

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted

christopher.russell@ofsted.gov.uk



23 February 2016

Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, North West

Dear Sir or Madam

I am writing to express my serious concerns about the lack of improvement in outcomes for pupils in Knowsley.

In 2015, almost two thirds of school leavers failed to achieve five or more GCSE grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. I am sure you will agree that this is a shocking statistic. Outcomes over time demonstrate that the local education system in Knowsley has already failed a generation of young people. The most recent GCSE results suggest that this is set to continue for yet another generation.

The overall quality of education provided for the pupils in the area is poor. The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector highlighted that Knowsley was the worst area in England for secondary school inspection outcomes in 2014/15. Not one of the local secondary schools is currently judged to be good or outstanding. This means that nearly 5,000 pupils attend secondary schools that are simply not providing them with the quality of education they deserve.

The alarmingly high absence rates in Knowsley's schools do not bode well for children's safety and well-being, let alone the continuity of their learning. Similarly, the high number of pupils who are being excluded remains a concern. Ofsted knows from inspection evidence that the proportionate use of exclusion can lead to improvements in behaviour and attitudes to learning. Unfortunately in Knowsley, these very high exclusion rates have not had the necessary impact on the culture of too many schools. Therefore, young people are not leaving school with the positive attitudes they need to succeed in adult life.

The efforts made so far by a wide range of stakeholders have had little or no impact. For example, despite the clear steer in 2013 from Her Majesty's Inspectors

on where improvements in mathematics were required in local secondary schools, GCSE results have hardly improved in the intervening period.¹

Because of the poor education received and the weak outcomes achieved, too many pupils continue to leave school with limited options for the future. In the most recent published figures, for example, only 37% of the area's post-16 learners progressed to higher education, which was by far the lowest proportion in the region and well below the national figure of 48%. Similarly, in the same year, only 53% of 19-year-olds attained a level 2 qualification including English and mathematics, and only 35% of 19-year-olds attained a level 3 qualification. The national figures for these indicators were 66% and 57%, respectively. These statistics paint a bleak picture for the employment prospects for these young people.

Outcomes for children in local primary schools have been relatively strong. However, many parents of higher-attaining pupils in the last year of primary schools in Knowsley are choosing to send their children to secondary schools outside the area because of the poor performance of secondary schools in the area. This is deeply worrying and will have a profound impact on the balance of secondary school intakes at the age of 11.

There is clearly more to be done to ensure that pupils have a smooth transition into secondary school and that momentum is not lost. The same could also be said for their transition to post-16 provision. I have, therefore, asked inspectors to pay particular attention to the effectiveness of arrangements that schools have to support pupils through the transition to different phases of their education.

While pupils generally do well in Knowsley's primary schools, there is absolutely no room for complacency. Outcomes for children in the early years are now lagging behind both national and regional averages. The consequence of this is that many children in Year 1 classes are starting from very low baselines. Strategies need to be in place to ensure that teaching in these classes enables these pupils to catch up quickly. Again, we have asked our inspectors to look closely at early years provision and children's transition into Year 1.

I have no doubt about the individual commitment that each of you bring to the improvement agenda in Knowsley. I am aware, for example, of the regular communication between council officials and leaders of local secondary schools. However, underachievement is now so entrenched in some local schools that I do not believe any single stakeholder has the capacity to effect the necessary level of change. The steps taken so far to tackle the issues mentioned above have been too disparate and insufficiently strategic to bring about any significant improvement in secondary or post-16 outcomes.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/news/mathematics-teaching-must-improve-in-knowsley.

The Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2014/15 acknowledges that the landscape that schools now operate in has changed significantly. The report highlights, however, that regardless of school structures, improvement is dependent on effective partnership, oversight and challenge.

As leaders responsible for educating children in Knowsley, you will recognise the urgent need for radical and rapid improvement in a borough that has languished for far too long. Improvement will only be achieved if local leaders work together to embed a culture of high expectations from early years, to school and progression to post-16 level. Transition between the different phases of education should be well organised so that children and young people do not fail or underperform from one stage to another.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has repeatedly called for strong political will to drive educational improvement and has recognised the contribution that this made to the success, for example, of the London Challenge. It is vital that local politicians and Members of Parliament play their part in supporting the rapid improvement of secondary schools within Knowsley.

I will, of course, continue to monitor the impact of improvement through the inspections we carry out in the borough and will ensure that Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is kept informed about developments.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Russell".

Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, North West

Recipients:

Local Members of Parliament
Cabinet Member Schools Portfolio
Chief Executive, Knowsley Council
Executive Director (Children), Knowsley Council
Regional Schools Commissioner
Director of Education, Liverpool Anglican Diocese
Director of Education, Liverpool Archdiocese
The Rowan Learning Trust
The Dean Trust
The Adelaide Academy Trust
SS Simon and Jude Church of England Academy Trust

Principal, Knowsley College
Mersey Boroughs ITT Partnership
Associated Merseyside Partnership SCITT
Liverpool John Moores University
Edge Hill University
Liverpool Hope University
Knowsley First Alliance

cc. Department for Education