

Challenging an inspection report

one school's story



Miles Coverdale is a happy, thriving primary school at the heart of its multicultural community in Shepherd's Bush, west London. In the last three years pupils' academic achievement has been transformed, with the proportion of 11-year-olds gaining level 4 in maths up from 48 to 90 per cent. Science results are even better, with 93 per cent gaining level 4 last year.

The school's 245 pupils can choose from 15 extra-curricular clubs and benefit from educational partnerships with the BBC, Queen's Park Rangers FC and the Royal Opera House, among others. The playgrounds and many interior spaces have been refurbished, and a full cohort of governors plays an active role in school life.

In January Ofsted gave the school notice to improve.

"I've been through many inspections in previous schools, and I've never encountered anything so negative," says Tara Baig, head teacher at Miles Coverdale since September 2008. "The whole process was flawed and biased. It disregarded my opinions as head teacher, the views of the governors, our school improvement partner and the local authority."

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"As governors, we were happy to be having an Ofsted inspection," says Vic Daniels, Miles Coverdale's vice chair of governors. "We're really pleased with what Tara's achieved, and welcomed the chance to have that recognised. But the inspection seemed designed to rip the guts out of the school. The destructive impact on staff is unforgivable and it can't be good for the children."

Ofsted's report was particularly critical of pupil attendance. It focused not on recent improvements, but on figures going back three years – before Tara joined the school. In giving the 'notice to improve', Ofsted imposed a target of increasing attendance to 93 per cent – a figure the school had already achieved!

Tara is angry at Ofsted's failure to acknowledge the human stories behind the figures. She relates stories of pupils unable to come to school following the shooting or attempted suicide of a parent, and of families taking their children abroad for weeks at a time for cultural reasons. In cases such as these, staff work with the local authority to ensure the safeguarding of the children involved.

"The local authority advises us to keep the children on our roll while we work together to bring them back to school," Tara explains. "Teachers give up their time, doing their utmost to support these children, and it feels that we're being penalised for this."

As with attendance, Ofsted downgraded the quality of teaching based on data from before Tara joined the school. Though the majority of lessons were judged good, inspectors deemed the teaching only satisfactory. Their judgements for academic outcomes were based on figures going back over three years, which Tara feels makes the inspection report misleading to parents.

Both Vic and Tara are frustrated that the school was downgraded in some aspects for petty reasons. For example, when the inspectors came there was a problem with the electronic gates. The local authority contractor had been due to fix them, but postponed the work because of snow. The inspector said the school couldn't be graded outstanding for 'pupils feeling safe' because of the electrical fault.

Despite Miles Coverdale's numerous and successful community partnerships, the lead inspector told Tara the school could not be rated outstanding for 'promoting community cohesion' because it didn't have links with a rural or suburban school.

Tara points out contradictions between statements from senior Ofsted staff and her own experiences – for example Christine Gilbert's comment in the March edition of *The Teacher* that "safeguarding grades of satisfactory or good do not limit the overall effectiveness of those grades". She refers to a magazine interview in which Miriam Rosen, Ofsted's director of education, says schools will not be marked down for minor administrative errors. Miles Coverdale was downgraded because a few school policies did not have a signature or review date.

Vic is a writer, and regularly comes into school to give writing workshops. Other governors help out in their specialist areas of maths and IT. "The Ofsted inspector wasn't interested in the educational value of any of this; she just wanted to know if we'd all had Criminal Records Bureau checks," he says.

"I used to be a bank inspector. We were there not to destroy, but to help and support. Ofsted was the opposite. I give up my free time to help the school. This process made me feel 'what's the point?'. It's so difficult to get the right people into schools as governors, and when Ofsted behave like this it drives people out."

When Ofsted gave the school 'notice to improve', Tara decided immediately to challenge it, supported by her school improvement partner and the local authority. After moderation, the notice was removed – a rare achievement – and some satisfactory grades were lifted to good. But Tara was far from happy. She and her governors submitted a formal complaint, and she also contacted the NUT.

"I read a piece in *The Teacher* saying 'tell us your experiences of Ofsted' and I had to let the NUT know what we'd been through," she says. "My local NUT secretary Dennis Charman and John Bangs in the union's education department have been incredibly supportive, which has given me confidence. I'm thankful to the NUT for taking a strong stance on this issue, challenging Ofsted and supporting schools that have been treated unfairly."

Tara's advice to others going through the new style Ofsted inspection is: "If you feel any injustice, challenge it. Teachers accept inspections are part of their accountability to children. But

inspectors need to be accountable for their judgements too. And they need to acknowledge and rectify mistakes."



Miles Coverdale: a happy, thriving primary school

