



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

A report on

St Helen's Catholic Primary School

**Lansbury Park
Caerphilly
CF83 3GT**

Date of inspection: March 2023

by

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

About St Helen's Catholic Primary School

Name of provider	St Helen's Catholic Primary School
Local authority	Caerphilly County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Primary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	251
Pupils of statutory school age	183
Number in nursery classes	43
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 Primary is 23.0%)	10.0%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Primary is 16.1%)	13.1%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	n/a
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	21.3%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/01/2020
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	30/09/2014
Start date of inspection	06/03/2023

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

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

Overview

Pupils enjoy attending St Helen's Roman Catholic Primary School. All staff have created a warm, caring and inclusive ethos that comes from their focus on the importance of everyone's well-being and their Christian faith. Staff know the pupils well and support their well-being needs effectively. Pupils know whom to ask if they need help and there is a strong relationship of trust and respect between them and the staff. Pupils' behaviour is very good and they have positive attitudes towards their learning.

During their time at the school most pupils make strong progress in all aspects of their work. Teachers plan engaging and exiting activities that inspire pupils to learn and develop their skills. They make very good use of the extensive outdoor areas to enhance the provision for all learners. Most pupils further develop their sense of safety and well-being through regular activities in the school's forest area. All staff encourage pupils to become independent, to work hard and to persevere on their tasks. However, there are limited opportunities for pupils to make decisions about how they organise and present their work.

Pupils contribute well to a variety of groups and committees. The recently convened Senedd that includes all older pupils is divided into six cabinets. Pupils that are voted as 'First Ministers' in these cabinets can articulate well how they have already made a positive contribution and are making a difference within the school and further afield.

The headteacher has a clear vision for the school and places well-being and faith at the heart of all decisions. Leaders have a thorough system for evaluating the school's strengths and they set realistic targets for improvement in conjunction with the well-informed governing body. They make sure that they listen carefully and consider the views of others. As a result, pupils, parents and school staff feel well supported and included in the decision-making process and that their contributions are valued.

Recommendations

- R1 Ensure that teachers' feedback targets the next steps in pupils' learning effectively
- R2 Provide more opportunities for pupils to make decisions about how they organise and present their work

What happens next

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

Main evaluation

Learning

When they join the school, a majority of pupils have skills that are lower than those expected for their age. Most settle well and make good progress including those eligible for free school meals and those with additional learning needs (ALN).

During their time at the school, most pupils make strong progress in their oracy and communication skills. In the nursery class, they develop their vocabulary and confidence effectively as they join in enthusiastically with familiar songs. Most older pupils apply their speaking and listening skills successfully during their lessons. For example, when learning about different careers, they listen well to friends explaining their preferences and talents before discussing which professions would suit them best. By Year 6, many pupils speak maturely, using formal language effectively, for example when taking part in a political debate from the 1840s about whether Caerphilly should have a railway line or not. They follow up points others have made, showing agreement or disagreement and justify their comments well.

Across the school, pupils' Welsh language skills are developing effectively. Younger pupils use a few Welsh words and phrases independently as they interact in the role play area. Higher up the school, many pupils talk about their families and interests in Welsh successfully, and a few use Welsh language patterns independently when giving each other feedback on their work.

Many pupils across the school develop their reading skills effectively and show an enthusiasm for books and stories. In the nursery class, most listen to a story well and a few describe the pictures in a book accurately. Older pupils have a deep understanding of the texts they read. For example, they explain a character's motives for their actions with maturity. They appreciate the time they are given for 'free reading' and speak confidently about favourite authors.

Many younger pupils experiment with mark making imaginatively, such as when they draw and paint on a large scale. In the reception class, many pupils are beginning to use their knowledge of letter sounds to write a few words and simple phrases effectively. As they progress through the school, most pupils write for a range of purposes such as letters, reports and instructions. By the time they reach Year 5, most pupils write a script for a football commentary well. They use an effective range of punctuation to guide the reader, such as commas and exclamation marks. Pupils in Year 6 use vocabulary for effect well. For example, when writing a persuasive letter, they gain the reader's attention successfully, using phrases such as, 'if you think this is bad ...' or 'you may want to sit down'.

