



Dear Parents/ Carers

Now the report is finally with us, I can be more specific than I have been in recent weeks. The inspection was ungraded which means we stay good but they want to come back in 18 months to check up on us. The report was complementary in some places, really quite critical in some others.

Rest assured we understand how the world works. We will do what they want of us and move on from there- we are pragmatic enough, more than capable enough and passionate enough about our school that of course we will set about this efficiently and without fuss (once this letter is written). You have my word. You are our community; we are committed to doing right by you; we are answerable to you.

#### Regarding Ofsted

Please do not imagine we are either browbeaten by the process or agreeable to the outcome. You should know that the report was delayed because we lodged both a challenge at the first stage of the process and a 5000-word complaint at the second. We accept that as a school we must be held to account so we do not object to the existence of Ofsted, only to how it operates in its present form. We would contend 1) that it is inadequate as a tool for parents and 2) that it is not accountable enough to the teaching profession and the resulting relationship can feel abusive.

Ofsted judges only how well a school is doing what Ofsted wants it to be doing. If the Ofsted formula or framework (the criteria by which they judge you) could be the gold standard for education, this would be marvellous and make us all happy, but it can't. Sadly, or perhaps thankfully, education/ learning cannot be bottled down to a formula. If it could, we would all be doing it. I can assure you. Of course the only way an inspection can be carried out in 1 ½ days (barring immortal levels of knowledge and wisdom) is to work to a formula and tick said school off against said formula. Does this represent a seeking of truth? Does it reliably get to grips with an individual school's challenges/ strengths/ worth/ impact/ personality? Does it actually raise standards of teaching and care? Does it raise aspiration and willingness? Does it support professional people to do a better job? I don't think so.

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On a personal level after 8 Ofsted, 5 as a head teacher, I have neither recognised my schools in each report nor gained much from my extensive experience of them. Given it's a snapshot, evidence, with conclusions/ judgements attached, must be gathered so rapidly that accuracy is far from guaranteed. As one head put it 'we get a routine from Ofsted of 'move fast and break things' as opposed to a routine of 'question, contemplate, challenge' which is far from commendable.' In that 1 ½ days a single inspector is set the task of telling a group of experienced, thoughtful professionals things about themselves that they have apparently failed to work out for themselves after 15 years of working in said school. And please don't assume an Ofsted inspector is some kind of higher being (I even tried it once) – they are just education people trained to evaluate against a formula.

And yet none of this comes for free- working to tick Ofsted's boxes can consume significant amounts of professional time and energy. This effort is never inspired- it is not driven by the belief that Ofsted are guiding you, through their formula, to the promised land for children- it is driven instead by fear. Schools inevitably end up narrowing what they offer to their children to ensure they don't trip up. Ofsted would claim this is not what they want but its daft to imagine any other outcome when the stakes are so high. This is a crying shame and it's not something we feel comfortable doing.

I'm going to make one pointed assertion at this point, before I talk about the report - that my staff and I are the best we've ever been. How can I make such a haughty claim? For the simple fact that we are constantly learning, constantly moving forward. If nothing else the challenges of the last two years have acted like an accelerant, developing us quickly as people as well as practitioners. Has this served to keep Ofsted's agenda in focus? – probably not but we know what we're doing and you know we care. Am I being over generous here in my estimation of our powers- no, but I do know of some other people who are being overly generous about theirs!

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**Regarding the report:**

The perceived wisdom here would be to come half way, accept some of the criticism but point out where we have some misgivings. Do this Nick, otherwise you will sound too complacent and/or defensive and/or opinionated and this especially so if your school has just been accused of having an over-generous opinion of itself. So here goes:-

1. We accept there is more we can still do to develop phonics and early reading- no more so, as ever, than any number of other areas of school practice – but something as important as teaching reading is always worthy of refining. We accept the fact that we have got on with delivering on our own priorities (some of them quite pressing given the impact of Covid on the school's mental health and SEN profile) rather than listening to the mood music on early reading in the new Ofsted framework.
2. We accept that our move to a different structure in Foundation Stage and KS1 (as in a change from 3x Rec/Yr 1 classes and 2x Yr 2 classes) and the subsequent physical moving of classes and year groups from one side of the building to the other was disruptive. Don't get me wrong – it is/was absolutely the right move but in the immediate aftermath of this kind of move, there will always be a period of time spent establishing new systems and working out what works. Hence perhaps concerns raised about expectations and systems.
3. We accept that we still have work to do on 'behaviour,' in particular some attitudes to learning- notwithstanding this is a far more complex issue than something as simple as raising expectations would remedy- an issue that includes in the mix the emotional dysregulation of some pupils and many others struggling socially and emotionally.

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4. We know that we could work more closely with the Trust and the Trust know we have committed to doing this already.

However the wording of this report with its weak evidence base, its negativity and its sweeping conclusions about my staff and our school feels like it badly misses the mark. It has left my staff, already struggling after a tough couple of years, in a far worse state. We are not perfect- we never profess to be so- but they are a talented, committed, compassionate group of people who do not deserve to be treated in this way. Sadly there are plenty of staff in other local schools finding themselves in a similar predicament.

