



Arolygiaeth Ei Fawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru  
His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

**A report on**

**Western Learning Federation Riverbank Special School**

**Vincent Road  
Ely  
CF5 5AQ**

**Date of inspection: November 2022**

**by**

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education  
and Training in Wales**

**This report is also available in Welsh.**

## About Western Learning Federation Riverbank Special School

Name of provider	Western Learning Federation Riverbank Special School
Local authority	Cardiff Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Special
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	71
Pupils of statutory school age	69
Number in nursery classes	0
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in maintained special schools is 44.7%)	61.3%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in maintained special schools is 100%)	100.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	39%
Date of headteacher appointment	09/01/2019
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	11/01/2016
Start date of inspection	21/11/2022
<p>Riverbank School provides day education for pupils from 3 to 11 years old. There are currently 71 pupils on the roll of the school. The additional learning needs of pupils are varied. Most pupils have a statement of special educational need. Just under half of pupils have speech, communication and language difficulties and a further quarter have autistic spectrum condition (ASC). Just under two fifths of pupils have severe learning difficulties. Fourteen per cent of pupils have a general learning difficulty and and/or physical and medical needs.</p>	

A minority of pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds. The majority of pupils are eligible for free school meals.

The school has been working with a local university to host PGCE students and is involved in a pilot PGCE programme for student teachers wishing to pursue a career in additional learning needs.

There are eight classes at the school, and 10 full time equivalent teachers and 25 teaching assistants.

The school was last inspected in 2015 and was placed in Estyn monitoring. It was removed from that category in 2017. The head of school was appointed in September 2019 but had been acting headteacher immediately following the inspection.

Riverbank School is due to move to new purpose build accommodation on the Fairwater education campus in 2026.

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website: [mylocalschool.gov.wales](https://mylocalschool.gov.wales)

- a. The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

## Overview

Riverbank School is one of three special schools that form the Western Learning Federation. The federation was established in January 2018. The aim of the federation is to achieve economies of scale, develop close collaborative working across the schools for the benefit of both pupils and staff, and develop and improve leadership capacity, whilst maintaining the individual identity of each of the three schools.

All three schools are served by one governing body and led by an executive headteacher, who was appointed in 2019.

Riverbank School is a caring and nurturing community that provides valuable care, support and guidance for its pupils. Staff place pupils' well-being at the heart of all aspects of their work.

Most pupils make suitable progress from the initial starting points during their time at the school. Pupils develop their social skills successfully as well as important skills for life. They become confident learners and are developing appropriate communication skills as they progress through the school.

There is a strong culture placed on school values, which pupils demonstrate daily, such as kindness to others. Pupils actively take part in decision-making at the school, which is carefully managed by staff who provide worthwhile opportunities for pupils to be actively involved in a range of decisions whilst recognising pupils' varied needs and abilities.

The curriculum is pupil centred, broad and balanced. Curriculum experiences are tailored to meet the needs of pupils effectively. The range of outdoor provision allows pupils to experience learning through a range of creative environments. This supports pupils well to develop a range of skills, particularly their social skills.

The nurturing and caring community of the school strongly supports pupils' well-being, allowing pupils' social and emotional needs to be met effectively. Family and community engagement is strong and well supported by the family liaison officer.

Leadership across the school is effective. Leaders demonstrate a high commitment to improvement across the school and federation. Partnership working successfully contributes to supporting pupils and families across the school.

## **Recommendations**

- R1 Develop a systematic approach to develop pupils' reading skills
- R2 Strengthen the use of total communication approaches to ensure that these meet pupils' preferred means of communication consistently
- R3 Ensure that the internal learning environment meets the needs of all learners, particularly those with more complex and sensory needs
- R4 Evaluate the impact of the Western Learning Federation on Riverbank School

## **What happens next**

The school will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Estyn will invite the school to prepare a case study on its work in relation to the work of the family liaison officer, particularly on their work to support parents and carers around addressing the poverty agenda and the school's use of outdoor learning to meet the needs of pupils with complex and sensory needs, for dissemination on Estyn's website.

