

Ripples and Reflections: River Academy's Teaching and Learning Newsletter

Edition 1 – July 2025

Reading – The River Way

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As we near the end of our first year of River Academy, it is both an opportunity to reflect on what we have done and how far we have come, whilst also celebrating the successes of this hard work.

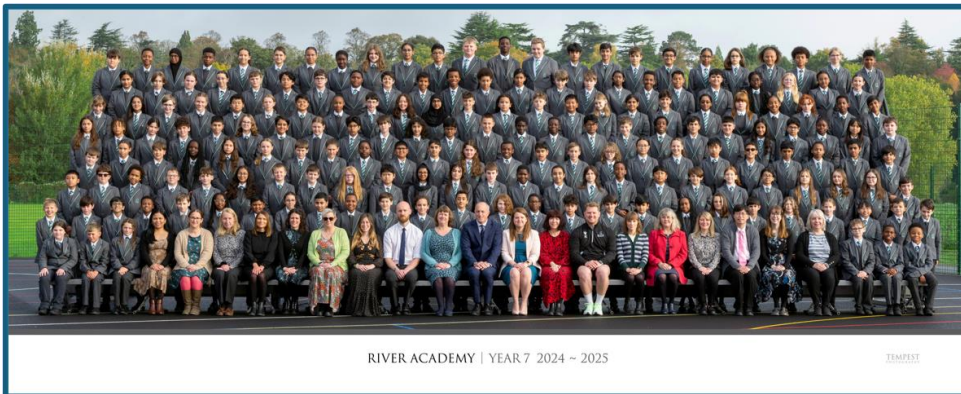
We have purposefully waited until this point to celebrate our 'Reading Culture' at River.

'Why?' you may ask; particularly, when we have been so vocal about the work that we do at River Academy. Well, because – we wanted to know that the work that we were doing had **impact**. That it was directly improving the reading of our students and therefore impacting more widely on their life chances as a whole.

We are immensely pleased therefore, to share that River Academy students have made **outstanding progress** in their reading this year, validated by NGRT assessments. 38% of students have made more than expected progress in their reading, with an additional 48% of students making the expected progress this year. All groups of students have made fantastic progress, but particularly our SEND and FSM students. Our most vulnerable students began the year with an average SAS score of 96.9. Over the course of the year, we have translated that to 99.8 – almost 3 whole SAS points of progress above that which would be expected – to bring students closer to that 'age expected' level. But our 'able' readers continue to be stretched too: at the start of the year 42% of the cohort were deemed 'high' ability readers. Now that marker is 49%.

So, how did we achieve this?

A brand new School



In September 2024, River Academy welcomed its founding cohort of Year 7 students: 187 children from 26 Primary Schools, a third of students speaking English as a second language, with more than 20 languages being spoken from across the world. The diversity of our community is an absolute strength, but it is not without its challenges. Almost 30% of our cohort are very able readers, reading at the chronological age of 15 or above, but just over 20% of our students joined our school reading below the chronological age of a 10 year old.

An important part of us understanding our students was to gauge not just their reading age, but also their reading attitudes. A survey of students in September revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that there is a correlation between reading ability and the love of reading, with our weakest readers telling us that they did not see themselves as readers – that it was more of a chore, and not something they would choose to do for fun.

There is a huge body of research which tells us that those students who enjoy reading are more likely to go on to live happier, more fulfilled lives; not just because of the amount of money that they can earn, but also because they have better mental health and stronger relationships.

At River Academy, we are committed to establishing a culture where students become successful readers, who love reading for pleasure, and use reading to be competent scholars. This blog gives us an opportunity to share the work that we have done, and will continue to do, at River Academy to establish this culture and support all students to thrive in their reading.

Reading Routines

Routines and consistency are vital to how we do things at River Academy, and this is no different when it comes to reading.

Our **bookletised curriculum** is designed to give students exposure to high-quality disciplinary reading as well as a range of fiction and non-fiction. Following the 'River Way', all staff read aloud, and students follow this reading with a ruler to ensure that they are making the link between how vocabulary looks on the page and how it should be pronounced.

