

# Inspection of Columbus School and College

Oliver Way, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 4ZB

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Inspection dates:	20 and 21 May 2025
The quality of education	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Behaviour and attitudes	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Personal development	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Leadership and management	<b>Inadequate</b>
Sixth-form provision	<b>Inadequate</b>
Previous inspection grade	Good

The headteacher of this school is Mark Savage. This school is part of Lift Schools, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Rebecca Boomer-Clark, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by David Hall.

## **What is it like to attend this school?**

All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). They have significant medical and learning needs. They require a high level of bespoke care. The school has not ensured that staff have the knowledge needed to identify and act upon the specific risks that pupils face. Staff do their best to manage pupils' safety. However, the school's safeguarding culture and practices do not mitigate these risks. This places pupils at risk of harm.

The school is experiencing a very turbulent time. This has resulted in a decline in the quality of provision. High staff turnover affects how well the curriculum is delivered. Some pupils do not access the full curriculum content, including aspects of relationships and sex education (RSE). This limits how well they achieve. This is particularly the case for sixth-form students, who do not receive the quality of education they deserve. Staff changes result in some pupils' behaviours becoming unsettled.

Pupils follow a curriculum that is suited to their specific needs. They receive the necessary adaptations identified in their education and health and care (EHC) plans. However, pupils sometimes do not get the support needed to make progress academically or in their behaviour and personal development.

Pupils are calm and positive with familiar adults. They enjoy swimming and yoga. Pupils like music, the outdoor play equipment and their sensory sessions. This supports their physical and mental well-being.

## **What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?**

A significant number of staff do not have the knowledge they need to recognise risk or potential harm in order to keep pupils safe. The school has not ensured that all staff have the training needed to teach the curriculum, deliver the personal development programme or manage behaviour effectively.

Some pupils present behaviours that cross into other's personal space or are unsafe. Staff try to manage these behaviours, but this is not as effective as it needs to be. Staff do not have the specific training or understanding of the risk that these behaviours can represent or the wider concerns they could indicate. This impacts negatively on the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding culture, as well as on pupils' and staff's well-being.

Staff do not teach all aspects of personal, social, health and economic (PHSE) education or RSE. The school has not ensured that pupils understand or know how to manage risks that pupils are more vulnerable to, such as harmful sexual behaviours or knowing about consent. Students in the sixth form do not receive statutory relationships and sex education. This means they are not being adequately prepared for adult life or taught safe behaviours.

The curriculum in the sixth form does not prepare students adequately for life beyond school or adulthood. The school does provide qualification routes for some students.

However, it does not check if students are taught all of the knowledge needed for these qualifications. This limits how well students achieve. The school does offer careers advice, but there is a lack of ambition as to the possible range of opportunities available to students when they leave school. Students are not supported well enough to develop independent life skills. They miss out on vital knowledge about how to recognise and have safe and healthy relationships.

The school has designed an ambitious curriculum across four 'pathways'. Each pathway is adapted to build knowledge in incremental steps to best support pupils' stage of understanding. Where staff have the specialist knowledge, pupils achieve well. However, many staff do not teach the curriculum as leaders intend. Some staff have not had sufficient support to understand the agreed curriculum approach. The school does not check effectively if pupils are retaining key knowledge. Some pupils are not taught all aspects of the curriculum and so have gaps in their knowledge. Therefore, they do not achieve as well as they should.

Across the school, most pupils can communicate using signing, symbols or technology. However, some pupils do not access their communication tools fully, as some staff lack knowledge of these methods themselves. This limits how well these pupils can convey their wishes and feelings. Pupils, when ready, are taught letter sounds to then read words. Some pupils are developing reading fluency. However, these pupils spend too long on books they can read with ease. This hinders their progress in reading.

When appropriately supported by trained staff, pupils are calm, engage in lessons and play happily. Staff provide pupils with settling-in activities at the start of each day. Pupils like the security of known routines. However, some staff are less confident or are not sufficiently trained in how to help pupils who struggle to manage their feelings and/or behaviour. Some staff do not feel well supported by the school in these situations.

Pupils do attend school regularly. If not, this is usually for medical reasons. The school directs families to appropriate support from external agencies to overcome any barriers to attendance.

Pupils learn about road safety and healthy eating. They learn that bullying is wrong. Staff are quick to address use of any derogatory language.

All aspects of the school's provision have declined since the previous inspection. This has resulted in some parents and carers and staff losing confidence in the school and trust. Senior trust leaders have recently increased their presence in school to ensure that they provide on the ground support and challenge. The trust and school are committed to addressing the school's current issues, to secure a permanent staff team and improve staff well-being. The school has started with some 'listening sessions' to restore parental confidence. However, this work is still in its infancy.

## Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.

The school has not ensured that staff are sufficiently well trained about the specific safeguarding risks pupils here are vulnerable to. Staff are not knowledgeable of risks such as harmful sexual behaviours. There is a lack of professional curiosity when reporting a behaviour incident to ensure that there are no wider safeguarding concerns. This means some risky behaviours are not being reported as a safeguarding concern or escalated quickly enough and so are not fully addressed. This leaves pupils and staff at risk of harm.

