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Dear Lisa

**RE: Open letter - Resignation of Route 39 Academy Trust and parent appointed governors**

The action of your office in appointing Launceston College MAT has effectively neutered the Trust and parent governors and therefore we are no longer in a position to discharge our duties effectively and in accordance with the funding agreement.

The Trust governors have been forced to capitulate and deliver messages dictated by your office and the Department of Education (DfE) or face delays, and the threats of funding being withdrawn, or the funding agreement being terminated. We therefore raise the following to clarify the position as seen by Trust governors.

**Ofsted**

The inspection by Ofsted last year judged the Academy as inadequate. This contradicted the judgement of a recently retired HMI who carried out an inspection of the Academy four months previously, as well as our DfE Advisor at the time. The Trust disputed the Ofsted judgement at the time.

As you know, we were also concerned about the quality of approach at inspection. Indeed, we contend that the Inspectors, including the QA, did not adhere to the Code of Conduct for inspectors, leaving staff and governors feeling bullied, ignored and humiliated. Despite being presented with a statement from the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) office stating that our decision to defer GCSE entry was “within the parameters of the legal framework”, the inspectors pursued a view that the decision was illegal. Acting inappropriately, one inspector accused members of staff, who had not been involved with the decision, of acting illegally. A major impact of this action was the unplanned and unwelcome loss of a member of staff through stress resulting in an inadequate handover of key Academy operations, which contributed significantly to the judgement becoming a self

fulfilling prophecy as the close-knit, demoralised and damaged, but committed, community strove to regain its equilibrium and regain positivity. A wholly internal inquiry by Ofsted concluded that their approach was 'robust'. We are fully aware from a recent precedent (Durand Academy v Ofsted) that, had we been able to afford to challenge this through the courts, the Ofsted judgement would be overturned.

In addition another inspector made key judgements on the quality of teaching and learning. He is the Principal of an underperforming school in Plymouth. That school has recently been subject to an Ofsted inspection that found teaching and learning to be inadequate. You have also issued that Academy with a 'minded to terminate' notice. It is inconceivable how the head of an underperforming school is employed by Ofsted to make judgements on other schools. How can his judgement be considered sound?

It is unclear whether the quality of these inspectors is representative of Ofsted currently but our experience suggests there are significant questions around the practice of inspectors. Whilst the Trust governors acknowledge improvements are needed at the Academy it has no confidence in the quality of approach displayed by inspectors last year.

### **RSC office and Local Authority**

Our experience with Ofsted demonstrated that the RSC office is incapable of addressing Ofsted statements. The RSC is the local representative of the DfE who determine the law in respect to examination entry. Instead of standing by the statement the RSC had made previously, that the actions of the Trust on GCSE entry were legal, the RSC office chose to remain silent.

When the Academy was formed it faced significant opposition from neighbouring schools. This was not unexpected, but the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, came personally to Bideford to challenge them to raise standards and to support and encourage us in our endeavours, as passionate, unpaid, volunteers to create a choice of secondary educational provision in the area. However it has been very disappointing that neither the RSC office nor the Local Authority seem capable or inclined to act in any way to resolve this situation which has now had such a negative impact on the opportunities for the students and their families.

The Academy has been required to accept a large number of students who have demonstrated to have had significant educational, emotional and behavioural difficulties at their previous local secondary schools. The approach of the Local Authority in supporting the Academy in ensuring the placement needs of these students is met is lacking in urgency, ineffective and inefficient. Thus the Academy, with severely limited resources and inappropriate accommodation has striven to provide bespoke packages to meet the needs of these students, which has at times sadly resulted in some of these students being excluded, due to concerns that continued attendance would be both harmful to the student

in need and potentially to others around them. This action has been severely criticised by both Ofsted and the current DFE 'Advisor'. On the positive side, a number of these students' lives have been transformed, converting attendance rates of individuals from nil to above 80%, and parents testify to their children's new-found enthusiasm and involvement in education. This success is ignored in any judgements on the Academy and we are constantly criticised on our attendance figures and instructed to take punitive measures against the parents of those students who may well be working cooperatively with us.

The paralysis of the RSC office in the face of Ofsted and the apparent preoccupation of the Local Authority in selling products over supporting schools raises significant concerns that schools are not properly represented and supported.

### **RSC Processes**

The process to re-broker the Academy with a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) has been beset with mixed messages and delay. Representatives seem experts in attending meetings but less effective in delivering solutions. Previously we have had an Education Advisor who was helpful in developing the Academy. However the most recent RSC appointment does not seem to understand the term 'Advisor' and instead prefers to sit in judgement and pontificate. She did not supply notes from her first visit and failed to support the development of our action plan despite ongoing requests from the school. It has led us to feel that her role is to evidence inadequacy, and thus underpin a rebrokerage, rather than support rapid improvement.

The MAT process does not allow any prospective MAT to contact the Academy during the tendering stage. This means any MAT that puts forward a proposal is partly, or significantly, blind to the objectives of the school it wishes to take over. The Academy was given an opportunity to briefly respond to the prospective MATs but our comments were largely ignored and the Academy was not given any opportunity to view applications in order to give a reasoned and objective response.

The preoccupation with MATs being the solution to every issue appears flawed. Currently MATs are unproven vehicles seemingly of greater value to the DfE for administration purposes than for the operation of schools. They demonstrate an ability to elevate headteachers to highly paid CEO positions without those individuals either demonstrating they are capable of holding these positions, or of enhancing the values and standards of the schools within their care.

### **Launceston College MAT**

The Academy has been subject to the impact of Launceston College MAT when it took over Bideford College a few years ago. Feedback from parents suggested the MAT encouraged students to leave Bideford College and many came to Route 39. While many of these students have settled well at Route 39, their initial influx was disproportionately disruptive

on a small school. We raised this issue with your office at the time but your representatives chose to not act.

When Route 39 was given approval in 2013, this was with a progressive education vision that provided a choice in the local area. Launceston College MAT have a traditional approach which is ideologically opposed to that of the Route 39 founding vision. Therefore the Trust governors believe any proposal to retain aspects of the vision will be with a view that this will be phased out over time. In effect the RSC action to appoint this MAT will result in the effective closure of the Route 39 Academy that the parents chose. In its place will be a school similar to those already in the area and therefore unlikely to attract enough students to make it viable.

This is particularly disappointing given the work of the Trust and staff to develop the Academy in poor temporary accommodation. Parents and students have kept faith with the school despite these trying circumstances. Now on the verge of being able to realise the vision in a new £20m school the actions and inactions of the RSC office will see this vision destroyed.

In summary, the Trust governors have no confidence that the plans for Route 39 Academy are in the best interests of students, staff or parents. As the actions of the RSC office make the the Trust governors unable to discharge their duties, we give you notice that we will resign our positions forthwith and pass the responsibility for the governance of the Academy to the Secretary of State or his representatives.

Yours faithfully

Route 39 Academy Trust and Parent Appointed Governors