#### Expectations

As a head teacher of 20 years' experience and with a deep and affirming knowledge of my staff, I refute in the strongest terms the accusation that our teachers lack high expectations. And 'accusation' is the only way to define this statement given you are addressing good and experienced teachers who amply demonstrate they want the best for their pupils on a daily basis. Essentially these staff are being criticized because they were behaving as you would expect professional teachers to behave- by being responsive to need- as opposed to blindly following dogma. Yes, they take educational attainment seriously but they know their jobs to involve young human beings who they need to relate to and care for and critically, in this context, for whom they need to stay responsive to need. This assertion by the inspector was based on a paucity of evidence and we would contend the conclusions were wholly unreasonable. If you want to get a truer measure of expectations, look to the strong results in 2023 which are some of the highest in the Trust and well above National average in reading, writing and math's both at the end of KS2 SATS and in year groups throughout the school.

#### Reading

To suggest that my staff do not know well enough how to teach children to read and have not received appropriate training is absurd. This is the kind of absurdity likely to happen when you take one area of reading research and turn it into a framework for inspection. In the process the research that should have caused thinking has instead become dogma and then yet more unreasonable conclusions are only one small

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step away. Does this happen anywhere else? I'm not sure it does. We're talking about professionals here for whom teaching children to read is their bread and butter. It's like inspecting a hospital and informing the nurses that they don't know how to take a patient's temperature.

Yes, our phonics results dropped for a couple of years post Covid but previous to that they have been in the high 90's and this coming year they are predicted to be back there again. Early reading is not just phonics of course but if you look at last year's KS2 reading results (ie what the children achieve after their reading journey with us), they were also high- 91% of pupils achieved age related expectation. To make these kind of sweeping conclusions about reading at Minchinhampton without considering data as part of the evidence is indicative of a formula gone awry - it lacks common sense.

#### Generous

We are all appalled at the phrase, 'The school has an overly generous view of its own effectiveness' which, to an uninitiated reader, implies arrogance or ignorance on our part – both completely unfounded. If anything the school is defined by the humble acceptance that we are not there yet, that we never will be and that we will never stop trying. In their response to my complaint, Ofsted said this simply referred to the fact that we had graded ourselves higher than we merited at present. Ironically when asked to evaluate the school, I sidestepped the good and outstanding labels and described us instead as 'enough.' Perhaps this is just modern life as we know it- to be enough is now an over generous ambition! Heaven alone knows what this assertion was based on! Perhaps we are too independent in our thinking (the enough label was a bit obtuse) or too enamored of autonomy (a word presently out of favour in education).

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### Regarding next steps on our School Development Plan

The development areas below were already established before Ofsted arrived. Clearly the first two in this list are now important for the sake of satisfying Ofsted as well as ourselves:-

- Well before Ofsted arrived we had identified phonics as a concern, had engaged the local English Hub and had a detailed action plan in place (as you would expect). We have training booked for all staff in January and have just spent nearly £6000 on resources.  
But please don't take this as evidence that staff don't know how to teach phonics and reading- this is about fine tuning and tightening up in response to the post Covid drop in attainment.
- We are looking to develop further our set up in the Early Years and KS1. Whole staff training has been booked and a well-respected expert in Early Years and KS1 has been engaged to work with staff on this journey towards turning continuous provision and play-based learning into a strength for the whole school and not just the infants.  
While the structure of N/R through to Yr 2 is very new, the staff are experienced, well trained and very good at what they do.
- We want to continue to build our expertise around Special Educational Needs which has transformed practice over the last two years. While this work has been, and continues to be, driven by high levels of need, the positive impact it has had on the overall school ethos has been profound.
- We want to devote time and money to better supporting staff wellbeing, including a number of measures, ranging from improving the physical environment of the school to providing weekly supervision for teaching staff. Our staff have been through a lot over the last couple of years and now Ofsted have unhelpfully waded in. They are our most treasured 'resource' and we need to support them better.

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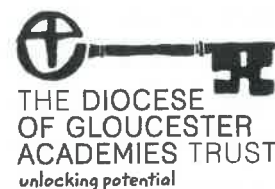
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Whatever we focus on going forward, we will continue to look to take account of the whole child and all their needs. We are presently navigating troubling waters with our children. Somehow as a society at this time we have created a seed bed for poor mental health in our young people- it is reaching epidemic proportions. This doesn't require finger pointing or sticky plasters, it requires joined up thinking. It requires everyone to take responsibility, including accounting for the unforeseen consequences of their actions and certainly included in this are those people and institutions further up the tree (like Ofsted) whose actions have an even more profound impact. Be under no illusion pressure and negativity filter their way down into the lives of our children in one way or another.

As I have said we will do what we need to do – we are pragmatic – and when a full and proper inspection arrives on our doorstep in 18 months' time (this one presenting more as brief and thoughtless), I can guarantee they will be kicked into touch with flying colours.

Thank you for your ongoing support and partnership. Know I'm very happy to talk this all through with any parent who has queries or concerns so don't hesitate to ask.

Kind regards

Mr Moss

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