

Dame Kate Dethridge

Regional Schools Commissioner - North West London & South Central England

rsc.scnwlon@education.gov.uk

16<sup>th</sup> June 2022

Dear Dame Kate

We write to you today hoping that despite the recommendation of our Governing Board, you may take on board **our researched and considered opinion** as you make your recommendation to Baroness Barran about the future of Holland Park School.

Promises were made to the RBKC community following Grenfell; this is particularly poignant as we write to you having attended the five-year anniversary memorial on Tuesday. In the months after the Grenfell tragedy, **MPs assured residents that our voices would never be undermined or overlooked again**, yet here we are, once again wondering why we are being invalidated in a process by those with power over us.

Stakeholders have had no voice in this decision, despite being told that the engagement process would allow us one. Our involvement should have happened earlier to allow genuine consultation and inclusion. You will have seen from the stakeholder engagement process that **a significant majority spoke against United Learning**, but governors have not been swayed by the lack of support for their choice nor by the very valid reasons there is such strong opposition. We continue to state that **United Learning is not the right choice for our school** and that had governors allowed us a genuine consultation, they would have better understood the needs of our children and our community.

Last Friday (10<sup>th</sup> June), parents and teachers learnt that Holland Park School had been downgraded from Outstanding to Inadequate by OFSTED. Many of **the failings addressed in the report are directly attributable to the poor governance and oversight of individuals that have been in place for the past ten months**. A time period in which they have brought division and instability to our community and failed to stabilise the leadership of the school. It is unforgivable that governor 'experts' brought in to improve the school have made our children's educational experience worse in the time they have been in position.

Behaviour, for example, was noted to have declined. This has been the case since February when we were given a totally ineffective interim headteacher. He has been invisible, out of his depth and inadequate as a leader. **Parents have written repeatedly to the Governors about declining standards of behaviour and the safeguarding of our children**, but until the OFSTED report confirmed what we suspected, we had been assured by this temporary head teacher that there was no issue with poor behaviour; he has ignored and minimised issues of safeguarding, such as behaviour.

**The vast majority of our teachers and support staff (80 out of 87) are now striking** and will continue to strike, such has been the lack of care and consideration taken to include them. They have been shown no professional respect or courtesy throughout this process. There is such hypocrisy in criticising the failings of the old regime, while governors have gone on to make things so much worse. It shows a breath-taking arrogance and lack of self-awareness.

The same can be said for the manner in which the Governing Board has reached their decision of MAT partner. We have tried our best to reach them with our concerns, but they have not been willing to engage on any meaningful level. **Governors claim that the MAT partner must, 'fix the inequalities of the past at HPS'.**

Some of the areas which all stakeholders agree must change are issues such as:

- poor SEN support,
- a culture of favouritism,
- and authoritarian behaviour practices.

However, **United Learning will perpetuate these failings.** Jon Coles, in his own pitch for MAT partnership states that he sees a key advantage being, 'cultural alignment between United Learning and Holland Park'. When we are all so aware of how much our school culture needs to move away from **authoritarian behaviour practices and the poor SEN support UL is also known for**, why would this be seen as an advantage?

As a parent group, we have raised numerous fears about United Learning and why we do not believe them to be the right partner for the school in light of the specific needs of our community, but also with reference to the complaints raised in the independent investigation. Some of the specific points we have never had answered are captured below:

- The independent investigation found a culture of racism existed at HPS. All stakeholders agree that this must change; however, **United Learning have more reports of racist incidents per school than any other MAT.** [https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2021/mar/29/which-english-academy-trusts-have-recorded-racism-complaints?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2021/mar/29/which-english-academy-trusts-have-recorded-racism-complaints?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)
- Complainants about HPS's previous practices of **ranked assessment** (removed from the school more than five years ago) complained about the impact of this practice on their mental health. One individual spoke of how it **allowed his abusive parent to beat him** based on where his attainment placed in relation to his peers; however, **United Learning have told parents they would implement this policy in our school.**
- Despite OFSTED's findings, **HPS typically achieves results in the top 5% of the country.** Our teachers are skilled and inspiring individuals. While United Learning claim that schools are autonomous and teachers can opt not to use their pre-prepared PowerPoint slides, they also state that they operate a centralised assessment structure. By definition therefore, the best outcomes in assessments are achieved through teaching to the pre-subscribed curriculum and **teachers do not have autonomy or flexibility of approach under their system.**
- Holland Park has been criticised for behavioural policies which were too extreme and discriminatory. United Learning's 'No Excuses' policy is, if anything, even more draconian. We attach a report below into some of **United Learning's practices** and how they **perpetuate a culture we have been assured HPS will move away from** for the benefit of all pupils.

