School report

Rivers Education Support Centre

Old Essex Road, Hoddesdon, EN11 0AA

Inspection dates	12–13 February 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	**Good**	**2**
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Students achieve well. The majority make more progress than expected nationally, which helps them to catch up on work they have missed in the past. Most students at Key Stage 3 return to mainstream school.
- Teaching is good. Staff are knowledgeable and know how to engage and interest students throughout lessons.
- The behaviour of students is outstanding. Staff manage it consistently and students know what is expected of them. Almost all conform quickly to Rivers' calm atmosphere.
- Students' attitudes to learning are outstanding. They are quiet, cooperative, keen to participate and work hard in class.
- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is outstanding. All systems are highly effective and staff act quickly to support students and families if necessary.
- Parents, carers, students and staff are all very happy with Rivers' work.
- Good leadership and management are helping Rivers to improve and develop quickly.
- The work of the outreach services is very effective and highly regarded by mainstream schools.
- Rivers provides an excellent, rich and varied range of subjects and activities. These lead to qualifications at the end of Key Stage 4 and prepare students well for their next steps.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- The assessment of students' skills when they join Rivers is not always accurate. This means that the targets first set for them can be pitched too low.
- Teachers do not always tell students how to improve their work or answers to help them speed up their learning.
- Information from records of students' achievement is not used widely enough to set individual learning targets in lessons.
- When teaching assistants are undirected, they do not always support learning well in whole-class work led by teachers.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 12 lessons taught by 12 different staff members. All lessons were observed jointly with a senior leader.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher, the two deputy headteachers, and other managers of the staff team; the Chair and three other members of the Management Committee; and the managers of the primary and secondary outreach teams. Informal discussions were held with students and other staff throughout the two days. A telephone conversation was held with the school's local authority improvement partner.
- Eighteen responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online questionnaire for parents and carers were taken into account, along with 17 responses to an identical paper-based survey sent out when the inspection was announced.
- Inspectors reviewed a wide range of documentation including: students' work and records of their achievement, progress, behaviour and attendance, and the school's strategies to improve them; records of the quality of teaching and how the school works to improve it; self-evaluation documents and improvement plans; the work of the outreach services; and documents related to the work of the management committee and keeping students safe.

Inspection team

Judith Charlesworth, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Sa'ad Khaldi	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Rivers Education Support Centre (ESC) works with students who have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. A few have additional difficulties, such as mental health issues and mild learning difficulties. Typically, most pupils are boys.
- Rivers ESC is sited in two locations. Provision for Key Stage 3 students is in a small listed Victorian building in Hertford, and Key Stage 4 students attend the Hoddesdon site which occupies a former primary school.
- The primary and secondary outreach teams run from both sites. Last year they supported 211 students in 22 secondary schools, and 115 pupils in over 100 primary schools. An additional service, the Education Support Team for Medical Absence (ESTMA) runs from the Hertford site.
- Rivers ESC provides education for students who have been, or who are at risk of being permanently excluded from their mainstream schools. The prime aim at Key Stage 3 is to return these students to mainstream school as soon as possible, better equipped socially, emotionally, behaviourally and educationally. At Key Stage 4, the prime aim is to engage students in relevant full-time education leading to qualifications that will prepare them for the next step in their lives.
- The role of the primary and secondary outreach services is to support mainstream schools and individuals with behaviour and personal development difficulties, so that pupils are not permanently excluded and are better able to make academic and social progress in their own schools. ESTMA supports pupils who cannot attend school because of medical reasons.
- The number of students on roll fluctuates during the year, with a particularly high turnover at Key Stage 3. Last academic year, the average length of stay at Key Stage 3 was five and a half months.
- All students were supported at school action plus in their mainstream schools when they joined Rivers. A few have statements of special educational needs or are in the process of obtaining one.
- The ESC uses three alternative provisions to supplement its own curriculum at Key Stage 4. These are: The Education and Youth Service at Harlow and at Stevenage, and Hertfordshire Regional College, Broxbourne Campus.
- A larger proportion of students than usually found is known to be eligible for the pupil premium, which is extra government funding to support the achievement of particular groups. These include students known to be eligible for free school meals, those looked after by the local authority and those with a parent in the armed services.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching and achievement by:
  - ensuring that assessment on entry is accurate, and using this information to set realistic, challenging long-term targets for each individual
  - using assessment information to plan and set learning targets in lessons that move each individual student systematically forwards
  - telling students in lessons what they should do to improve their work and answers so they can reach higher levels and achieve their longer-term targets
  - making sure that teaching assistants support and check on learning during whole class teaching.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Most students enter Rivers ESC with attainment that is lower than expectations for their age due to the impact that poor attendance, disrupted education and difficulties in personal development have had on their ability to learn well. Students' reading ability is very varied and, for example, currently ranges from eight to 18 years at Key Stage 4. While many students achieved average results in the national tests at the end of Year 6, information provided by their mainstream schools shows that almost all made little progress after this.

