

Interview

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Staffordshire University Academy, which has been rated 'inadequate'

Pride and resolve at school of hard knocks

Academy given the lowest rating possible by inspector reveals its grit and determination for the future and a blueprint for recovery

It does not feel like a school in special measures.

Walking into the modern reception of Staffordshire University Academy and being greeted by friendly smiles and warm 'hellos', it feels like a school at the higher end of the Ofsted ranking table, not the lower.

But regardless of how it feels, SUA, on Marston Road in Hednesford, is a school that has been rated 'inadequate' – the lowest rating possible. It joins the likes of Willenhall E-Act Academy, dubbed the worst school in Britain, in the special measures category.

"We are dead proud of the progress we are making," headteacher Rowena Hillier tells the Express & Star after inviting the paper in for a chat as part of the 600-pupil school's open doors policy.

"Dead proud of what?", the cynics might ask. Dead proud of the inadequate teaching? Or maybe dead proud of the inadequate behaviour of pupils? Dead proud of taking the school from requires improvement to special measures?

No, what Mrs Hillier is 'dead proud' of is a surge in the success of results.

Basics, which is the number of pupils at GCSE achieving A*-C in both English and maths, has risen from 29 per cent in 2015 to 48 per cent last summer.

Progress 8, the measure of a pupil's average GCSE grade across a set suite of eight subjects, has moved from -0.36 to -0.18, while progress 8 for disadvantaged pupils has gone from -0.93 to -0.55.

Ofsted might have noted in its report that pupils were throwing missiles and using homophobic slurs, and it might have rated the school inadequate in every category bar one, but what

it does not give is context. Context to these incidents and context to the report itself.

As Mrs Hillier explains: "Two years ago we were inspected and that was when I was new to leadership as headteacher. I joined four years ago as deputy head but it was two and a half years ago I was made headteacher.

"Roughly five months into me being headteacher we were inspected, and on that occasion we got a 'requires improvement' judgement overall with a 'good' judgement for leadership.

Nothing has changed in the senior leadership team since then apart from one colleague who has joined us. Because we had had two 'requires improvement' judgements in a row we couldn't be given a third. The feeling we got from the inspection team is that we still require improvement and we aren't really an 'inadequate' school.

"We are particularly concerned by the behaviour judgement, as it is not a fair reflection of the children's behaviour. The inspection happened on the second day after a two-week Easter break and by my own admission to the lead inspector I was concerned there might be some disruption while children were getting back into routines.

"In the report it talked about missiles being thrown and that was a glue stick and a ruler being thrown in one maths lesson.

"The homophobic slur mentioned in the report was a throwaway comment. The teacher dealt with it immediately. The children at this academy are inclusive and look after each other."

So everything is fine at the school and it should be at least rated 'good'? Not by any stretch. Mrs Hillier freely admits the school needs to improve and has put a raft of measures in place to see the improvement. "Maths is going to be our focus as it is still not good enough. All our documentation

is very honest about where we are, although we are making lots of progress there are some areas where we need to put more support in.

"We have two directors of learning who have responsibilities for continuing our drive forward for learning. We have already got our review of governance underway, which was one of the recommendations in the report, and we already have in motion the pupil premium review, which will happen early September. We are fully staffed for September and that is very important. The cynic might think we are doing all these things because of Ofsted but we were doing them anyway."

Despite what will appear to many as an incredibly harsh Ofsted report, Mrs Hillier pledged there are 'no sour grapes', saying she and her staff accept Ofsted's judgement, but vowing the school will be out of special measures 'as quick as physically possible'.

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Staffordshire University Academy head teacher Rowena Hillier