Pupils are not routinely taught RSE, how to manage risky situations or about what constitutes appropriate and safe behaviours towards others.

The school's induction process for agency or temporary staff is weak. These staff are not given sufficiently detailed information about specific safeguarding risks pupils face or key information about pupils they are working with. New staff are not confident in how to report concerns or who to report them to.

Changes in staffing mean there are less staff who have the specific training some pupils need for their medical care. Trained staff are spread thinly. Some staff feel their concerns are not always listened to. There have been several instances where staff have not administered medication or have recorded details of medication administered incorrectly. This places pupils at risk of harm.

There is a lack of strategic oversight of safeguarding. The school does ensure that individual known concerns are dealt with and monitored. However, it does not use this information to shape an effective whole-school approach to manage these risks more widely or prevent them from re-occurring. The school does not check robustly that follow up actions or lessons learned have had the intended impact. The process for checking the impact of risk reduction plans lacks rigour, for example.

The school does carry out the required checks on adults that work in the school.

## What does the school need to do to improve?

### (Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school has not ensured that staff know the specific safeguarding risks pupils are vulnerable to. Inappropriate behaviours are not always identified as safeguarding concerns and reported as such. The school must ensure staff know how to identify and report concerns, including for harmful sexual behaviours. The school must ensure that all concerns are accurately identified and addressed.

- Temporary support staff are not sufficiently informed about pupils' needs, their communication tools or specific safeguarding risks. This means that these staff do not always provide pupils with the support they need. They do not know how to recognise and report some safeguarding concerns. The school must ensure that agency and temporary staff have the information and knowledge they need to identify and report safeguarding concerns and support the pupils they work with effectively.
- The school does not use patterns and trends from safeguarding concerns or staff views to prioritise whole-school safeguarding actions. This limits how well the school mitigates for risks repeating. The school needs to ensure that the strategic oversight of safeguarding is in place so that risks are effectively and sustainably addressed.
- Students in the sixth form follow a narrow curriculum with low ambition. They are not suitably prepared for adulthood and/or are limited in the qualification routes they can follow. The school needs to ensure that the curriculum in the sixth form is ambitious and tailored to providing the life skills and/or qualifications students need for their next stage in education and life beyond school.
- The school does not ensure that all pupils study all of the required age-appropriate RSE curriculum. This means pupils do not learn all that they need to know to stay safe and be prepared for adulthood. The school must ensure pupils receive this important knowledge for their safety. The school must ensure parents are consulted about this curriculum content.
- In some subjects, including reading, the curriculum is not consistently taught as the school intends. This results in some pupils not achieving as well as they should. The school should ensure that the agreed curriculum is implemented consistently well in all subjects.
- The trust and school have not acted effectively to maintain the quality of provision or ensure that arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Some actions are very recent. This means that some parents and staff lack confidence in the work of the school, particularly its work to keep pupils safe. Some parents do not engage with the school. The trust and school must act with urgency to secure the improvements needed and regain the confidence of stakeholders in the work of the school.

## How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

## Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	138122
<b>Local authority</b>	Essex
<b>Inspection number</b>	10405348
<b>Type of school</b>	Special
<b>School category</b>	Academy special converter
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	3 to 19
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	289
<b>Of which, number on roll in the sixth form</b>	41
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	Board of trustees
<b>Chair of trust</b>	David Hall
<b>CEO of the trust</b>	Rebecca Boomer-Clark
<b>Principal</b>	Mark Savage
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.columbusschoolandcollege.org">www.columbusschoolandcollege.org</a>
<b>Dates of previous inspection</b>	26 and 27 June 2024, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

## Information about this school

- Since the last inspection, the name of the multi-academy trust has changed to Lift Schools. It was previously called Academies Enterprise Trust.
- The vice-principal took up their post in January 2025 as did both assistant principals.
- The principal was not in school during the inspection.
- The school caters for pupils who have severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. Many pupils have a diagnosis of autism. All pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.

- At the time of this inspection there were fewer than five pupils of Nursery or Reception class age. Therefore, no separate early years judgment has been made. The evaluation of provision for these pupils is included in the quality of education judgement.
- The school uses four unregistered alternative provisions.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

## Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this inspection under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We deemed the inspection a graded (section 5) inspection under the same Act. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

In accordance with section 44(2) of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than it might in all the circumstances reasonably be expected to perform.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- The inspectors held meetings with the regional executive principal, the regional education director, the vice-principal, assistant principals, heads of learning, the designated safeguarding lead, teachers and support staff.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: communication and early reading, mathematics, and personal, social, health and economic education (PHSE). The inspectors spoke to leaders, visited lessons, looked at pupils' work and spoke with teachers and support staff.
- The lead inspector met with the trust director of education and the regional education director as representatives of the trustees and the school's governance.
- The lead inspector also held a meeting with the CEO of the trust.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The inspectors considered the responses gathered through Ofsted's online survey for parents, Ofsted Parent View. An inspector also spoke to some parents by telephone. There were 50 responses to the staff survey.

## **Inspection team**

Sara Boyce, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Bessie Owen

His Majesty's Inspector

Peter Stonier

His Majesty's Inspector

Liz Smith

His Majesty's Inspector

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