- Boys and girls of all ages and abilities make good progress during Key Stage 3 due to good teaching, the range of interesting subjects and activities provided, and excellent support for behaviour and personal development. Progress is better in English than in mathematics, but is often at double the rate expected nationally for both subjects. This helps students to close the gap between their attainment and that expected for their age which gives them great encouragement and boosts their self-esteem. The large majority return successfully to mainstream school.

- Students in Key Stage 4 achieve well. Girls tend to achieve slightly better examination results than boys. All gain useful qualifications that prepare them well for the next step in their lives. Last year, almost all students who left Rivers at the end of Year 11 went to college, with a very small number either gaining an apprenticeship or going to work.

- Students in Key Stage 4 make better progress than the national average in both English and mathematics. Progress in other subjects such as art, science and physical education is also good. Students' work shows clearly how their skills, knowledge and pride in presentation improve during their time at Rivers. Good opportunities are provided for students to improve their literacy and communication skills in other subjects, for example, to explain and develop, verbally and in writing, the particular theme chosen for an art project.

- In the summer of 2013, most students gained five GCSEs or the equivalent, including English and mathematics. They also achieved a range of other qualifications accredited by national boards, such as the BTEC home cooking skills course. Seven students attending Hertfordshire College achieved a City & Guilds qualification in construction.

- Students learn well in lessons and develop confidence in their own abilities. On one occasion, for example, a group of Key Stage 3 students wrote down and drew their ideas for the design of a mobile phone for teenagers. They presented their ideas to the group as a 'sales pitch', which strongly promoted their speaking and listening skills. With two visiting adults in the room as well, this showed a high degree of confidence.

- The pupil premium is used effectively to provide extra support for the given individuals. For example, in the past year it has provided literacy support, French coaching and attendance incentives, all of which have improved these students' achievement. Analysis shows that the achievement of students eligible for the pupil premium is comparable to that of their peers. The small number of students with a statement of special educational needs or additional difficulties such as mental health issues make good progress due to the additional, personal support and guidance they receive.

- Students' attainment and progress is closely tracked from the time they join Rivers. This allows support to be targeted where needed, for example, if attendance is falling off or students are not making expected progress in a given subject. However, the test used to determine students'

skill levels when they first arrive at Rivers does not always yield secure results. The initial tracking of their progress and the longer-term targets first set on the basis of these results are, therefore, not wholly accurate.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teaching is very rarely less than good and is often outstanding, so students achieve well. This high quality teaching engages students throughout lessons and secures good behaviour and high levels of enjoyment. Students respond very well to the ESC's behaviour management systems, and the evaluation of their own efforts and success at the end of each lesson. This contributes very effectively to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

- Teaching in Key Stage 3 is characterised by enthusiastic, interesting teaching which is planned to engage students from the start of lessons and strongly promotes their learning. An excellent example of this was seen in a science lesson on respiration. The teacher started the lesson by providing the respiratory system of a pig for the students to handle, so that they fully understood the connection between the lungs and windpipe. All students examined the organs, and their interest, learning and behaviour were outstanding. When the teacher demonstrated how the diaphragm works using a home-made model, a student exclaimed: 'Oh! That's magic!' as the 'lungs' (a balloon) inflated and deflated.