## Main evaluation

### Learning

Due to their complex and multiple learning needs, the ability range of pupils across the school varies considerably. Overall, most pupils, including those eligible for free school meals, make suitable progress from their initial starting points during their time at the school.

The warm and nurturing school culture at the school supports pupils to develop their social skills successfully. Over time, many pupils learn to listen well to staff and their peers. They follow instructions and respond appropriately in a variety of social situations. For example, they queue patiently in breakfast club and take turns choosing music for circle time. A minority of pupils use a range of strategies consistently to communicate fluently. Most pupils interact confidently with visitors to the school and show respect to members of the school community.

During their time at the school, nearly all pupils develop important skills for life such as resilience and confidence. They approach challenges with enthusiasm and excitement. This supports their learning well. For example, pupils with responsibilities, such as the 'eco ambassador', monitor the school environment carefully.

Most pupils at the school develop their physical skills suitably. They develop their gross motor skills through a variety of activities, such as during 'bikes and trikes' sessions as part of outdoor education or through dodgeball games in the school hall. Pupils develop their fine motor skills through meaningful activities such as adding toppings to their toast or mark making using technology.

Relevant to their specific needs and starting points, over time most pupils develop beneficial skills that support their independence and self-care. For example, pupils brush their teeth, put on their coats independently and move around the school without adult support. In breakfast club nearly all pupils collect their own breakfast and return their empty tray and plate. A few pupils cut toast independently.

Nearly all pupils develop their digital skills suitably across a range of contexts. Pupils take photos of their own work and make choices using the interactive white board. A few pupils type basic phrases and their own name.

Pupils across the school demonstrate a wide range of writing skills, from pre-writing mark making, to overwriting and independently writing short sentences. Nearly all pupils practise their prewriting skills across a range of media, including through painting activities and messy play. Many pupils make sound progress in their writing skills, a few progress to sounding out and writing simple sentences independently, for example when writing an invitation to their friends for the class Brazilian fiesta as part of topic work.

Most pupils develop their creative skills well. They sing enthusiastically in both English and Welsh during assembly and use their prior learning to add relevant details to paintings of tulips as part of their topic work on the Netherlands.

Many pupils make suitable progress in numeracy. They develop a basic understanding of number, for example when counting ice cream cones during a class cookery activity. Where appropriate, a minority of pupils develop a deeper understanding and recognise shapes and predict sequences, for example when using building blocks to create patterns.

A majority of pupils develop appropriate reading skills. They read regularly and are developing a love of reading. A minority of pupils read aloud fluently, sound out unfamiliar words and correct their mistakes with adult support.

### **Well-being and attitudes to learning**

Across the school pupils feel happy and safe. Most pupils settle quickly into lessons and are ready to learn. They respond well to the established routines in the classroom and engage positively with the lesson presented to them. Across the school, relationships are strong between all pupils and staff. These relationships allow for purposeful learning to take place, for example in lessons where pupils collaborate whilst undertaking an experiment.

Most pupils show a good understanding of the school values, such as kindness. They enjoy being rewarded for showing these values in weekly assemblies. Nearly all pupils relate well to visitors. They are polite, open doors and are proud to show off their school. Nearly all pupils engage well with staff and their peers. For example, they learn to take turns with one another.

Nearly all pupils enjoy coming to school due to the positive ethos at Riverbank. They enjoy the warm and nurturing approach that all staff provide, particularly at the start of the day. This ensures that pupils are ready to learn. Many pupils who are new to the school settle into the routines quickly. Nearly all pupils demonstrate good behaviour in class and during break times. During the daily breakfast club, nearly all pupils relate well to each other. They are calm and respectful and take turns to collect their breakfast. A minority of pupils prepare their own breakfast independently.

Most pupils enjoy the valuable opportunities to learn about keeping healthy. Many pupils choose healthy snacks throughout the day, and they enjoy trying these through exploration and play. For example, they make fruit skewers and guacamole wraps.

Most pupils take part in a suitable range of physical activities such as dance, swimming and yoga. Many understand the importance of exercising to be healthy and access a wide range of play and exercise equipment during break times. Many pupils enjoy the recently established 'hobbit house', which helps those pupils who generally play alone to improve their social skills. Many pupils enjoy taking part in lunch time activities such as using parachutes and hoops and playing football. This helps to develop their awareness of space and physical skills.