Most pupils across the school make strong progress in developing their numeracy and mathematical skills. In the nursery class, most recognise many number digits to 5 and a majority count objects accurately to 10. Pupils in Year 1 create simple repeating patterns using 2D shapes independently. A few develop their mathematical vocabulary particularly well, such as when they ask if a hidden shape has 'two curved edges'. Most older pupils have a good grasp of number and place value. They

calculate the difference between positive and negative numbers and convert fractions to percentages effectively. Most apply their mathematical skills in other subjects well.

Across the school, most pupils make effective progress in learning and using digital skills. Younger pupils explore programmable toys and use tablet devices to support their learning well. By Year 2, pupils create simple block graphs to represent information they find about a range of different books effectively. Most older pupils make sound progress when using a variety of applications to support their work. For example, they create purposeful presentations and use a coding programme to operate a virtual Ferris wheel successfully.

Most pupils across the school develop their creative and physical skills effectively. Younger pupils develop their expression, balance and co-ordination well as they pretend to be a tiger or elephant during an engaging dance session. Most pupils develop their drawing skills successfully. For instance, older pupils use 'one point perspective' when designing Welsh themed interiors.

Across the school pupils develop their thinking skills well. Many younger pupils think carefully and ask useful questions as they play a game with friends. Older pupils develop their problem-solving skills as they design and create an electronic product for use in the community. For example, they work out how to use a parallel circuit to create a Halloween sweet dispenser for a front door.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Nearly all pupils enjoy school and feel safe within its inclusive and caring ethos. They know whom to turn to, and are happy to discuss any concerns with members of staff in the knowledge that they are listened to. This enables nearly all pupils to engage in learning and to develop as confident contributors to school life.

Nearly all pupils' behaviour in class and around the school is very good. They are polite and respectful to each other, staff and visitors. This is a strength of the school. Most pupils engage in their learning with enthusiasm and take pride in their achievements and in the progress they are making. As they progress through the school, most pupils develop the attitudes and behaviours that help them to become successful independent learners. Most are resilient and have a determination to do their best. They draw successfully upon a range of strategies to overcome challenges. For example, Year 4 pupils persevere to form line graphs accurately when plotting climate change data.

Across the school, most pupils settle quickly to their work and move between tasks maturely. They work well individually, in pairs and group situations. They listen attentively to each other and follow staff instructions well, relative to their age and stage of development. Most talk with confidence about their work and interests and are eager to take part in a variety of experiences in class and the well-established outside areas.

Across the school, pupils have a secure understanding of their rights and contribute maturely to discussions about fairness and equality. Pupils engage in a range of leadership opportunities and take these roles seriously. For example, the 'First

Ministers' representing the Healthy Schools Senedd Group have secured positive improvements to the playground environment.

Nearly all pupils have a sound understanding of how to keep healthy and safe. They have a strong awareness of how to stay safe online and of being a responsible digital user. They make sensible choices, for example to eat healthily and drink fresh water throughout the day. Most enjoy regular physical activities and participate with enthusiasm.

Teaching and learning experiences

In response to curriculum reform, the school is developing an engaging curriculum that provides an effective breadth and depth of learning experiences that meet the needs of pupils well. The school has adapted the focus of curriculum topics suitably to broaden learning outcomes and make them more relevant to pupils. For example, in Year 6, a topic now uses the experiences of pupils with a focus on migrant communities such as those with Italian and Polish heritage. This develops pupils' understanding of their local community and the wider world successfully.

