

# A Less Than Outstanding Trend

Schools are losing their outstanding rating, but why?

Ofsted have done their best to downplay the fact that 75 per cent of outstanding schools have lost their designation after re-inspection. But it remains a rather startling number and can't fail to call into question the validity of their original grades and the inspection process itself.

Spielman maintains that the level of re-designation is an 'inevitable' phenomenon following on from some outstanding schools not being inspected for up to 10 years.

Unfortunately, this explanation—it's more of an observation than an analysis—throws up some further uncomfortable questions. Why is it inevitable? Why is exemption from inspection afforded to outstanding schools leading to such complacency that these schools subside into mediocrity, or worse, on such a wholesale basis? If it were the case in just one or two outstanding schools, such assumptions of complacency might be more plausible.

Some comments, possibly emanating from Ofsted itself, have suggested that these 330 de-designated outstanding schools were self-selected, in that they gave enough cause for concern to warrant re-inspection despite exemption.

Fair enough. No evidence has been forthcoming to support this proposition. But in any case, why did this large number slide so dramatically?

## Headteachers matter

The split between primary and secondary de-designations might hold some clues. Primary schools far exceed secondary schools in this 'loss' of status and one can speculate that size of the school might be a significant factor. The loss of an 'outstanding' headteacher might have a much more profound and immediate impact in a small school with a limited number of other staff than in a secondary school, which is much more of a large, semi autonomous system where the headteacher is more a helmsperson than day-to-day decisive force. Six-ten years, the number during which many of the outstanding schools had not been inspected, corresponds to the length of tenure many heads serve in post. And it coincides with an era in which it has not been easy to fill primary headship posts ...because of the extreme pressures of the job created by, yes, Ofsted.



## Small schools disproportionately affected by variation

With smaller intakes, any variation in cohort year-to-year can also have disproportionate effects, turning great schools and great outstanding leaders into Ofsted-induced basket cases overnight.

School Leadership Today reported on how this happened to primary head Suzanne O'Connell when her previously lauded school in Nuneaton had a less able cohort for one year. Its impact corrected itself over two years and the school once more became high achieving, but by then the head was so disillusioned at the way she was treated that she left the profession for good.

## The ground keeps shifting

In, six years or more of non-inspections, there have been at least two new Ofsted Frameworks, not including this current one, as well as countless shifts of emphases and drives. Almost yearly shifts, in fact, as the political winds have changed.

One year, the quality of the governing board was a key component of the Ofsted grading, another it was special needs, yet another it was data analysis and tracking and now it is safeguarding, where any shortcoming could drop a school from outstanding to inadequate without stopping at Go.

Ten, or even six, years ago, the schools could have been performing against completely different criteria to ones they were recently judged on. Add to this the notorious variability of Ofsted inspectors and this new craze for the Curriculum and for Engaging Teaching and Learning, and you have got a situation where de-designation is 'inevitable' because the criteria have morphed so much.

### Issues of motivation

What if the awarding of the designation was, itself, the very cause of a school's decline. Once you are at the top, the only way to go is down, and it has been suggested that the panic this creates in a school leads to an increasing obsession with results, with reducing risk-taking and a marked narrowing of the focus of the school to 'achieve' in core EBacc subjects. The joy is sucked out of the school's mission. Senior posts become harder to fill because expectations are so high, so any loss of personnel is almost possible to replace with the same quality. Could the designation itself set up a downward spiral?

Perhaps the most disturbing explanation is a variation of the previous thesis, which is the one put forward by Ofsted itself... that the lack of inspection is the cause for these schools' fall from grace. It proposes that once the behaviourist stick of sanctions in the form of poor or poorer designations is removed, schools withdraw from the effort of jumping through Ofsted's hoops and that, because of the power of the stick and carrot, there is no intrinsic motivation, and the search for continual improvement has been left behind.

### What is the point?

Regardless of the explanation, this situation suggests that the standard of 'Outstanding' is, at the very least, not sustainable and could even be something of a poisoned chalice.

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