Many pupils enjoy positions of responsibility at the school, including the work of the school council. Members of the school council are beginning to meet face to face again following the pandemic. They have taken part in a variety of decision-making activities about the school and the federation. For example, they have relished the opportunity to be part of the interview panels of staff appointments. A very few pupils

have campaigned successfully to have curry put back onto the school lunchtime menu.

Nearly all pupils are aware that they have a voice, and they have an appropriate awareness of their rights as individuals. They enjoy discussing their rights in weekly assemblies where they make important decisions about school life, such as suggestions for new lunch time clubs. A minority of pupils understand how to keep themselves safe online. For example, they create online safety posters advising others not to share their password.

Most pupils enjoy taking part in a range of creative activities with outside providers such as their work with an orchestra and the Welsh National Opera. This develops their confidence and self-esteem effectively. They also enjoy contributing to the wider life of the school and community, such as when they make reindeer feeders and decorations to sell at their annual Christmas fayre.

Despite the impact of the pandemic, attendance has improved and is above the national average.

### **Teaching and learning experiences**

Staff at the school have collaborated to design a purposeful and pupil-centred curriculum in line with Curriculum for Wales. It is broad and balanced and is being developed to meet the needs of pupils at the school.

Staff engage pupils successfully in their learning by introducing new themes through exciting and authentic 'enrichment days', for example by challenging pupils at the school to complete a range of scientific experiments to find solutions to a medical problem. As a result, pupils approach new challenges with enthusiasm.

Staff at the school know their pupils very well. They develop positive and nurturing relationships based on mutual respect. As a result, pupils are increasingly engaged in their lessons and demonstrate positive behaviour. Teachers use well-established routines effectively to support transition times and prepare pupils for their learning.

Across the school, staff plan a range of engaging learning activities that meet the interests of pupils well, such as role play sessions or activities that allow them to design their own themed party. In addition, the school is providing greater opportunities for pupils to access the community as part of their regular learning activities. For example, they recently visited Cardiff airport to support the Welsh football team as they departed for the FIFA World Cup.

The extensive outdoor education provision is a strength of the school. This includes a range of engaging outdoor learning environments such as play areas, bike and trikes area, a school garden for growing vegetables and a wooded area with its own fire pit and the 'hobbit hut'. Pupils thrive in these creative environments, for example when using the outdoor space to develop important social skills and their understanding of risk.

In contrast, the indoor learning environment at the school inhibits the delivery of the curriculum, notably for pupils with most complex and sensory needs.



Staff provide meaningful praise to pupils to celebrate their achievements. As a result, pupils show pride in their work. Where required, staff correct misconceptions sensitively and give gentle guidance to pupils to improve their work.

The school is adopting a whole school approach to develop pupils' communication skills. This is at an early stage of development and as a result there are inconsistencies across the school.

Where planning, assessment and teaching are effective, pupils are fully engaged in meaningful activities that meet their individual needs well. However, the quality of teaching across the school is too variable. In a few lessons, learning is not matched to the needs of pupils well enough, learning objectives are not clear and planned activities lack purpose.

Support staff at the school provide attentive support for pupils and lead learning activities effectively. However, the direction of support staff is too variable and in a minority of classes there are not sufficient numbers of staff to meet pupils' complex needs well enough.

Overall, staff across the school use questioning effectively to further learning. Staff use a range of open and closed questions, appropriate to the needs of pupils. As a result, pupils recall prior learning and apply it to increasingly new contexts. A very few pupils share feedback on example work and correct misconceptions.

As a result of the changing pupil profile at the school, leaders have identified the need to amend approaches to teaching reading. This new initiative is at an early stage of development.

The school collects a range of useful assessment information about pupils to evaluate their progress. These are gradually being adapted in line with wider curriculum changes and it is too early to evaluate their impact.

Parents and carers receive regular updates about their child's progress through an electronic platform. Further, the school provides regular reports to parents and carers, which share beneficial information about their children's next steps in learning. Annual reports to parents and carers are bright and accessible, and they provide parents with opportunities to see photos of their child's achievements. These are a helpful record of pupil progress and curriculum coverage. Parents and carers value the communication from the school regarding their child's education.