- Teaching in Key Stage 4 is characterised by an atmosphere where students are expected to discuss, explain and work to a consistently high a standard. Lessons are a good mix of teacher input, students working on their own and group or paired work which keeps students interested. These features were clearly observed in an English lesson on the poem 'I Shall Paint my Nails Red'. Staff checked students' understanding all the way through, provided extra explanation and suggested the use of dictionaries to ensure that they fully understood every element.

- In some lessons, such as GCSE art, students are encouraged to think freely and creatively. This creates a very adult atmosphere where staff and students work together. In one such lesson, the staff encouraged a student to look for, and combine, images on the themes of 'order' or 'disorder', stressing the importance of being able to describe this thinking in writing to achieve the highest grades. This led to a deep discussion developing the theme into 'disorder in order', and the student's decision to create her work in relation to mental health.

- Teaching in English and mathematics is good. Demanding work is set for each student that ensures they learn well and improve their skills steadily. Good opportunities are provided for students to practice their skills in other subjects, particularly speaking, listening, reading and writing. The extra support provided for students who are falling behind, or with particularly low reading skills, is effective. Checks show that these students' achievement improves as a result.

- Support staff are well directed to help individuals who find the work particularly challenging when they are working independently, rather than as a whole class. However, unless directed to do so, teaching assistants do not always support and check on students' understanding and learning in whole-class work led by the teacher.

- Teaching and achievement are not outstanding because information about individuals' skills is not used widely enough to set them learning targets in lessons. Longer-term targets for students' achievement are set, but the assessment information on which these are based is not always accurate. Teachers sometimes do not tell students clearly enough what they need to do to reach the next level in their work during lessons.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- The work the school does to keep students safe and secure is outstanding. All parents and carers who responded on Parent View, and the parents, carers and school staff who responded to the inspection questionnaire, agree that students are safe and behaviour is good at Rivers.

- Students themselves say that behaviour is good and that they feel safe. They have very strong relationships with staff, and faith in their support. These encourage students to feel happy and improve their self-esteem and confidence in adults. One student said that Rivers had changed 'everything' about her, and she wished she did not have to leave.

- Students' behaviour is extremely well managed by clear, consistent, well-explained systems. As a result, any disruptive behaviour shown by individuals on their arrival soon ceases. Students enjoy the rewards gained from the 'ABLES' system, which records their attitude to learning in lessons in categories such as respectfulness and trying their best. A half-termly 'attitudes to learning' grade clearly shows individuals' improvement over time.

- The work of the outreach staff in primary and secondary schools is very successful in improving pupils' behaviour so that they can learn and achieve better. The services' own surveys of schools', pupils', parents' and carers' satisfaction, together with many letters of praise sent by mainstream headteachers, shows how highly the services are valued by community schools.

- Students fully understand about different types of bullying and this topic is frequently covered in the strong provision for personal development. Those who arrive with a tendency to be verbally abusive quickly drop this behaviour and students are generally kind and respectful to one another. Incidents of bullying or racism are very rare.

- The ESC's practices for keeping students safe, such as through fire prevention and computer safety are highly effective. Keeping safe from substance abuse and dealing with everyday risks are frequent topics. In discussion with an inspector, students were keen to point out that the inspection coincided with 'e-safety week' which they fully understood.

- Students' attitudes to school, their lessons and adults, including visitors, are excellent. For example, at Key Stage 3, the inspector was warmly welcomed by students and invited to join them for lunch. At Key Stage 4, students talked to the inspector with maturity about developments they would like at the ESC. Students respond enthusiastically and sensibly in class. They follow instructions and participate fully in all subjects which helps them to learn well.