Students are expected to help with reading out loud to the class because we want them to all leave as confident speakers. However, there are occasions when texts are read by the teacher as the 'expert' reader in the room. For example, novels in English are read in full by the teacher so students can experience a whole novel read fluently.

Tutor Reading

Students have their own personal reading books, but alongside this, twice a week, we dedicate tutor time to **Tutor Reading**. This takes the form of a class reader, which is enjoyed as a group – out loud, together.



We selected a range of genres, fiction and non-fiction. The texts we have chosen range from *Oh My Gods* by Alexandra Sheppard to *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness and Bear Grylls' *Mud, Sweat and Tears*.

Sparx Reader

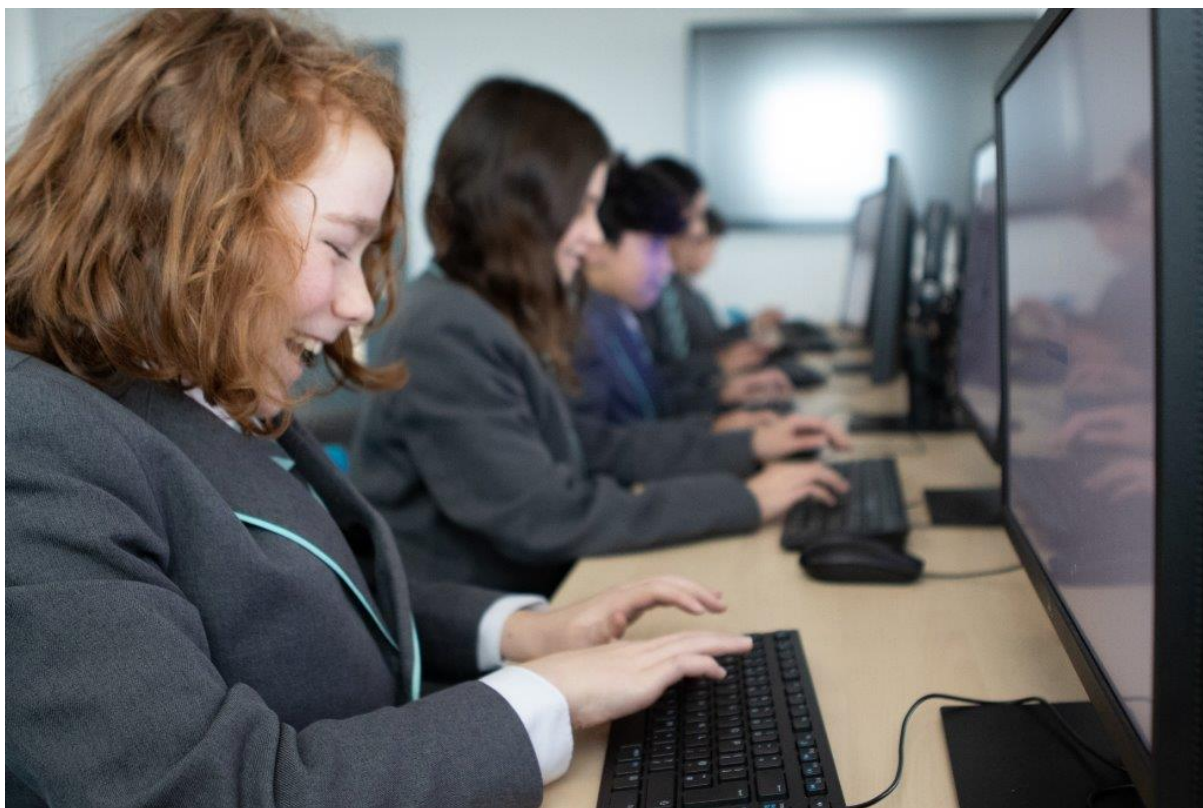
Having learned about the attitude to reading of our students, we knew it was vital that we built on the efforts of our feeder primary schools to maintain positive reading habits.

As English teachers, we both had experience of asking students to read at home but of having no real way to ensure that this was being completed. We also noted from our reading survey, and from what we had observed in school, that many students had limited access to books at home and others were reading books that were either too challenging or too easy for them.

