

Inspection of a school judged good for overall effectiveness before September 2024: Fred Nicholson School

Westfield Road, Toftwood, Dereham, Norfolk NR19 1JB

Inspection dates:

11 and 12 March 2025

Outcome

Evidence gathered during this ungraded (section 8) inspection suggests that aspects of the school's work may not be as strong as at the time of the previous inspection. The school's next inspection will be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are proud to be part of Fred Nicholson School. Some pupils have enjoyed visiting the new building, including signing steel work so that they will be part of the school forever. Pupils develop strong social skills. They regularly encourage each other to try things, even when they are hard.

Pupils take part in a wide range of activities beyond the school, visiting workplaces and farms. These activities include pupils who have found it difficult to access trips in the past.

Leaders are ambitious for what pupils will achieve. They have identified weaknesses in the quality of education and are taking actions to address them. However, currently, pupils do not consistently receive an education that matches these ambitions. Expectations of what some pupils can achieve are too low in too much of the work they do.

Pupils learn to be able to name how they are feeling at any time. If they are upset or angry, staff are calm and patient in helping them get back to their 'green zone', ready to learn again. Highly consistent use of symbols and visual timetables around the school helps pupils know what is coming next and to communicate confidently with staff.

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

The school gets to know pupils really well as individuals. Staff understand how to help pupils develop their communication skills. Pupils become confident using their own preferred systems, whether verbal, signing or using symbols, to communicate.

The school supports pupils well to recognise and manage their feelings. The more time pupils spend in the school, the more they can independently use strategies to support their regulation, for example the use of alternative learning spaces. As a result, the school is a calm place. Pupils are keen to do the work they are given.

When teachers give pupils work that closely matches the intended learning, pupils use their knowledge well, for example when creating meaningful tally charts and graphs to analyse their performance in a bowls match. However, too often, staff's expectations of what pupils can do are low. Teachers give pupils work that does not challenge them appropriately and is too easy. For example, pupils who can write are rarely asked to do so. This does not help pupils to achieve as well as they should.

Leaders re-launched phonics teaching so that all pupils who need to catch up with reading get the phonics teaching they require. Staff use a common approach and clear letter sounds. However, staff have not used their checks on pupils' phonics knowledge effectively. As a result, some pupils learn and practise sounds that they are already very confident with. This slows their progress in learning to read. However, pupils are enthusiastic about books. They enjoy going to the library and know where their favourite authors' books are stored.

All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Many pupils now join the school with more complex needs than in the past. The school is in the process of establishing a curriculum that clearly identifies the important knowledge that these pupils should learn and in what sequence. This means that some pupils are not taught what they need to know in a logical order. This means they do not achieve as well as they should.

Pupils learn about life in modern Britain. They regularly visit local shops and places to build up their skills for life outside of school, for example travelling by bus. The school values of safe, ready and respectful are revisited regularly through learning. Pupils enjoy receiving rewards for showing these values in their behaviour.

Pupils learn about different careers and visit job fairs. The school works closely with families so that pupils are ready to move on to further education at the right point for them. Some stay for longer in the sixth form. Sixth-form students are positive about the life skills they learn to develop.

Leaders have put in place the starting points for necessary improvements to the quality of education. Staff understand the need for change, and they recognise where changes have already brought about better practice. Staff now have regular coaching on effective teaching methods. They value the visits to other local specialist schools to see effective practice in action. Governors are working with the local authority to develop their skills and to provide more effective challenge and support to the school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Expectations of what pupils can do and achieve are often too low. Staff too often set activities and work that pupils find too easy because they do not take into account what they already know. This means that pupils do not learn as much as they could. The school needs to ensure that activities are effective in deepening and extending pupils' knowledge so that pupils are challenged to a greater extent and are helped to achieve as well as they can.
- For those pupils at the early stages of learning to read, staff do not use their checks on pupils' phonics knowledge effectively. As a result, too many pupils are taught phonemes that they already know. This means that pupils are not supported to improve their reading as well as they should be. The school needs to ensure that phonics teaching is appropriately adapted to meet the varying reading stages in each class.
- The curriculum and assessment processes to guide what pupils should be taught are not fully planned out. The school has not identified precisely what knowledge will be taught and how to track this using assessment. As a result, some pupils are not supported as effectively as others to develop their knowledge and skills. The school needs to ensure that it is clear what all pupils are expected to learn and when.

Background

Until September 2024, on a graded (section 5) inspection we gave schools an overall effectiveness grade, in addition to the key and provision judgements. Overall effectiveness grades given before September 2024 will continue to be visible on school inspection reports and on Ofsted's website. From September 2024, graded inspections will not include an overall effectiveness grade. This school was, before September 2024, judged to be good for its overall effectiveness.

We have now inspected the school to determine whether it has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at that previous inspection. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school's work has improved significantly or that it may not be as strong as it was at the last inspection, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection. A graded inspection is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good for overall effectiveness in December 2014.

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	121256
Local authority	Norfolk
Inspection number	10345254
Type of school	Special
School category	Foundation special
Age range of pupils	7 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	197
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	13
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Jill Wilson
Headteacher	Heidi Philpott
Website	www.frednicholson.norfolk.sch.uk
Dates of previous inspection	6 and 7 November 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school provides education for pupils with a wide range of SEND. All pupils have an education, care and health plan.
- The school is registered for ages three to 19 but currently has no pupils in the early years or key stage 1.
- The school currently uses five unregistered alternative provisions.
- The sixth form opened in September 2023.
- The school is relocating to Swaffham, Norfolk, aiming to move in Spring 2026.
- The boarding provision has closed since the previous inspection.
- A new headteacher has taken up post since the previous inspection. There have been changes in the senior leadership team.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors spoke to the headteacher and members of the leadership team. They met with the local authority officer and members of the governing body. They spoke to teachers and support staff.
- Inspectors visited a wide range of lessons. They looked at samples of pupils' work and curriculum plans. They spoke to pupils both in lessons and in groups out of lessons.
- 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.

Inspection team

Tessa Holledge, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Rachael Judd

Ofsted Inspector

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