a peerage and admitted to the House of Lords on nomination by the Conservative Party. Paul Arnold, a conference delegate from Reading, labelled this appointment as "an insult to all of us," reflecting the frustration felt by educators still grappling with the ramifications of previous inspection regimes.

Another poignant contribution came from teacher Alice Butterton from Brent, north London. Speaking emotionally about her negative experience of an Ofsted inspection that concluded with an “inadequate” rating, she compared the school’s atmosphere after the inspection to that faced by Ruth Perry. Butterton said, “Ofsted is random, unaccountable and dangerous.” Her account was met with a standing ovation from delegates, highlighting the widespread impact inspections have on school communities. She recounted how the inspection transformed her school into an "unsmiling and fearing institution."

A survey involving over 12,000 NEU teacher members indicated that 57% believe that Ofsted inspections negatively affect their mental health. Professor Julia Waters, sister of Ruth Perry, further criticised Ofsted’s response to the coroner’s findings on Mrs Perry’s death, stating: "Ofsted continues to ignore the coroner’s findings regarding Ruth’s death and overlooks multiple reports recommending change. Their inspection system still prioritises transparency and ease of message to parents over teacher welfare, putting educators in serious danger." She insisted that the proposed new system "must be rejected."

Despite criticism from educators, a YouGov survey last month found that two-thirds of parents in England favour the new Ofsted report cards, with 86% describing the new style reports as easy to understand. Some 84% found the colour-coding system helpful in grading schools. These results suggest a divide between parents’ preferences and educators’ concerns.

Voicing his concerns about the proposed inspection reforms, Pepe Di’Iasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), addressed the NEU conference and described the plans as "a car crash waiting to happen." He added that he believes the system is "doomed to quickly fall into disrepair and disrepute."

Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the NEU, called for substantial reform but stressed the need for change to be well-considered and not rushed. Speaking at the conference, he stated: "The reality is that Ofsted’s culture of fear leads to unsustainable workload, damages mental health and drives many out of the classroom. It is a broken model. We need to see radical reform – but reform must be right and cannot be rushed through for the sake of it." He urged Ofsted and the Education Secretary to "pause and listen closely to the profession before it is too late," advocating for a new system that is "supportive, effective and fair."

The discussion surrounding the effectiveness, impact, and future direction of school inspections in England continues to be a critical point of debate among educators, policy-makers, parents, and inspection authorities.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://neu.org.uk/abolish-ofsted> - This URL from the National Education Union discusses the need for reform or abolition of Ofsted due to concerns that it causes more harm than good, aligning with the NEU's criticism of Ofsted’s inspection practices and their push for a fair school improvement system.
* <https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/politics/ofsted-schools-labour-bridget-phillipson-b2690782.html> - This news article covers the backlash against Labour's new Ofsted report card proposals, which are criticized by educators and unions for not addressing core issues with the inspection system. It also mentions the context of Ruth Perry’s death and its impact on the discussion about Ofsted inspections.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/independent-research-shows-high-parent-support-for-ofsteds-report-card-proposals> - This government news report highlights the positive reception of Ofsted's report card proposals among parents, as indicated by a YouGov survey, contrasting with the criticisms from educators and unions.
* <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/england-naht-bridget-phillipson-b2693493.html> - This article discusses the majority of school leaders rejecting Ofsted’s proposed report card system, citing it as ill-thought-out and likely to increase workload and stress on educators, further highlighting the divide between educators and the proposed reforms.
* <https://www.mumsnet.com/talk/_chat/5268598-ofsteds-new-report-cards-for-schools-are-a-pile-of-bollocks> - This discussion forum on Mumsnet reflects criticism about the complexity and potential subjectivity of Ofsted's new report card system, echoing concerns from educators about increased administrative burdens and inconsistent grading.