

Inspection of Riverside Meadows Academy

Barton Road, Wisbech PE13 4TG

Inspection dates:	24 and 25 June 2025
The quality of education	Inadequate
Behaviour and attitudes	Requires improvement
Personal development	Requires improvement
Leadership and management	Inadequate
Previous inspection grade	Requires improvement

The co-headteachers of this school are Karen Smith and Alan Buckley. This school is part of Horizons Education Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the interim chief executive officer (CEO), Jane Nolan, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Julie Perry.

What is it like to attend this school?

The story of this school is a tale of two sites. Pupils' experiences on each site are as far apart academically and personally as they are geographically.

Pupils who attend school at St Neots experience a culture of low expectation. Teaching does not meet pupils' needs or inspire them to learn. Consequently, pupils do not place high value on their learning. Many opt out and disengage. The school has not made it clear how pupils should behave. There is a lack of consistency in helping pupils manage their emotions when this is needed. As a result, swearing is commonplace. Learning is frequently disrupted. Many pupils are frustrated by the poor provision that they experience.

Pupils in Wisbech are benefiting from the improvements that new school and trust leaders have made. A sense of togetherness and trust between staff and pupils is valued by all. While many pupils still do not learn as well as they should, this situation is getting better. There is a renewed aspiration from staff in what pupils can achieve. Pupils have responded by working hard. The quality of their work has improved. Pupils at Wisbech behave well. They are proud of what they are now achieving. They happily share their own and each other's successes.

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

Historically, the school and the trust have not taken appropriate action to improve the provision for pupils. Actions have taken too long to implement. Consequently, the necessary improvements have not been achieved or sustained.

In response to this situation, a reformed trust board has made changes to leadership structures across the trust and school. In the short time that experienced and qualified leaders have been in post, they have secured improvement in key parts of the school. For example, a new ambitious curriculum has been designed. There are clear expectations about how pupils should behave, and safeguarding practices have been overhauled to ensure the safety of pupils. This work indicates that the school has the capacity to tackle its weaknesses.

A new vision for the school has been developed. However, the school has not made it clear to staff how they can enact its vision in everyday practice. This means that, despite the recent work to bring about necessary change, the actions to improve provision on both sites are not universally implemented. As a result, many pupils do not access the quality of education, set within a positive environment, to which they are entitled.

The school has not clearly set out how prior learning links to new knowledge. This makes it difficult for pupils to use what they already know to secure new knowledge. Pupils learn isolated pieces of information. These small bits of knowledge are used for a short time and not returned to. There are clearly defined ambitious end points for pupils. The specific knowledge they need to know has been set out. However, because teaching does

not link these small elements, pupils find it difficult to remember key knowledge over time.

The school has not ensured that staff have the subject and pedagogical expertise to teach the curriculum. This means teaching is highly variable between the two sites. When teaching motivates and engages pupils, they produce high-quality work. They enjoy learning. In this environment, pupils are starting to develop a rich understanding of some of the topics they study. However, this is not a common experience for all pupils. Often, teaching does not include clear explanations. Checks on pupils' understanding do not identify if they are ready to move on to new learning or need more help. This often results in pupils being assigned work that is menial and tedious.

All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The individual needs of pupils with SEND are swiftly and accurately identified. However, the adaptations made to support pupils are ineffective. Teaching does not address pupils' barriers to learning. Pupils are unable to complete activities and consequently do not learn.

The school has recently changed its approach to support those pupils at the earliest stages of reading. Individualised support helps pupils overcome their barriers to reading. Many become confident, fluent readers.

Recently introduced strategies are beginning to support pupils to meet the school's high expectations for their conduct. Even so, there are parts of the school where the full impact of this work is not evident. However, pupils are confident that behaviour is getting better. Pupils' attendance has begun to improve. Even so, some of the strategies that the school uses to tackle absence do not address pupils' individual barriers to regular attendance. Consequently, the pupils who find it most difficult to attend, are not supported well enough to access school on a regular basis. They miss important learning and personal development opportunities too often.

Pupils learn about an increasing range of faiths and cultures different to their own. They understand key values such as tolerance and respect. However, some find it difficult to display these values in their day-to-day interactions. Where there is a broad offer of activities such as sports or arts, pupils enthusiastically take them up. In contrast, where the offer is more limited, pupils miss out on chances to develop new interests or talents. There is a wide variation across the sites in the opportunities provided for pupils to develop their independence. This means that too many pupils miss out on key learning that prepares them for adult life.

Some staff do not feel the school has considered the impact of the pace of change on their workload. However, the majority of staff are on board and determined to make the school a better place for pupils to attend.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school has not ensured that the curriculum sets out how pupils' existing knowledge helps them secure new learning. This means that teaching does not explicitly link new knowledge to what pupils already know. Consequently, pupils find it difficult to secure new knowledge and do not learn as well as they should. The school and trust must ensure that the curriculum clearly sets out how prior learning links to new knowledge.
- The school has not ensured that staff have the subject and pedagogical knowledge they need to teach the curriculum as intended. As a result, teaching does not provide pupils with the clear explanations of new information, adaptations that help them engage or suitable activities they need to secure learning. The school and trust must ensure that staff have the subject and pedagogical knowledge to teach the curriculum as designed.
- Some of the strategies to support pupils who struggle to attend school regularly often lack the focus to directly address individual pupils' needs and barriers. This means that some pupils do not feel adequately supported to return to school. The school and trust must ensure that the support provided to pupils addresses their individual barriers to attending school regularly and often.
- The school has not ensured that staff have a shared understanding of its vision and how it will be realised. This means that staff do not understand why changes are implemented. It has also led to marked differences in the provision between the two sites. A lack of performance indicators means staff and trustees are unable to measure how well actions are impacting on pupils' experience. The school and trust must ensure that staff and trustees understand and share its vision and how this will be realised in their practice.

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

Unique reference number	142932
Local authority	Cambridgeshire
Inspection number	10378549
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	107
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Julie Perry
CEO of the trust	Jane Nolan (interim CEO)
Headteacher	Karen Smith (co-headteacher) Alan Buckley (interim co-headteacher)
Website	www.riversidemeadows.cambs.sch.uk
Dates of previous inspection	29 and 30 March 2023, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of the Horizons Education Trust.
- The school operates on two sites. The sites are about 40 miles apart. The address for the second site is Almond Road, St Neots, Cambridgeshire PE19 1DZ. Currently, 57 pupils are based on the Wisbech site and 52 are based on the St Neots site.
- There are two co-headteachers. The co-headteacher on the St Neots site is currently an interim appointment.
- The school caters for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- The school is designated as an 11 to 18 school. However, there are no pupils over the age of 16. The school has not had pupils in the sixth form in recent years.
- 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.

- The school uses 10 unregistered and three registered providers of alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. 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.
- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors held meetings with leaders, including the co-headteachers, deputy headteacher and special educational needs coordinators. The lead inspector also met with the chair of the board of trustees and the CEO.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, art and design, science and personal, social, health and economic education. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to staff, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To further inspect the curriculum, inspectors looked at examples of pupils' work, reviewed curriculum documentation for some other subjects and observed how the school supports pupils at the earliest stages of reading.
- 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.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments submitted. They considered the responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for staff. Inspectors spoke to groups of pupils about their experiences of school life and their learning in lessons to understand what it is like to be a pupil in their school.

Inspection team

Dave Gibson, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Jo Pedlow

Ofsted Inspector

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