

Opinion

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Re-prioritising data in Ofsted inspections is a backwards step

At the risk of “annoying successful headteachers”, Matthew Tate uses his school as a case study to show why the inspection framework is getting the big calls right

It was with great frustration and some anger that I read an article in these pages shortly after my school’s ‘good’ Ofsted judgment where fellow professionals – who in my view should know better – were happy to imply that the judgment must be wrong.

The basis for their assessment was simply that the GCSE outcomes were below national average. Former chief inspector Michael Wilshaw seems to agree with them. He recently said it was “ridiculous” that schools with low outcomes can gain a ‘good’ grading, adding that such results “annoy successful headteachers”. In both instances, the conclusion is that the current Ofsted framework is not fit for purpose. They are wrong, and my school proves it.

Hartsdown is a high school in a selective area. Our cohort is mainly white working-class with over 60 per cent on free school meals, around 15 per cent Slovakian Roma and an average reading age of seven on arrival. Our community is highly mobile, with only 71 per cent of our year 11s starting with

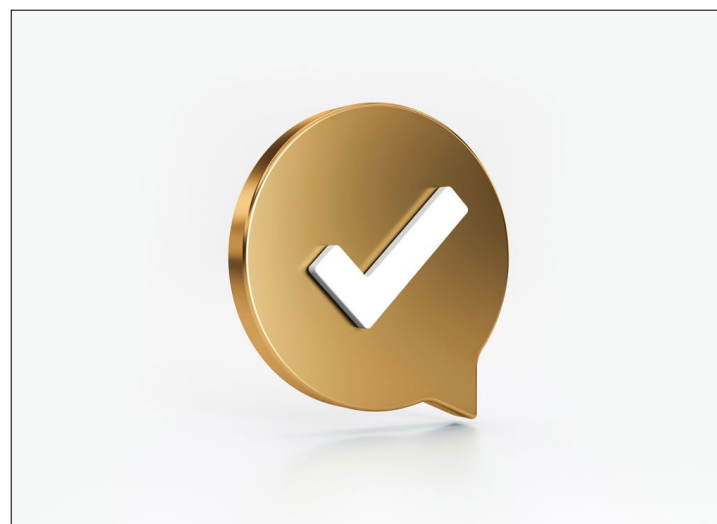
us in year 7. Around 20 per cent of our cohort are being supported by social services or early help.

When I became its headteacher in 2016, it was a broken school. It had played the accountability game and lost, and financial changes and a drop in rolls had finished the job. It was undersubscribed in every year group.

My primary questions were, “Is this school good enough for my child?” and “Would I be happy if my child had SEND or childhood traumas and got this level of support?” In 2016, my answer was “no” and my promise to parents was that I would make the changes required so that I could answer “yes”. With the support of Coastal Academies Trust, I began to make changes with a view to the school’s long-term future.

When Ofsted visited in 2018, the inspectors remarked from the start that our results (then in the bottom 10 per cent nationally) meant we were likely to be ‘inadequate’. But they genuinely wanted to come to a fair judgment. They met with some of our most challenging students, some of whom had been excluded from other schools.

They saw our mental health provision, our work with social services and the police and our efforts to ensure our children’s



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basic needs and safety are met, including 24/365 safeguarding support. The final judgment was well-evidenced and fair: we still needed to improve but we were rapidly moving in the right direction, and a traditional curriculum model would be unlikely to meet the needs of our students.

This encouraged us to be radical. We remodelled our curriculum, working with Cliftonville Primary School, an ‘outstanding’ school, to develop a new kind of key stage 3. Instead of 12 teachers a week, our pupils have one classroom for 20 hours a week with two main teachers – one for literacy-based subjects and one for numeracy-based subjects. The rest of their time is spent accessing our enrichment curriculum.

When Ofsted returned in 2021, our results had improved but were still poor. Under the previous framework, we would not have been able to achieve better than ‘requires improvement’. Under the new one, the team was as

challenging as before and equally concerned about our results, but a different approach led them to a different conclusion.

I could argue that subsequent results confirm that judgment. After all, this year we are the 11th most-improved mainstream school nationally. But it is ridiculous to judge a school primarily on data.

I like data. But, used properly, data drives questions rather than providing answers. Of course, results are crucial to pupils and should be part of the conversation. They are, however, a poor proxy for how good a school is.

No one is surprised that a complex cardiac unit’s death rate is higher than a cottage hospital’s. So with schools serving vastly different constituencies.

Would I be happy for my child to attend Hartsdown? He does. He has moved from a local grammar school and he is thriving. An increasing number of the staff’s children also attend. What better endorsement of a good school could you wish for?