



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

A report on

St Alban's R.C. High School

**The Park
Pontypool
Torfaen
NP4 6XG**

Date of inspection: May 2023

by

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

This report is also available in Welsh

About St Alban's R.C. High School

Name of provider	St Alban's R.C. High School
Local authority	Torfaen County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	Roman Catholic
Number of pupils on roll	770
Pupils of statutory school age	770
Number in sixth form	
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 Secondary is 20.2%)	16.0%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Secondary is 17.8%)	24.1%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.6%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	7.0%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2017
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/12/2015
Start date of inspection	15/05/2023
Estyn does not inspect religious education or the religious content of collective worship when it is a school with a religious character. Instead, the governing body is required by law to arrange for religious education and collective worship to be inspected separately.	

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

Staff at St Alban's R.C. High School are committed to providing pupils with the best possible education based on its values of 'Respect, Responsibility and Resilience' underpinned by the Catholic faith. The school creates an extremely caring and inclusive environment for its pupils. This is a particular strength and contributes positively to pupils' well-being, behaviour and engagement in learning.

There is a strong working relationship between pupils and teachers, which is based on mutual respect. Teachers' enthusiasm for their subjects engages pupils in their learning and staff encourage pupils to set high aspirations for themselves. Most teachers have high expectations of what pupils can do and challenge them accordingly. As a result, pupils enjoy being at school and engage well with their learning. This helps many pupils to make good progress.

Nearly all pupils understand the school's expectations around behaviour and staff consistently and sensitively promote good behaviour. This contributes positively to the manner in which pupils conduct themselves. They display strong social skills and interact maturely with staff, their peers and visitors. They enjoy being in school and are satisfied with their learning.

The school offers a balanced curriculum, which provides for the interests, needs and aspirations of nearly all pupils. It has established a clear vision for the development of Curriculum for Wales and pupils enjoy the new approach to teaching in Year 7 based on capturing pupils' imagination and stimulating their curiosity. Planning for progress of pupils' numeracy and literacy skills across the curriculum is developing well. The school provides an excellent range of enrichment activities that support the curriculum and develop pupils' interests. Currently, the school does not provide enough opportunities for pupils to develop their Welsh language skills across the curriculum other than in Welsh lessons.

The headteacher, supported by a strong leadership team, shares a clear vision of high ambition and success for all. Nearly all staff promote this vision and consistently reinforce the school's values. This contributes strongly to an inclusive Catholic ethos that permeates school life. As a result, pupils enjoy school and are very proud to be part of the St Alban's community. The school has developed strong relationships with a wide variety of partners to ensure the best possible support for pupils. However, the quality of the school accommodation is poor and in need of upgrading.

Recommendations

- R1 Increase the range of opportunities for pupils to practise their Welsh language skills
- R2 Improve the condition of the buildings

What happens next

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

Main evaluation

Learning

Many pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), make secure progress in their learning and a few pupils make particularly strong progress. Many pupils recall prior knowledge well and use it effectively to inform their learning. For example, they use their knowledge about what Catholics believe to evaluate whether God is all powerful and all loving.

Most pupils listen respectfully to their teacher and to their peers. They engage well in discussions in small groups and share their opinions confidently. For example, in science lessons, they discuss how to investigate how the oldest tree in Pontypool has survived for 400 years. Many pupils are eager to answer questions and contribute to class discussion making effective use of subject terminology. A minority of pupils provide well-developed responses to their teachers' questions, for example when discussing capitalism, socialism and the historical context of Macbeth. A few pupils pose pertinent questions to clarify key points and share their views with confidence.

Most pupils are adept at reading a range of texts for information. Many do so with good understanding. A minority of pupils are highly perceptive in their analyses of the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Jessie Pope for example, and in their understanding of how authors manipulate readers' thoughts in dystopian texts. Pupils of all ages benefit from opportunities to apply more advanced reading strategies such as summary, synthesis and evaluation in different subjects. When required to, pupils generally read aloud with confidence and fluency.

Across the curriculum, most pupils write clearly for a range of purposes, for example in history lessons when evaluating whether the industrial revolution was a good thing. Many pupils organise their writing suitably and use paragraphs appropriately. They write confidently at length with suitable accuracy and use a good range of vocabulary. A few pupils write fluently using different sentence structures and sophisticated vocabulary. A few pupils make basic spelling and grammatical errors.

In Welsh lessons, many pupils make suitable progress in their written Welsh language skills and a majority write basic sentences with suitable accuracy. However, in general they struggle with their speaking skills. Many pupils lack confidence and their pronunciation is underdeveloped. Consequently, they provide only brief concise responses.

Many pupils have secure number skills and can use the four arithmetic rules well to solve a variety of problems. In a few lessons, pupils use formulae to calculate

quantities successfully, such as when calculating the energy released per gram from different cereals. Many pupils have a sound understanding of shapes and measure and use Pythagoras' theorem well to calculate unknown quantities of a triangle. Many use their data handling skills effectively and are able to construct and plot a range of graphs accurately. When given the opportunity, pupils analyse graphs appropriately. As they progress through the school, more able pupils develop a secure understanding of more advanced aspects, for example how to simplify surds (numbers that cannot be simplified into a whole number). A few pupils have weak basic number skills. As a result, these pupils struggle to grasp new concepts.