The school provides authentic learning experiences for pupils. For example, pupils in Year 2 develop their knowledge and understanding of how to care for living things well through a bee keeping project. Activities include checking on the queen, growing bee friendly flowers and 'spinning' to collect honey. Opportunities for outdoor learning are well established throughout the school and staff make good use of the forest areas. Pupils benefit greatly from this effective provision. Younger pupils explore their feelings effectively as they make portraits from mud showing different emotions. Older pupils develop their understanding of the natural environment well, as they learn bird calls and identify trees from making close observations of their branches.

The curriculum is enhanced well through regular enrichment activities. For instance, older pupils develop their entrepreneurial skills well as they design and make a simple electronic device, taking into account the cost, pricing and profit. They develop their oracy skills successfully when pitching these products to the headteacher. Pupils are beginning to influence the content of the curriculum. Across the school, they contribute to short-term planning, which provides opportunities for them to ask questions relating to the current topic. For example, pupils in Year 2 learn about the history of the Welsh flag after asking the question, 'Why does the Welsh flag have a red dragon?' The school provides beneficial opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding of the history and culture of Wales. For example, pupils learn about local history through worthwhile visits to nearby castles and a coal mine to explore the past. They study the work of Welsh artists such as Rhiannon Roberts and Kyffin Williams, which supports their creative development effectively.

Staff have created positive working relationships with pupils that result in a warm, caring ethos throughout the school. This is built on mutual respect, meaning that every child feels valued as they strive to achieve. All staff use praise and encouragement to support and motivate pupils well. There is a strong emphasis on pupils' well-being in all classrooms to ensure that they are ready for learning and that they are supported in their work and in their lives. This is a strong feature of the

school. The staff know their children well, and know what the pupils need to thrive and flourish.

Teachers provide clear instructions and expectations to ensure that pupils know what they need to do to complete tasks successfully. In the best examples, pupils decide on their own success criteria skilfully, demonstrating that they have understood the requirements of the task well. Pupils are encouraged to strive hard and to work independently to complete tasks. However, across the school, teachers generally provide limited opportunities for pupils to decide for themselves how to organise and present their work.

Staff use an effective range of questioning techniques, often using open questions to assess pupils' understanding and to challenge pupils in their learning. They provide pupils with suitable opportunities to reflect on their own learning and that of their peers. From the youngest classes, staff encourage pupils to think about what they've done and learnt. This skill is developed throughout the school with older pupils regularly assessing their own work or discussing their peers' learning productively. Staff provide valuable oral feedback for pupils during activities that encourages them to persevere and to succeed in their tasks. However, teachers' written feedback does not always target the next steps in pupils' learning well enough. This hinders their understanding of how they could improve their written work and restricts the amount of challenge afforded to them. Staff demonstrate good subject knowledge that enables them to accurately identify ways to help pupils progress in their learning. For example, staff in the nursery have a sound understanding of child development. This ensures that they provide purposeful opportunities for pupils to learn and apply skills progressively in their play.

Teachers meet regularly with leaders to discuss their pupils' progress using a range of evidence. This means that they have a wealth of useful information available when planning the next steps of pupils' learning. They also use this information to ensure that groups of learners, such as those at risk of underachievement, are making appropriate progress. Teachers work effectively with the teaching assistants to support pupils' learning. Together, they succeed in providing appropriate challenge for the full range of pupils' abilities. Teachers share information regularly with parents about their children's progress and well-being, which helps them to understand how they can support them at home.

Care, support and guidance

All staff place a high priority on the well-being of pupils, creating a warm and friendly community. They work tirelessly to create a safe and caring environment for the pupils and their families. As a result, most pupils develop strong social and personal skills. Staff promote the importance of good behaviour, courtesy and respect well. This is applied consistently across the school. The school has a strong culture of safeguarding and the school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils meet requirements and are not a cause for concern.

Staff provide robust support for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN). The school works closely with external agencies who provide specialist support for pupils' emotional, health, and social needs, where appropriate. The ALN co-ordinator and staff track and monitor pupil progress carefully. They ensure that all pupils have

specific targets that are reviewed and evaluated regularly. They identify and plan a range of effective literacy, numeracy and social and personal programmes to support pupils. The teaching assistants deliver these programmes effectively, impacting positively on their well-being and progress.