Reading is at the heart of everything we do, and we wanted it to be a focus of our **home learning** too. Our Maths department had successfully launched Sparx Maths in September with high engagement and high completion rates, so we decided to change the approach to

Home Learning in English and introduced Sparx Reader, an online platform which provides a library of literature and monitors and tracks reading.

After clearly sharing the reasons *why* Sparx Reader would benefit students, we launched Sparx Reader in January. It has been a fantastic way to monitor that students are doing at least thirty minutes of careful reading a week; celebrate students' successes in reading and ensure that they have access to high-quality and age-appropriate books.



Since its launch, River Academy has sat comfortably in the top 5 schools for completion rate. We have an average completion rate of 99% and have been top of the Sparx Leader Board on many occasions – no mean feat given well over 900 schools are now using the platform! In fact, we have led webinars and hosted other teams from across Reading and beyond so that we can share our successful our implementation of the platform was.

As a school, we tell students and parents that ‘nobody gets left behind’ and so a lot of effort goes into ensuring that every child completes their reading.

Find out how we've managed this!

1. Every member of staff is on board with Sparx Reader and shares the importance of reading with students. We all understand that we are all responsible for reading; it is not the job of the English Department to do this.
2. As a school, we have line-ups four times a day. We use these line-ups as an opportunity to share completion rates, deadline reminders and build competition between tutor groups.

3. Within English lessons, students are reminded throughout the week about the deadline, and we share the leader board with students.
4. Celebration is key! Every Friday, we end the week with a celebration assembly and as part of this there is a Sparx Reader award for the student in each class who has earned the highest SRP each week. They are awarded with certificates to celebrate this.
5. To build student motivation, we have begun giving 'Sparx Early Completion Merits' for students who complete their homework in the first half of the week and 'Sparx Extra Mile Merits' for those who achieve over double the Sparx Reader Points (SRP) required. This has galvanised students and gives us another way of celebrating their hard work!
6. We have high expectations of our students but also believe in high levels of support. Students who need access to a computer or a quiet place to work can attend Homework Club twice a week after school.
7. We set the deadline on Sparx Reader for Friday at 5pm, but the students' deadline is Friday morning. If they have not completed their Sparx when they come into school on Friday, we contact home and students have to stay after school until it is done. When we say no child gets left behind, we follow through.

World Book Day

World Book Day was a great opportunity for us to put the spotlight on reading, and students enjoyed sharing their favourite reading with staff, who started their lessons with their favourite autobiographies, poems and stories.



We also used this spotlight to host a Scholastic Book Fair – providing the opportunity for our students and their families to see new books. This was so well attended – and also supported the school to purchase books for the school library.



And... Impact?

Without a doubt, this is just the beginning. Against a backdrop of national concern for reading – in both children and adults, River Academy is working hard to build a culture of excellence when it comes to reading – and having lots of success, but there is much to do, and this is just the start!

Early tracking indicated that what we were having a significant impact. The bold headline is that **every** student is now engaged in habitual, age- and skill-appropriate reading, weekly. The foundations for a culture of Excellence in reading at River Academy have been well and truly laid, with reading being explicitly taught in every classroom, and at every opportunity.

Digging deeper though, tracking revealed that in just 10 weeks, our weakest 20% of readers have added over 10 months each to their chronological reading age. In the same amount of time, our students in receipt of Free School Meals had added over 6 months.

A year on, the data is positively affirming. River Academy is **impacting strongly on every students' ability to read**. NGRT testing showed that our systems and culture isn't just ensuring that students make expected progress, we are going beyond that and breaking down the barriers for students to ensure that they are able to make more than expected progress, so that for so many, they are brought up to age-related expectation, and then, they are able to smash 'expected' outcomes, with no ceiling on what they can achieve.

These results are truly staggering and demonstrate the impact that a cohesive and well planned Whole School Reading Strategy can have on the most vulnerable students in our community.

But we remember that this is **just** the beginning – and we are committed to our mission that no child is left behind. Continue to follow the River Academy Journey to see how we continue to shape the reading behaviours, develop the reading skills and, ultimately, foster a love of reading, for all!