### **Care, support and guidance**

Riverbank School is a caring and nurturing community that provides valuable care, support and guidance for its pupils. Pupils' well-being is at the heart of all aspects of the school's work. Staff are sensitive to pupils' needs and consistently promote a positive culture.

The school provides worthwhile support to meet the social and emotional needs of its pupils effectively. Well-trained staff show high levels of care and compassion for all pupils. They build positive working relationships with pupils and create a happy and positive environment. The school assesses and monitors pupils' social and emotional skills carefully. This provides valuable information and enables the school to plan

bespoke intervention for pupils in need of additional support. 'Dosbarth Pili Pala', for example, is a caring environment for pupils to develop their social and communication skills as well as their well-being.

In line with additional learning needs (ALN) reform, all pupils have appropriate one-page profiles. The school uses person centred practice effectively to ensure that parents, the school, pupils and outside agencies have a voice in planning to meet a pupil's needs. Pupils' individual profiles and development plans are purposeful and include beneficial targets, which are reviewed regularly. These plans include useful approaches to promote pupils' learning and well-being.

Staff work effectively with a range of specialist services. These successful partnerships support the improvement of staff knowledge and skills, and help them to meet pupils' more complex needs suitably. In a very few cases, this advice is not used consistently to support pupil needs well enough.

Family and community engagement is a strength. The school family liaison officer (FLO) carefully considers parent views and family needs. This helps her to plan bespoke and worthwhile support for pupils and their families. The FLO signposts parents and carers to suitable support from a range of external agencies. She facilitates valuable training for parents and carers on a range of beneficial initiatives including the use of school communication processes to support pupil learning at home. The FLO helps the school to consider the impact that the cost of the school day can have on family budgets. For example, daily healthy snacks are provided at minimal cost to families. This ensures that there is equity of access for all pupils. Careful consideration is given to supporting pupils who have English as an additional language, such as the employment of bilingual teaching assistants and use of beneficial translation technology. This ensures that messages are communicated effectively to all parents.

The school's extensive garden area provides high quality outdoor learning experiences particularly for pupils with sensory needs. This includes a mud kitchen, ball pit, sand play, sensory trail and allotment. Staff use these valuable resources extremely well to promote learning on a daily basis. They facilitate activities that help pupils to develop a wide range of skills and ensure that their sensory needs are purposefully met.

Pupil voice has a prominent place in school life. For example, when pupils take an active role in the creation of their one-page profiles they help staff to determine what helps them to learn best. The school also provides worthwhile opportunities for pupils to take on positions of responsibility. These arrangements are flexible, which ensures that a large number of pupils have opportunities to participate and to make a difference. The work of the school council is a particular strength. Notably, pupils created their own school development plan based on their observations carried out on walks around the school.

The school's work to promote pupils' understanding of their rights is highly effective. The school core values are promoted well through regular assemblies and class based activities. All staff celebrate when pupils display these values in daily school life.

The school has a strong culture of safeguarding, which ensures the safety of well-being for all pupils and staff. A secure and well-established electronic system is in place for staff to report and record concerns, and is readily available. Staff receive appropriate training with regular tracked refresher updates to ensure that their practice is up to date and effective.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership provided by the head of school is motivational and highly effective. Leaders across the school are consistently visible. They are positive role models for pupils and provide robust support for staff. The strong strategic vision, which places the needs of pupils at the centre of all the work of the school, is extremely successful. This vision is understood and shared enthusiastically by all staff across the school community.

The leadership team demonstrates a strong commitment to improvement across the school and federation. Together with the head of school, leaders work effectively as a team and promote a robust culture of success for all pupils, professional development and respect for all. These core values support both pupil and staff well-being positively.

Across the school there are robust process and systems in place for self-evaluation. Effective leadership ensures that staff are developing their ability to work as reflective practitioners. Well-established monitoring and evaluation processes support improvement planning and delivery successfully. These processes are linked effectively to the federation and school strategic aims and improvement priorities. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development and the steps they need to take to continue the cycle of improvement. Leaders recognise the changing needs of pupils at the school and are responding to these changes well and organise effective targeted professional development for staff. For example, recent training on positive behaviour and a whole school approach to developing pupils' communication skills are beginning to have a positive impact throughout the school.

