

Inspection of Harlow Fields School and College

Tendring Road, Harlow, Essex CM18 6RN

Inspection dates:	14 and 15 January 2025
The quality of education	Requires improvement
Behaviour and attitudes	Requires improvement
Personal development	Requires improvement
Leadership and management	Requires improvement
Early years provision	Insufficient evidence
Sixth-form provision	Requires improvement
Previous inspection grade	Good

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils attend a school where the adults treat them with care and kindness. Pupils appreciate, for example, how they can signal to adults when they like or dislike something. Adults mostly respond well to pupils' communication. By meeting their needs, adults help pupils to feel happy and safe.

Behaviour is generally calm here. This makes the school a pleasant place to be. Pupils appreciate that the school introduced new equipment to help them exercise and play at breaktimes. They enjoy, for instance, taking turns on the nest swing with one or two friends. The school is working to address gaps in the curriculum, teaching and staff training. While this progress continues, occasional challenges in these areas sometimes contribute to poor behaviour. The current systems to manage these behavioural incidents do not always work as well as they could.

The school wants pupils to achieve their very best. In the past year, it has started working on improving the curriculum to raise expectations for what pupils will learn and be able to do. However, some parts of the curriculum are incomplete. This makes it harder for pupils to learn important ideas. Sometimes, pupils do not remember what they have learned or develop skills, such as writing or using their own communication method, to share their thoughts and feelings.

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

Leaders, including governors, actively seek scrutiny and advice to drive improvement. They have taken steps to address long-standing issues. For example, there is now a rigorous approach to training, recording and reporting on pupils' safety. However, while leaders have focused on urgent financial and staffing challenges, their improvement planning does not consistently include objective, measurable targets. This makes it harder to evaluate progress and ensure sustained improvements in areas such as curriculum development. Consequently, the pace of improvement has been uneven.

The curriculum, including in the sixth form, is under review. Some areas work well. For example, pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties benefit from carefully planned activities informed by advice from external experts like occupational therapists. These activities expand pupils' thinking, communication and physical development. However, some curriculum plans lack detail. Staff are getting to grips with a new system for checking pupils' progress. These issues can hinder staff's ability to efficiently plan lessons that build on what pupils need to learn.

The school is committed to helping pupils on formal and semi-formal pathways become fluent readers and writers, and this shows. There are pupils who read confidently, meaning that by the sixth form, they can understand accessible versions of classical literature. However, staff lack resources, such as the phonics programme's required flashcards, to teach letter sounds effectively. Some activities, such as guessing words from pictures, do not help pupils practise their reading skills. In the sixth form, students

sometimes move between different types of writing without fully mastering the conventions of each one. This limits their ability to improve their writing step by step.

The school ensures pupils' education, health and care plans are reviewed on time. Staff work effectively with the local authority. The school fosters collaboration among staff, professionals, parents and carers to identify pupils' needs and decide on the best support. While curriculum and teaching issues remain, some support, such as physical therapies including hydrotherapy, is effective in meeting individual pupils' needs.

Leaders and staff mostly succeed in building respectful relationships with pupils. This helps them predict and prevent behaviours that may disrupt learning or hinder peer interactions. The school has a staff training system for managing behaviour, but its application varies across the school. Sometimes, staff are unsure when to record incidents and the process for supporting staff during crises is not fully established. The school plans to apply successful safeguarding approaches to behaviour management. However, at the time of inspection, these changes had not yet been put into practice.

The school is improving how it monitors pupils during absences and works to reduce them. It has introduced measures, such as prompt follow-up calls and meetings with families, to decide support and encourage regular attendance. These changes are starting to show positive results.

The personal development programme aims to broaden pupils' experiences and equip them with life skills. These include how to cook and to travel safely. While pupils build a secure understanding of healthy relationships and online safety, other areas of the programme are currently in development. Careers guidance is improving through meaningful employer engagement, showing in students going on to appropriate further education, employment or training.

The school acknowledges the frustrations of some families, particularly those advocating for their children's needs. Efforts like inviting parents to volunteer on trips aim to rebuild trust and strengthen partnerships. Similarly, improving communication with staff is a priority, ensuring more effective collaboration across the school community.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The curriculum, including early reading, and the school's approach to assessment lack clarity. This hinders teachers' ability to deliver the curriculum effectively and limits how well pupils' progress is checked and supported. The school should define and

communicate what pupils need to learn and provide clear guidance on how staff should check pupils' understanding and use this information to inform their teaching.

- There are gaps in the resources needed to teach effectively, such as decodable books and other learning aids. These gaps limit teachers' ability to deliver high-quality lessons and restrict pupils' opportunities to develop key skills. The school should ensure all necessary resources are available and that staff have the expertise to use them effectively to enhance pupils' learning experiences.
- Transitions and activities do not always support pupils in maintaining calm behaviour, which can lead to moments of dysregulation and disruption. This affects the overall learning environment and the ability of staff to manage behaviour consistently. The school should strengthen its approaches to behaviour management, ensuring consistency in practice and effective support during incidents.
- The school is managing multiple pressing challenges, including staffing and finance, which can make improvement planning more reactive and limit the focus on setting objective, measurable targets. This, in turn, makes it harder to evaluate the impact of actions and demonstrate clear progress in key areas such as curriculum, teaching and behaviour. To strengthen its approach, the school should set clearer targets and timescales, ensuring that staff, parents and other stakeholders better understand priorities and the steps being taken to address them.

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	131838
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	10345277
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	177
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	30
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Paula Violet
Headteacher	Kathleen Faherty
Website	www.harlowfields.essex.sch.uk
Dates of previous inspection	26 and 27 September 2023, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The headteacher took up post in September 2023. There is a seconded deputy headteacher who joined the school in September 2024.
- The school caters for pupils with autism spectrum disorder, moderate learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties.
- The school can cater for Nursery and Reception-age children. However, at the time of inspection, there were no children enrolled in the early years. Therefore, inspectors could not gather the evidence to justify a separate judgement grade.
- The school reasonably interprets the Gatsby Benchmarks to meet 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 is currently working with three unregistered alternative providers of education.

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.

- 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 headteacher, seconded deputy headteacher, a middle leader, two governors and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: 'communication and interaction' (including early reading), 'physical and sensory' (including physical development and physical education), and 'cognition and learning' (including mathematics and art). For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers and education support staff, communicated with some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also met with leaders to discuss the broader design of the curriculum.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, 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 reviewed school documentation, including the school improvement plan, self-evaluation form and minutes from meetings of the governing body.
- Inspectors considered the responses to the surveys, including Ofsted's staff survey and responses to Ofsted Parent View, which included free-text responses. Inspectors also considered other correspondence shared directly by parents. Staff were present for inspectors' discussions with pupils to ensure pupils felt comfortable and able to communicate.

Inspection team

Daniel Short, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Wayne Jarvis	Ofsted Inspector
Michael Thomas	Ofsted Inspector

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