

**Education**

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An open letter in response to concerns raised by Ofsted Regional Director Bradley Simmons

Dear parents, staff and residents of Swindon,

We were very surprised to receive a letter from Bradley Simmons, Regional Lead for Ofsted in the South West, which was sent to all headteachers, governors and senior leaders of education in Swindon.

In his letter and accompanying press release sent to the media, Mr Simmons says children in Swindon are being “failed at every level” by our schools.

This is despite Ofsted’s own assessment that:

- 98% of early years settings in Swindon are good or outstanding
- 92% of Swindon primary schools are good or outstanding: which is above the national average

The Council is also exceeding the target for a pledge announced last year as part of its Vision for Swindon to increase the percentage of Swindon primary schools graded good or outstanding to at the least the national average by March 2021.

However, the very existence of the pledge is recognition of the need to continuously improve the standard of education in Swindon. In May this year the Council’s Chief Executive and a number of education officers had a positive and open meeting with Mr Simmons, which he described as “encouraging” and “helpful”.

Furthermore, Ofsted inspectors from the South West ran school improvement training sessions for headteachers and governors in July and the Council, in partnership with Ofsted, arranged a follow-up session in September. All the work we have undertaken has been with Ofsted’s full knowledge and we believed we had its full support.

All primary inspections this term have been at least good with Nythe Primary School moving from Requires Improvement to Good.

Whilst phonics test results are lower than we would like at the end of Year 1, by the end of Year 2 children have caught up and are above the national average.

At the age of 11 at the end of primary school, Swindon pupils meet the national average for reading, mathematics and grammar, including punctuation and spelling. Writing results are lower this year and we recognise that, but it comes after the introduction of a new writing assessment. Swindon schools interpreted the guidance very strictly (as did Dorset for example) whereas other local authorities appear to have been much more generous in their judgements.

We fully expect writing results to improve next year as teachers adjust to the new system and be in line with the national average as in previous years. We feel the data that has been released has been used selectively and to say that schools have “failed” their pupils is overly harsh and indeed unfair. This is particularly the case as the test and assessment data is still unvalidated and the writing assessment has been recognised even by Ofsted as being insecure.

We share concerns about secondary education although we have some very good schools in the town such as Ridgeway, Lydiard Park, Warneford, Commonweal and St Joseph’s. GCSE results have continued to improve and we have seen marked improvements at Nova Hreod and Swindon Academy, which are managed by the United Learning Trust Academy chain.

In the new headline measure of pupils obtaining an A*-C grade in English and mathematics, Swindon pupils’ results improved by 5% against a national improvement of 3% and are now just 2% below the national average. Partnerships with good or outstanding schools are being put in place for Dorcan, Kingsdown, Isambard and Churchfields.

It is worth noting that all secondary schools bar one are academies being independent of the Council and are the responsibility of the Regional Schools Commissioner. Using the English Baccalaureate to criticise Swindon secondary schools is also unfair as many schools choose not to do this as it has a lack of focus on vocational and work-related learning.

We also share concerns about the relatively high level of fixed-term exclusions. This has been the subject of discussions by council officers with individual schools, the Swindon Secondary Headteachers group and at recent conferences in July and October. Behind this is the growing number of pupils diagnosed with social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH). A key target for the Council is to reduce the number of exclusions and to also better meet the needs of SEMH pupils.

There is no mention of the special schools sector in Swindon - five out of our six schools are good or outstanding with Uplands being named national school of the year in 2015/16. Lydiard Park Academy received national recognition for becoming a Leading Edge school for consistently demonstrating significant levels of progress, with pupils performing above the national average.

Swindon Borough Council, independently of Ofsted, set up an Education Strategy Board which has been operating for well over a year and includes a wide range of stakeholders including the Regional Schools Commissioner, who has responsibility for Academy performance. Its core purpose is to improve results in Swindon schools and to ensure all children and young people receive a good or better quality of education.

This is being developed into the 'Swindon Challenge Board' which will involve the Council providing considerable additional advice and support to schools.

The Council and its education department pride themselves on their openness and would welcome an open discussion with Mr Simmons about the issues he raises. He would also be very welcome to attend the Education Strategy Board to discuss his letter with headteachers and the Regional Schools Commissioners' office at their next meeting in December.

On a daily basis we see the good work that is going on in Swindon's schools. By making his views so public in this way, Mr Simmons must have recognised the demotivating impact they would have on teachers. In fact it has really angered and annoyed many headteachers of good and outstanding schools who are doing an excellent job providing high class education for children and young people whether they are in council maintained schools or academies.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with Mr Simmons so we can work together to improve education further for all children and young people in Swindon.

Yours Faithfully

Cllr David Renard, Leader of Swindon Borough Council

Cllr Fionuala Foley, Swindon Borough Council's Cabinet Member for Children's Services

John Gilbert, Chief Executive of Swindon Borough Council

Steve Colledge, chair of SASH (Swindon Association of Secondary Headteachers)

Gary Evans, chair of SAPH (Swindon Association of Primary Headteachers)