Naturally in trying to articulate clearly to you what we do not want, we would like to take the opportunity to express what we do want and why we strongly believe it will be the better choice.

**A MAT partnership with KAA and RBKC** offers an opportunity that not only meets the majority of the assessment criteria, but **brings benefits that no other MAT can offer:**

- **Outstanding SEN and safeguarding policies**, that have a more inclusive approach than the large corporate, authoritarian approach of United Learning.
- **Support from stakeholders** included a large number of parents, RBKC and the school's teachers. Support from these stakeholder groups will be essential to achieve stability.
- David Benson is a credible and trusted leader. He has outstanding knowledge of the community and as such has the **goodwill of key stakeholders** to make this a success.
- KAAs response to Grenfell shows **experience and sensitivity in dealing with a school in crisis**.
- The HPS/KAA partnership would leave **a legacy for our children - something tangible after the Grenfell Tower tragedy** which many in our community, including children, have been traumatised by and are still living with daily. No school other than KAA has the know-how or resources alongside RBKC Education to cope and implement the strategies we need to heal our community.

To date the KAA/RBKC bid has been unfairly prejudiced by Governor actions. It is incredibly frustrating to stakeholders to read the following statements in a letter from the Chair, Jane Farrell:

- *"KAA is not currently a MAT and it could take six months for it to form one."* Had the KAA bid been properly considered in February, the process to being MAT ready would be nearly at the point of completion now; instead, they have been disadvantaged by the actions of our Governing Board. However, **KAA have this week reiterated they can have a robust package of support in place ready for 1st September**. Please note Sally Coates of United Learning has told parents that they will not be ready to take over HPS until January at the earliest.
- *"It is often some years before a strong MAT is established."* KAA does not have the MAT experience that UL has, but it does offer qualities that are equally important when considering the strength of their proposition: **the respect of the Holland Park School stakeholders, the backing of school leaders in the community, the support and expertise of RBKC** and perhaps most importantly of all, **a history of dealing with a community in crisis** – not just any community either – ours. Furthermore, this MAT has the support and expertise offered by Sir David Carter, former National Schools Commissioner.
- *"KAA parents would need to be consulted."* Please note this is disingenuous as Holland Park parents have not been consulted about the MAT decision in any meaningful way. Furthermore, **KAA have been very clear on their future intentions to form a MAT and their parents, who are part of our community, are fully aware of this**, in fact many of them attended Holland Park themselves and have children at both schools.
- KAA would need to *"divert resources and time into turning around Holland Park School."* We understand that **KAA has deliberately been overstaffing at all levels of responsibility for exactly this eventuality**. We understand that KAA provided a detailed response to this point in their application.

“Capacity” is a word that comes up repeatedly when discussing the stabilising of Holland Park School. However, there must be some appreciation for **true capability in addition to capacity**. United Learning are confident that they can provide enough staff members for a September start, however, existing staff described the quality of staff United Learning has provided to date as mediocre, so how will they inspire trust in their leadership by the HPS staff? **The HPS staff are committed and extremely capable**; they simply need a good leader. **Stability is about more than just teacher numbers.**

We understand that our OFSTED rating has now changed how the school’s future will be assessed, however, it is in your gift to **consider options beyond the United Learning proposal**. The context remains that Holland Park School is very far from an educationally-underperforming school and does not have serious financial weaknesses, now that issues raised in the Notice to Improve have been resolved; it is however, **a school that has been failed by poor governance decisions in recent months.**

The White Paper suggests that refinements need to be made to MAT processes and that significant doubts remain as to their oversight and accountability; that as data becomes available on what success looks like and what best supports educational outcomes, decision-makers need to respond accordingly. Discussion in the House of Lords revealed that their view was that **no MAT should be larger than 50 schools** (United Learning already has 89+) and the **schools within the MAT should be geographically linked** (United Learning doesn’t have schools in RBKC); decision making about what is right for Holland Park School needs to evolve with this new direction from the House of Lords. It is unsustainable to implement this policy agenda without broader consensus or consultation with school communities and those directly affected by these fundamental changes.

**The irreversible decision you make about our school will affect our community for generations.** We ask that you seriously consider our very real concerns about United Learning, our commitment to supporting a local MAT, and genuinely take the time to make the right long-term choice for our children.

Please know that **stakeholders would not be pushing back with this much determination if we did not firmly believe that it was in the best interest of *all* our children, and our community.**

Your sincerely,

316 Holland Park School Parents as named in the 4 pages that follow.

*Please note that these parents have come together in only the last twenty four hours and have been collected without access to the full list of parents held by the school. With more time this list would undoubtedly be significantly longer.*

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