

The Cost of "No Excuses": Why Safeguarding Must Trump Ideology

Everywhere we go, we see schools wrestling with the challenges of misbehaviour. On this point, we find ourselves in total agreement with Tom Bennett. We all want schools to be brilliant, safe places where pupils flourish, not just the majority, but every single child. We also want schools to be places where committed teachers and staff are supported and properly trained. Across the City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership's area of responsibility, we are fortunate that most of our schools achieve this balance.

However, in his recent [highly critical response](#) to the Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) concerning events at Mossbourne Victoria Park Academy (MVPA), Bennett fails to put his own principles of creating calm, safe spaces into practice. Instead of engaging with the serious safeguarding findings, we are treated to a defensive piece that characterises a statutory process as a vilification by those determined to attack school discipline.

Bennett seems unable to distinguish between an ideological attack and a necessary safeguarding intervention. He equates criticism from an independent and highly credible review author, commissioned by a non-political multi-agency safeguarding partnership, as a "*perpetual mugging*" by "*campaigners*." One has to wonder if he has actually read the report or simply scanned it for grievances. The author, Sir Alan Wood CBE, is a figure whose credentials are utterly impeccable. Working with Sir Michael Wilshaw and Sir Clive Bourne, he brought Mossbourne to Hackney, creating a programme that introduced six other academies into the borough. He wrote and delivered the Wood Review (2018) for the previous government and has redefined safeguarding approaches in statutory guidance. To sweep this expertise aside and describe the methodology as akin to a fortune teller is not just disrespectful; it is an embarrassing misstep. Is this a serious reflection by one of the Department for Education's (DfE) Behaviour Ambassadors? or is it the type of emotional outburst that, under the strict rules of a 'no excuses' culture, would result in an immediate sanction?

I am not sure Bennett truly understands the role of Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships or the purpose of a CSPR. Such reviews are not driven by partisan political groupings, but are overseen by serious professionals from health, children's social care, the criminal justice system, and the education sector. By dismissing this rigour, Bennett suggests he may need to do some extra homework on how statutory safeguarding actually works.

Furthermore, Bennett relies heavily on negative stereotyping, dismissing anyone who dares to question an institution as someone who campaigns "*against any form of school discipline.*" This is risible. I would have thought he would be familiar with the old adage about what making assumptions can do. So, rather than relying on rhetoric, let us look at the facts he seems to so readily ignore. Bennett claims the "fatal" problem with the report is that it relies on 73 complaints from an activist group. This is a gross misrepresentation of the concerns.

The reality is that for over a year, the DfE, Ofsted, Hackney Council, and others attempted to work with the school to clarify issues and prevent escalation. There were not merely a handful of complaints; there were 342 individual concerns raised across the Federation, with a significant number appearing in the weeks immediately prior to the review being triggered. Of this total, 268 were submitted by individuals providing their names and contact details, these were not anonymous snipers. Specifically, 103 people put their names to their concerns about MVPA. The "73 accounts" Bennett disparages formed the core analysis for the review, detailing separate incidents or issues involving 71 identifiable children, with other concerns referencing multiple pupils. To reduce this substantial body of evidence to "*anecdote after anecdote*" is a disservice to the families involved.

Bennett also mocks the methodology, claiming the author is unclear on what "triangulation" means. Yet, while Bennett stamps his feet in the playground, triangulating his views only with his own opinion, the CSPR utilised investigative rigour. It included testimony from current and former teachers at MVPA, surveys from pupils and parents, concerns from external agencies, and critical documentation provided by the Federation itself. Sir Alan also undertook 42 separate interviews.

Bennett points to academic results and Ofsted ratings to defend the school's record. However, Sir Alan looks beyond the grades to the culture behind them. Bennett conspicuously ignores critical Ofsted survey data in which 41% of students stated they would not recommend the school, and 29% reflected that they did not consistently feel safe.

These statistics align with the views captured relating to a significant minority of parents in the most recent 'MVPA school survey', who expressed dissatisfaction with pupil happiness, communication, and the management of bullying. These are not new concerns; they are historical, systemic issues. There is a consistent pattern across Ofsted reports. In 2016 they noted that strict discipline limited pupil expression and in 2021 and 2023 their findings highlighted weaknesses in welfare and communication. So, if you want to use Ofsted as

evidence, beyond academic achievement, it could be argued that the school has a documented history of struggling in these areas. In fact, the concerns raised in the 2023 inspection mirror those brought to the LSCPR.

Bennett's claim that the report alleges 'racial bias', while simultaneously criticising an apparent lack of data sources, numbers, and comparisons, is further evidence of his inadequate analysis. The source of the data is made explicitly clear: it was MVPA's own data, which took the school ten months to provide to Sir Alan. The figures are included in the report, and the methodology adheres to government standards. Furthermore, Sir Alan is identifying the statistically significant and notable disproportionality that exists within that data. It shows that Black Caribbean children are 2.6 times more likely to be sanctioned compared to White pupils and 5.1 times more likely to end up in the Behaviour Support Unit (BSU) or Alternative Provision Centre (APC). Black African pupils are 2.3 times more likely to receive a sanction and 4.4 times more likely to be in the BSU or APC. These figures aren't made up - they are fact.

Bennett's claim that there is no evidence of mental health damage is, in my opinion, egregious. The data paints a starkly different picture. The review highlights that the school identified more than double the number of mental health concerns, 708 in total, compared to its much larger sister school in the same year, a figure that had risen by 17.4% from the previous year. External agencies corroborated this; Hackney's Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) noted a disproportionately high number of referrals from the school, and CAMHS clinicians reported that staff usage of shouting and angry communication exacerbated psychological harm. Former pupils have directly linked the culture to self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Bennett is prepared to dismiss these profound concerns because of an Ofsted rating. He seems to suggest we should accept the view that shouting is acceptable, or that denying adjustments for vulnerable pupils is necessary collateral damage. This misses the fundamental point of a CSPP. The review does not deny academic excellence; it shines a light on the potential human cost of that success. It provides overwhelming evidence that a culture prioritising compliance and control led to harmful, humiliating practices that went unchecked due to a defensive leadership culture and a failure of governance. The irony is that he ignores the potential echoes emerging from Thurrock, or worse, potentially writes them off as those activists and campaigners at it again. If the Thurrock concerns are found to mirror those in Hackney, I wonder whether the link will be in leadership and a philosophy anchored in 'no excuses' - a mindset largely indistinguishable from zero tolerance.

This report is a mandate for change, not a vehicle for a philosophical debate on school discipline. Bennett's insistence on defending a model of strictness, despite compelling evidence that this model is a source of trauma for a significant minority of vulnerable pupils, suggests his critique is centred less on objective truth and safeguarding, and more on protecting his own ideology. If the safeguarding principles of professional curiosity and challenge are lost to the white noise of such a zealot-like approach, we have truly lost our way.

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