

Wednesday 16th March 2022

Dear Ms Jane Farrell,

I, Rose [REDACTED], a sixth form student at Holland Park School, with the support of the student body, chaired by Ines [REDACTED], would firstly like to thank you for the contributions that you have made to our school thus far. Secondly, though, I would like to express our concerns about the past few months, and on your decision to have Holland Park join United Learning. I have faith that you will take our thoughts into consideration, as you have previously done so with former students.

As much as you might believe that you do, I can assure you that you cannot comprehend the unsurprisingly immense amount of stress and anxiety that the current students of Holland Park school have been subjected to over the last year. The various articles and letters, from a minority of former students, and ex-teachers, complaining about a school that we all love, care deeply for, and are so grateful for, have undoubtedly been distressing, and have greatly impacted us as well. Yet, our voice has seemed to have gotten lost in an argument over our own wellbeing. The voice of current Holland Park School students has been completely disregarded in favour of ex-pupils, our experiences and opinions marginalised. After being told that Mr Hall would be retiring at the end of the year, to be confronted by a new head teacher a couple of months later with merely an evening's warning, was a shock and has been an uncomfortable period for us all. Our hitherto worries and anxieties over not only our futures, but that of our beloved school's, for example the question of who our new headteacher will be, have only been exacerbated with a tense, demotivated, and distressed atmosphere gripping the school for weeks, which has consequently impacted our happiness, motivation, and studies in a detrimental way. As you can see, your actions and changes within the school have undoubtedly affected the pupils, despite how insignificant you may have deemed them to be with regards to us - though some of the lower years may not understand the severity of the situation, that is not to say that they do not sense the anxious atmosphere, or that us older students are deaf and blind to the un-welcomed changes occurring to our school. We long for the Holland Park that we have known, and take pride in, not what the media has portrayed our school to be. We are tired of the constant changes that you are enacting in our school without any regard for our feelings and opinions, but your own desires. Considering all the above, at such a time, we students, whose well-being you claim is a priority, merely request for stability - something the sudden and un-deliberated decision to join a multi-academy trust certainly does not provide.

As a relatively small body of five members, who have rarely visited our school, or made contact with our staff and students, your collective decisions have affected the 1400 pupils to a great extent, though this is nothing compared to the detrimental impact of being absorbed into a federation and that being United Learning - a trust that has faced numerous allegations, which I will now outline for you, in case you had missed them. According to Schools Week, parents at one of United Learning's Avonbourne academies in Bournemouth claimed that an alteration to the curriculum and behavioural policies, as well as significant staff changes, since the schools joined the trust, were having an adverse impact on their children. This was followed by an allegation that a vulnerable child with special educational needs was 'encouraged' to leave one of its schools, one of many levelled at the trust by discontented parents, whom had already removed their children from schools, since the trust took over. Moreover, an ITV source has stated that the parents of Coleridge community college in Cambridge, run by United Learning, launched a petition against what they called the school's 'draconian' discipline rules, where the students were punished for having their top button undone and reportedly made to chant 'silence is my natural state'. I need not mention how oppressive and regressive such a statement is in an age, where valuing individual liberty and the significance of one's voice is what is being emphasised. It is, therefore, not surprising that Shadi Blaga, a thirteen year old former student of the school, stated that she felt 'very anxious' at the school. The college had also been accused of wasting the children's time with line-ups, chanting, and repeated walk-in to assemblies, something that has never occurred at Holland Park, and one of numerous factors that justify Ofsted's judgement of our school as 'Outstanding'. Coleridge community college claimed that this behaviour policy had worked in United Learning's other schools, demonstrating how joining a multi-academy trust will centralise power to the extent that behavioural policies in schools will be generalised, rather than personal and individual to the school and its students. Ms Farrell, are you really advocating joining a trust, where students are taught to stay 'silent', rather than learn about their freedom of speech

and right to voice their opinions on matters regarding them? What kind of a school would Holland Park become, if under the trust's leadership, students' voices are disregarded, and pupils are indoctrinated into believing that 'silence is [their] natural state'? With a behavioural policy such as this set out, our ethos and 'values' are anything but similar to that of United Learning's, a justification you have provided for joining with the trust. This is demonstrated by the presence of the student leadership team in Holland Park School, emblematic of the significance of a student body and voice.

Since there are innumerable issues with joining United Learning, as outlined above, as well as the fact that United Learning simply gave up with one of their struggling Leeds schools and handed them over to another chain, demonstrating their 'utmost care' for their schools, that I cannot mention them all, I will now swiftly move on to mentioning the financial issues that United Learning are dealing with, as I am sure you are already aware of. In 2020, United Learning were entangled in a legal dispute with a major software supplier, who claimed that United Learning failed to act transparently or lawfully in breaching procurement law - a lawsuit as such will have undeniably been costly for the trust, and the effects most likely still felt two years later. That is not all, however, for currently, many of the academy trusts, as well as United Learning, who have gas contracts with the Russian firm Gazprom, will, according to Schools Week, 'face 'severe financial penalties' if they exit' them, as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This decision to exit the gas contracts would come as a result of the immorality that arises from bodies financially supporting Russia in the current situation. Exiting these contracts would mean that 'trusts face potentially taking millions away from children's education to pay for new deals at much higher prices', and 'unions are urging the department of education to make emergency funding available to cover cancelled contract costs', according to the source. This financial difficulty, you may argue, is only temporary, however, if United Learning, and indeed even other trusts, who are currently deliberating on a decision, decide to cancel the contracts, for fear of supporting Russia's invasion, resulting in a decrease of funding in our education, the impact of this will last for many years to come, which if we join, will inevitably also impact Holland Park. At a time of both political, as well as financial instability, by joining a trust, it will merely hinder our success as an academy, and I have not even mentioned the inherent financial drawbacks of joining a MAT, which you will know of. United Learning is neither ethically, nor financially in a stable position to benefit and support Holland Park School.