Whole-school acts of collective worship make a valuable contribution to pupils' spiritual and moral development. The school's curriculum provides planned opportunities for pupils to explore their rights. Staff provide pupils with the opportunity to reflect on key values and how they might apply these to their daily lives. The school celebrates its Welsh heritage appropriately, for example by holding an annual Eisteddfod and visiting local places of interest. Staff provide effective opportunities for pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding of the wider world and sustainability. Pupils learn about significant figures who have overcome adversity to drive change. For example, older pupils study Greta Thunberg and COP27 and her quest for action against climate change.

Staff ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion are promoted positively through their teaching and within their classrooms. For example, pupils learn about Martin Luther King's influential 'I have a dream' speech. This teaches pupils awareness, empathy and acceptance of others. There are numerous opportunities for pupils to influence the life of the school and develop their leadership skills by taking on additional responsibilities, for example as a member of one of the many Pupil Senedd groups. The Chaplaincy Group encourage pupils to think about those less fortunate than themselves and to organise a variety of fundraising activities.

The school uses a range of effective strategies to promote the importance of good attendance at school. A staff member with responsibility for attendance supports pupils and parents conscientiously, signposting families to other agencies where appropriate.

Leadership and management

The headteacher provides strong, compassionate leadership and a clear strategic direction for the school. She has included pupils, parents, governors and staff in developing a clear vision, which has well-being and faith at its heart. Leaders support the work of the school ably, promoting the agreed vision and values passionately, creating a warm and nurturing ethos. The whole staff work well as a team to ensure that the well-being of pupils and staff is everyone's foremost priority, resulting in a strong safeguarding culture throughout the school.

Leaders know the school well. They gather a wide range of first-hand evidence on a regular basis that allows them to clearly identify what they do well and their priorities for further improvement. Leaders and staff make effective use of regular pupil progress meetings, which are also attended by a governor. They discuss individual pupils' progress, their well-being and strategies for ensuring that every pupil makes progress. As a result, teachers know their pupils very well and identify their needs accurately. Self-evaluation activities take place throughout the year, with all staff having meaningful input. This results in leaders and staff identifying priorities for improvement accurately, for example the need to improve pupils' progress in their mathematical development. Leaders formulate relevant and realistic plans for

improvement. This has subsequently impacted positively on pupils' mathematical skills.

Governors are experienced, skilled and very supportive of the work of the school and fulfil their statutory responsibilities well. They use their individual expertise effectively to promote what is best for pupils. For example, they understand their legal responsibilities in respect of promoting healthy eating and drinking and ensured a bespoke, healthy menu choice when pupils returned from periods of lockdown during the pandemic. They are well informed and have a sound understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. They gather first-hand evidence through activities, such as listening to learners and learning walks, to help them carry out their roles as critical friends. They are knowledgeable about the school's progress towards its improvement priorities and national priorities, including its drive to mitigate the impact of poverty on educational attainment.

Leaders' financial management of the school is effective. They work well with governors to ensure that spending is sensible, affordable and linked to improvement priorities. They monitor expenditure closely and balance short-term and longer-term needs appropriately. For example, a significant sum is ringfenced to improve the interior and exterior learning environment. Leaders ensure that the pupil development grant is used well to benefit eligible pupils, for example through employing skilful support staff to deliver worthwhile interventions.

Parents are kept well informed of developments and activities at the school through regular electronic communications. The school asks for their views on a range of issues. Parents appreciate how quickly leaders and staff respond to any concerns and suggestions that they raise. For example, the headteacher arranged a 'meet the teacher' evening early in the autumn term in response to a comment in a parent survey. This means that parents have a better understanding of the upcoming theme and curriculum that their child will be following and therefore better prepared to help at home.

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)

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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Publication date: 11/05/2023