- Most students arrive at Rivers with a history of poor attendance. Improving it is a strong focus of the ESC, in recognition that if students are not in school, they cannot learn and are not necessarily safe. The ESC is very successful in this aspect of its work. Attendance is improving and is now approaching the national average at both key stages. The majority of individuals' attendance improves markedly.

The leadership and management are good

- The staff, local authority and management committee all say that the ESC has changed and developed positively and quickly in the past few terms. Parents, carers and staff overwhelmingly agree that leadership and management are good. Staff fully support the senior leaders in their ambition to improve students' future.

- Change has been driven by rigorous self-evaluation. This identifies strengths and weaknesses and the ESC follows it up with detailed improvement plans that are regularly shared with staff and the management committee. Staff make a good contribution to the process through the 'QUAD' system in which each one notes achievements and areas for development every half term in each area of the ESC's work.

- Senior leaders have improved the quality of teaching by systematically tackling particular aspects. This has been achieved by checking teaching to identify areas for improvement, providing support and training as required, and reviewing the success of these measures. Last term's checks on teaching indicated that the quality of all teaching was good or outstanding.

- Training, professional development and target setting for both teachers and support staff are thorough and regular. This has helped to improve the quality of teaching and learning, for example, by training in promoting literacy across all subjects, and developing the staff's understanding of students' difficulties such as anxiety, loss and depression.

- The leadership team has recently been extended. Several members of staff now have new responsibilities, such as to collate assessment information or to develop the skills of teaching assistants. These managers support the work of the senior leaders and the effectiveness of the school as a whole. Their responsibilities give them good experience towards becoming senior leaders in the future.

- The primary and secondary support services both work very successfully, and as a result, permanent exclusions are few. ESTMA, too, works very effectively with its pupils. Staff help them to achieve as much as possible, taking their individual medical circumstances into account.

- Rivers provides an excellent range of subjects and activities at each key stage. The provision for personal development at both key stages is of high quality. There is a strong emphasis on students providing for their own school community, and for others, such as senior citizens and younger pupils in other schools. The subjects and activities interest and engage students, and strongly support their excellent behaviour, attitudes to learning and spiritual moral, social and cultural development. Students at Key Stage 4 receive effective advice on future options from an independent adviser as well as from ESC staff. They leave the ESC well prepared for their next steps.

- The ESC is continually adding to the challenge and range of subjects provided. For example, City & Guilds 'employability' and 'hair and beauty' courses have recently been introduced. A small amount of alternative provision is effectively used to provide practical courses such as construction for a few students. The quality of this provision and students' safety and well-being while attending are kept under close scrutiny.

- The pupil premium is used well, including to provide personalised college placements or to improve other aspects of a student's life that impact on achievement, such as attendance and well-being. The impact of this support is checked regularly.

- The ESC receives effective support from the local authority adviser. This includes regular visits to work with senior staff, for example, to confirm their judgements on the quality of teaching, and to help review and develop the assessment systems.

- **The governance of the school:**
  - Members of the management committee are experienced, knowledgeable and very effective. Most are school and local authority leaders, and include headteachers of schools served by the ESC and the three outreach services. This means they have first-hand knowledge of how well

Rivers works. Members are also well informed by detailed reports, plans and presentations by staff, and fully understand how far the ESC has come in the past few terms.

- The management committee knows about the quality of teaching on both sites, and is now looking at the staff responsibilities and promotions in light of their new budget responsibilities. Finances are managed well. Members understand what to do about any significant underperformance in teaching, although there has been none. They hold the senior leaders to account for students' achievement, attendance and behaviour and check on the progress of developments and planned improvements. The committee makes sure that statutory duties are met, including the safeguarding procedures and the content of the new website.

What inspection judgements mean

School Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors. A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.

School details

Unique reference number	135890
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	431179

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	53
Appropriate authority	The proprietor
Chair	Steve Neate
Headteacher	Janet Bourne
Date of previous school inspection	29 March 2011
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