Aside from the allegations and financial issues surrounding United Learning, we (students, parents, and school staff) believe that the future of our school is not, in your own words, 'best secured and stabilised' through joining a MAT. You have stated that 'there are many advantages that come with being a part of a family of schools', and yet you have failed to outline any, apart from the inadequate and vapid argument that we will all be part of one 'big family'. According to the national education union, 'a 2018 report by researchers at University College London's Institute of Education found there was no positive impact on the attainment and progress of pupils in MATs when compared to equivalent non-MAT schools.'. In fact, pupils in larger MATs performed 'worse, particularly in secondary schools'. Furthermore, there have been cases of failed MAT ventures, namely the previously Outstanding Kinsley Academy in West Yorkshire, which rapidly deteriorated after joining the Wakefield City Academies Trust that eventually went bankrupt. You are doubtlessly aware of our school's status as 'Outstanding', and there has been no direct academy order, thus there is no need to join a MAT, for we are not failing, and have previously not and still do not require the support of a trust. Rather than be supported, the school's autonomy will instead be stripped, as Holland Park will have limited control over its finance and budget, as well as staff recruitment and retention - this will doubtlessly result in slower decision-making, thus affecting students and our needs. Moreover, we students would become controlled by executives, who have no student-staff relationship with us, or understanding of our needs, thus resulting in unspecific and impersonal teaching methods, pastoral care, and an overall reduction in investment in student welfare, and safeguarding, due to the loss of freedom to do what is best for pupils, as well as the community. This would lead to a deterioration in academic results, as a result of the emotional impact of this on students, which would only be exacerbated by any alterations made to teaching, the curriculum, and leadership, were we to join a multi-academy trust.

Additionally, being absorbed by a large MAT, an irreversible decision, will only result in Holland Park losing its identity, character, and the ties with our community, whom we deeply respect. The charm and magic of Holland Park School will vanish, as the school loses its autonomy to a large, non-local MAT, and we


students become negatively impacted, losing our pride, and aspirations, thus resulting in a lack of incentive for better performance both by us and our teachers. One former staff member of a multi-academy trust, who asked not to be named, talking of the impacts of joining a trust, described redundancies as 'pretty draconian... It meant the schools weren't able to run in perhaps the way they would have been able to normally.', demonstrating the devastating affect of altering the leadership of a school, and so suddenly and unnecessarily in Holland Park's case.

What is perhaps more disappointing than the disregard of students' opinions, and feelings throughout this situation, however, is your alienation of our parents, and teachers in the decision to join a trust, for the decision was taken without consultation with our parents, staff, and other stakeholders. Are we and our parents to assume that this lack of communication will only be exacerbated, once Holland Park is to join United Learning, since MATs are less accountable to parents and the community? The fact that there is no requirement for MATs to include parent representatives on the 'local' governing bodies of each academy, and the fact that some MATs have even abolished local bodies altogether is understandably worrying for parents. A House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report, Academy accounts and performance, January 2019, stated: 'Parents and local people have to fight to obtain even basic information about their children's schools, and academy trusts do not do enough to communicate and explain decisions that affect the schools they are responsible for and how they are spending public money.' Despite repeated efforts from our parents to work with you, having asked for a consultation period before decisions were made, you nevertheless continued to make this decision behind their backs, and are forcing Holland Park to join a trust, when it is possible to remain a single academy trust and continue succeeding, as the school has done for so many years. May I ask you why, when all the three stakeholders (the students, the parents, the school staff), who have a long-term relationship with the school and students, are vehemently opposed to the idea of joining a MAT, you are overriding that decision? This is merely evidence of the undemocratic nature of your actions. If, as you claim that student wellbeing is the priority, why then, are the opinions and voices of those who know us best, including ourselves, not being heard and taken into consideration?

In conclusion, we request of you, Ms Farrell, and the rest of the governors, that you reconsider the decision to have Holland Park join a multi-academy trust, based on the amount of stress that, not only students and parents of the school, but also our incredibly hard working teachers and Holland Park staff, have been subjected to over the past year and especially the last couple of months. At such a difficult period of time, what our school requires is harmony, rather than further discord, and we believe that making the rash decision of joining a MAT is not in the best interests of the school in creating stability.

I have copied in Ofsted into this email, as I am aware that some previous emails to you have not been responded to. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Rose  (with the support of the student body).

References:

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