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Mr Husain Akhtar

Amanda Spielman
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Sent by email to: husain.akhtar@virginmedia.com

Our ref: 391366

Dear Mr. Akhtar

Thank you for writing to me and to our chair, Professor Julius Weinberg, about my statement on the wearing of the hijab in primary schools.

It may be helpful if I set out the background to my statement reported in The Sunday Times on 19 November. At Ofsted we do not look only at educational outcomes: we have a statutory responsibility to have regard to the need to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children when we inspect.

Last month I met a group of Muslim women to discuss the increasing number of primary schools that are including the hijab as either a compulsory or optional item in their uniform policy. This was a matter of concern to the group given that, traditionally, the hijab is not worn until girls reach puberty, as a mark of modesty as they become young women.

As you will be aware from your experience as an Ofsted inspector, inspectors do not single out, and will not be singling out, individual children during inspection. It is already an established part of inspection practice for inspectors to talk to mixed groups of children about a range of issues, such as discrimination, bullying and the children's understanding of other cultures. Exploring why primary aged girls are wearing the hijab and whether this is having any implications for school culture and relationships may be another theme that inspectors discuss in some circumstances, not as a matter of routine.

You will also be aware that all our inspectors are current or former teachers and school leaders themselves, so they know how to talk to children and ask questions sensitively. They ensure that such questions are appropriate to the age of the children, their culture and their faith.

Ofsted does not have a policy on the wearing of the hijab in schools, and we respect parental choice. However, we do have concerns, and a legitimate interest, if children face pressure to wear certain items of clothing or if parents may experience pressure from others to dress their child in a particular way.

We also have concerns that some schools may be seeking advice on uniform policy and other faith matters from local religious institutions without knowing whether they are getting appropriate and balanced advice. Where our inspectors do have concerns they will discuss the issue with school leaders. Inspection guidance will support them in doing this.

You assert that schools know what is best for them, including the school uniform and dress code for staff. Whilst I agree that this is the case in most schools, as you must have seen from your time as an inspector, it is not the case in all schools. Where the rationale for a school's policy is not clear, inspectors will discuss this with school leaders and those responsible for governance to clarify the process by which the school went about implementing the policy. Our prime interest here is that the school adopted its policy through fair and proper means and that the policy does not disadvantage any individuals or groups of pupils.

When developing and clarifying any inspection policies or procedures, we meet a range of stakeholders, including from faith groups and other interested parties. **We have considered what guidance our inspectors might need on this sensitive matter and we have met representatives of groups such as the Association of Muslim Schools,** as well as interested school leaders and politicians. We are now in the process of finalising this guidance, taking into account the views expressed. As with all our inspection policies and procedures, this guidance will be published in due course.

Thank you for raising your concerns with us.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amanda Spielman".

Amanda Spielman
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector