

Inspection of Ripplevale School, Rochester

10–13 New Road, Rochester, Kent, Rochester, Kent ME1 1BG

Inspection dates: 25 to 27 April 2023

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Requires improvement

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Sixth-form provision

Requires improvement

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

No

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils join Ripplevale Rochester at different points in their education, frequently having experienced major disruptions to their schooling. Every pupil receives a warm welcome. Bespoke induction arrangements help pupils to settle quickly.

Throughout the school, pupils feel safe and are typically happy. Pupils trust adults to help manage and resolve concerns, including relating to bullying. Staff are trained well to manage and calm dysregulated outbursts. Pupils particularly appreciate the interventions provided by emotional well-being staff. Pupils say the support they receive helps them to control their behaviour with increasing success. Most lessons continue without significant disruption. However, many pupils miss lessons often.

Pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans are carefully considered. Specialist therapy input is available and provided according to need. Pupils' progress towards EHC plan targets is monitored closely. However, annual reviews are not always held to time.

Older pupils benefit from a high-quality vocational curriculum. More widely, leaders' ambitions for the curriculum are not realised. The subject curriculum is disjointed. What pupils should learn and when is not effectively established. Opportunities for pupils' personal development, including to learn about career choices, are limited. However, pupils do enjoy a variety of lunchtime clubs, off-site visits and activities.

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

Significant and extensive changes to staffing have taken place over the last 12 to 18 months. The interim headteacher, supported by key leaders, has secured much-needed improvements to safeguarding systems and practice. The new leadership team has identified widespread aspects of the school that require improvement, particularly relating to the quality of education. Planned improvements are at the earliest stages of implementation.

Across the range of subjects, the curriculum is neither well designed nor suitably ambitious. Leaders have not identified the key knowledge that pupils should learn at different stages or within individual subjects. Teachers are not clear about what pupils have learned before or what they will learn next. Therefore, pupils are not prepared effectively for transitions between classes and key stages. Individual teachers plan sequences of lessons with thought and care. In some instances, pupils learn new knowledge well. In other cases, pupils repeat similar content over and over. Consequently, curriculum breadth is narrowed. In key stage 4, there is a systematic curriculum in place which teachers are skilled at delivering. There is a range of subjects on offer, including a wealth of vocational subjects with strong uptake at various entry levels.

Teachers have few opportunities for training in the subjects that they teach, or in how to teach effectively. Choices about how to teach do not always lead to pupils

securing the knowledge intended. While practical work sparks interest, the desired learning is not always clear or retained. Formal assessments take place three times per year. However, resulting information is not used to revisit learning. Therefore, gaps in knowledge remain. On a day-to-day basis many teachers use questioning to check pupils' understanding. On these occasions misunderstandings are addressed. Assessment and feedback provided to sixth-form students are effective and help students improve their work well.

Staff are trained to teach early reading. Pupils who need further practise with letter sounds or fluency take part in phonics lessons. However, these lessons are not popular with older pupils or supported by all staff. Pupils do not routinely have books with engaging content that matches their reading skills. Consequently, pupils do not gain new reading knowledge quickly. More widely, a culture for reading is not established. Pupils say that they rarely or never visit the school library. There is no widely understood expectation for listening to pupils read or for adults to read aloud to pupils. Many teachers select engaging texts to share, based on their own experiences. There is no plan for the range of texts and genres that pupils should experience.

Speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, as well as emotional well-being interventions, are part of the school's routine provision. Pupils' therapy needs are identified and met well by expert staff.

During the inspection, pupils were seen to behave positively in lessons, although wider evidence indicates that this is not always the case. During assembly, pupils listened attentively and celebrated others' achievements during a presentation of certificates for positive behaviour and learning. Pupils evidently took pride in their awards.

Absence from school among older pupils is remarkably high. Overall, attendance is too low. An attendance policy introduced in February 2023 has not brought about sufficient improvement. Leaders take extensive action to make sure that pupils not attending school are known to be safe.

Pupils benefit from school trips and from participating in decisions, such as about which extra-curricular clubs should run at lunchtimes. Pupils learn about values, different faiths and cultures and about positive relationships. Statutory guidance has been followed. New schemes of work intended to strengthen personal, social, health and relationships education are planned but not yet introduced.

Pupils in the sixth form all have access to work experience. Many take advantage of the 'vocational Fridays' in school, and offer services to customers. While there is a careers programme in place for other year groups, it has not been delivered as intended for some time. Pupils have not heard from external speakers about colleges, apprenticeships, or local employment. Pupils in Year 11 have not received a careers advice meeting. Overall, pupils are not prepared well for adulthood or next steps in education, training, or employment. The independent school standards

relating to careers education are not met in full. Consequently, standards relating to leadership and management are not met in full.

Staff morale has been affected by significant change. Not all staff feel well informed or considered, but report that workload is manageable. Members of the proprietor body are knowledgeable and fully aware of their obligations. However, systems for holding leaders to account had not uncovered weaknesses. Once identified, additional support, including the deployment of an interim headteacher and an executive principal, was swiftly implemented. The director with responsibility for safeguarding has overseen the work of leaders in this regard. Leaders have ensured that the school complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010. Improved safeguarding practices and an accurate evaluation of the quality of education indicate that leaders have the capacity to continue improving this school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and directors have rightly and successfully prioritised work to develop a strong, secure culture for safeguarding. The interim designated safeguarding lead and safeguarding team have established thorough systems of oversight. Pupils are known and cared for extremely well.

Staff are extensively trained. They identify concerns appropriately and follow the agreed processes exactly. Leaders respond promptly to any concerns raised. Safeguarding records provide helpful and precise detail, enabling next steps and appropriate onward referrals to be identified.

Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe from a range of threats, including when online.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Leaders have not developed a subject curriculum that identifies and orders the important knowledge that pupils need to learn through, and across, key stages. As a result, some pupils struggle to master important skills and knowledge or to remember learning over time. Leaders must ensure that the curriculum builds knowledge in a coherent way, across all key stages, so that pupils develop a secure foundation of knowledge to prepare them well for next steps.
- A significant number of pupils do not attend school regularly. Leaders' actions have not yet addressed this. Poor attendance places pupils at risk of falling behind in their education. Leaders must continue to embed their plans to improve attendance and provide the support that pupils need to attend well.
- The careers programme is not current or up to date. Consequently, not all pupils learn enough about a range of different employment or education options. Leaders must ensure that pupils receive a broad and balanced careers education.

This is so that pupils are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed choices and be successful once they leave school or education.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	132097
DfE registration number	887/6006
Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	10286132
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	6 to 25
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	170
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	78
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	Cavendish Education Ltd
Chair	Simon Coles
Headteacher	Joanne Baker
Annual fees (day pupils)	£45,000
Telephone number	01634 812233
Website	www.ripplevaleschool.co.uk
Email address	office@ripplevaleschoolrochester.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	7–9 January 2020

Information about this school

- Ripplevale School Rochester is an independent special school that caters for pupils with autism spectrum disorder. Many pupils also have additional special educational needs and/or disabilities, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and speech, language and communication difficulties. All pupils attending the school have an EHC plan.
- There have been significant changes in leadership and staffing since the previous inspection. Approximately 40 members of staff have left the school in the last year. An interim headteacher was appointed following the departure of the previous substantive headteacher. A senior school leader from within the company has been acting as interim principal, a new head of school has been appointed, and other staff have changed roles and taken on new responsibilities.
- The school occupies two different premises, located close to each other on the same road. The 'school' building caters for primary and secondary pupils. The 'college' building caters mainly for post-16 pupils, including those aged 19 to 25.
- The school is governed by a board of directors.
- The school is registered for up to 210 pupils aged between six and 25 years of age.
- The school's last standard inspection was in January 2020.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school has failed to meet the independent school standards. These are the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors met with the headteacher, senior leaders and school staff throughout the inspection.
- The inspectors met remotely with two of the school's directors. The lead inspector met a further director, with responsibility for safeguarding and compliance and also the interim principal. The interim principal is a senior school leader from Cavendish Education Ltd, currently acting in an advisory and oversight capacity. The lead inspector looked at documentary evidence of the work of directors.

- Inspectors met with a range of members of staff, including subject leaders, and teachers whose lessons had been visited. The lead inspector also met with members of the therapies team.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives in early reading, science, vocational studies and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To make wider judgements, inspectors spoke to staff with wider responsibilities and scrutinised extensive documentary evidence. Inspectors held informal conversations with pupils and observed behaviour in classrooms and throughout the school day.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors spoke extensively with staff and pupils as well as with senior leaders. The lead inspector met with the interim designated safeguarding lead to review their knowledge, records and actions. The lead inspector examined records of staff training and reviewed information about the safer recruitment of staff.
- The lead inspector met with a small group of parents. Responses to Ofsted Parent View, including written comments, were also taken into account.

Inspection team

Hilary Macdonald, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Michelle Lower

His Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school failed to meet the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 2(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if–
 - 2(2)(e) for pupils receiving secondary education, access to accurate, up-to-date careers guidance that–
 - 2(2)(e)(ii) enables them to make informed choices about a broad range of career options; and
 - 2(2)(e)(iii) helps to encourage them to fulfil their potential.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school–
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently.

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