Quality assurance measures are robust. These include the internal panel meetings involving school leaders and the executive head and deputy head teacher, the governing body subcommittee and the full governing body meetings. These quality assurance measures provide leaders across the federation and school with valuable opportunities to reflect and make strategic improvements based on a sound evidence base.

The pace of change has been rapid over the last two years. Leaders recognise the need to consolidate these changes, allowing time to reflect and evaluate the impact of these changes on pupil outcomes.

The well-established performance management process for all staff is highly effective and supports school improvement and professional development well. All staff understand their roles and responsibilities and contribute purposefully to the school self-evaluation process. Leaders fully support the culture of professional development, which links to performance management, school priorities, and individual staff development securely. Leaders and staff value the strong federation

opportunities for increased purposeful professional development, which is strengthening the skill set of all staff across the school. For example, the beneficial systems to support peer working, through 'trust trios' to promote sharing of good practice and research based developments, have strengthened the quality of professional dialogue and challenge amongst staff to raise standards of teaching and learning.

Leaders have a range of initiative to work purposefully with a range of partners and carers, which were strengthened during the pandemic to support the needs of pupils and families. Across the school there are strong links with parents and carers, which are significantly supported through the work of the family liaison officer. This support is highly beneficial and provides sensitive help and advice across a range of areas including the impact of poverty.

Leaders promote a strong culture of safeguarding. This is integral to the work of all staff across the school. Secure systems are in place to record and track referrals and work with multi-agency professionals.

Leaders have ensured that improvements to the current building have been made. However, the building does not meet the needs of the current school population well enough and this significantly impacts on the ability of staff to deliver the curriculum.

Over the past three years the Western Learning Federation has developed a generally clear vision supported by highly ambitious strategic aims. However, the federation does not always articulate stated actions with precision. At times they are jargonistic and unclear.

The federation and the executive headteacher are supported very well by a chair of governors and governing body who are highly invested in the vision for the federation and its schools. They are passionate and generally use their skills well in supporting and challenging the executive leadership team. However, not all governors are fully aware of the aims and priorities of the federation. In addition, a few are not sufficiently aware of spending decisions.

The governing body's duties extend across the three schools. Members of the governing body are advised suitably on the work of the three schools by the executive headteacher and the heads of school. Heads of school, where appropriate, present to governors on the work of their school and sit on the governing body in an observer capacity. In part due to the increase in responsibility of the governing body and restrictions following the pandemic, the extent to which governors visit each school informally, meet pupils and staff is infrequent and this limits their understanding of each of the three schools.

The executive headteacher has established a series of valuable systems and structures to ensure that the governing body make informed decisions. Systems and oversight of finances, for example, across the federation, are strong. However, core budget deficits are predicted for each of the schools. The federation has recently increased its leadership capacity and, as a result, the contribution that each school makes to funding the federation has increased, which further limits the resources available to the three schools. The long-term viability of the federation is unclear.

The professional learning offer for staff is enhanced by strong partnerships with external providers. In addition, the development of in-house trainers and collaboration across the federation in areas such as positive approaches to behaviour support training. This is having a positive impact on the work of schools. The professional learning offer for leaders has also been strengthened.

The federation has undertaken a thorough analysis of the funding it receives and has been successful in gaining an uplift in the core budgets for each of the schools. As a result of this activity, other special schools in the authority have benefited also.

The federation and the schools have strengthened links with a range of partners that provide highly valuable and essential services to both pupils and staff. For example, the federation has well-developed plans to commission services from the local health authority to extend provision, where appropriate, across the three schools.

## Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carer and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents/carers to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors, senior and middle leaders (where appropriate) and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work, to listen to them read and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee
- visit a broad sample of classes, including learning support groups and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

## Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website ([www.estyn.gov.wales](http://www.estyn.gov.wales))

The report was produced in accordance with Section 28 of the Education Act 2005.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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