When given opportunities, pupils develop their creative and physical skills well. For example, in physical education lessons, pupils make good progress when improving their catching and fielding techniques in cricket. In design technology lessons, pupils design pewter souvenirs, which could be sold at local visitor centres. In general, pupils are developing their digital skills suitably. For example, pupils use a range of software applications in mathematics and art competently to create complex shapes and compare the gradient on line graphs.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Positive working relationships between staff and pupils are a notable strength of the school. Nearly all pupils are proud to belong to an inclusive school and promote well its core values of mutual respect, courtesy, kindness and 'being the best we can be'. Their enjoyment of school is reflected well in their level of attendance.

Most pupils feel safe and happy in school, and free from physical and verbal abuse. Nearly all pupils know who to turn to if they have any problems and appreciate the support and restorative approach to dealing with their concerns.

Many pupils understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle and how to keep themselves safe online. High numbers of pupils enjoy taking part in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, including sports practices and matches, chess club and a school musical production.

A diverse range of pupils participate responsibly in decision-making at the school through the many leadership opportunities available to them. These pupils are democratically appointed to the School Council and senior pupils provide a beneficial informal channel of communication between pupils and staff. Many pupils feel that school leaders listen to their views and appreciate the changes made, for example in the variety of food on offer in the school canteen.

Pupils develop well as ethical, informed citizens and have a strong awareness of fairness and equality, supported by the 'Youth Ethos Teams' and the 'Diversity Group'. Pupils in the 'Eco-committee' demonstrate their commitment to sustainability and support of the wider community by participating in regular litter picks and producing bee boxes for the local community park. Pupils appreciate that the school respects and celebrates diversity and engage enthusiastically with a wide variety of groups within the school.

Most pupils have a positive attitude to learning. They arrive promptly to lessons ready to learn and engage purposefully with their work. They take pride and interest in that

work and most persevere and demonstrate resilience when they find it more challenging. In many cases, co-operation and interaction between pupils is very good, particularly in group work or in pairs.

Teaching and learning experiences

Most teachers foster purposeful and productive working relationships with their classes. This, along with the well-understood classroom routines they establish, helps to create a calm learning environment that supports pupils' learning well.

In a few cases where pupils make particularly strong progress, teachers' passion for their subject enthralls pupils and leads them to engage fully in their learning. These teachers are very clear about what they want pupils to learn and have notably high expectations of what they can do. They provide clear explanations and plan a variety of engaging approaches, resources and demanding tasks. These teachers ensure that the sequence of activities builds well on pupils' prior knowledge and understanding. They ask sharp, incisive questions that challenge pupils' thinking skills and deepen their understanding.

In many instances, teachers have suitably high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They plan a variety of appropriately challenging activities that engage pupils in their learning successfully. These teachers use questioning adeptly to probe pupils' understanding and to ensure that they are making at least appropriate progress.

In a few lessons, teachers' expectations of what pupils can do are too low and they do not develop pupils' independence in their learning well enough. These teachers talk too much or give pupils too much support with written tasks. In these lessons, teachers are over-reliant upon closed questions and do not monitor pupils' engagement and progress well enough.

In the majority of cases, teachers give pupils helpful verbal feedback. A minority of teachers also offer pupils precise written feedback and provide useful opportunities for them to improve their work. However, in a minority of subject areas there is too much variation in the quality of written feedback. Reports to parents, which contain useful information about pupils' progress and attitudes to learning, are clear and easy to understand. The school has robust systems for monitoring pupils' progress and uses this information effectively to put in place a suitable variety of helpful interventions.

The school provides a balanced curriculum, which meets the interests and needs of nearly all pupils. It considers pupils' views carefully and has introduced subjects such as the built environment and hospitality and catering as a result. Pupils value the support they receive through helpful online booklets and videos, while making subject choices.

A notable strength of the school is the wide range of extra-curricular activities, which are very well attended. These worthwhile activities, including various sporting and debating clubs, support the curriculum and develop pupils' interests well. The school has organised relevant educational trips to local sites such as St Fagan's and Big Pit in addition to subject enriching visits to Rome, New York and Washington.

The school has a clear vision for Curriculum for Wales, reviewing and refining tasks based on a 'Big Question' approach in Year 7. It has also collaborated effectively with partner primary schools to ensure that the curriculum builds well on pupils' prior knowledge and to agree areas for further development.

The school plans effectively for the development of pupils' numeracy and literacy skills with worthwhile opportunities in different subjects. The provision for developing pupils' digital skills across the curriculum is at an earlier stage of development.

Skills co-ordinators have a clear passion and vision to improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. The school has focused on developing strategies based on St Alban's 'Numeracy Great Eight' and 'Literacy Super Six', and provides staff with purposeful guidance and resources. This has helped to ensure that provision is authentic, challenging, appropriate and consistent. However, teachers' correction of literacy errors in pupils' writing is too variable.

A valuable and effective personal and social education (PSE) programme responds well to relevant contemporary issues. The PSE programme reflects clearly the school's values and virtues.

Pupils have a few opportunities to use the Welsh language outside of Welsh lessons. This includes prayers and blessings at the beginning of lessons and during registration periods. In a few lessons, pupils learn about Welsh culture, for example through cerdd dant in music. However, opportunities for pupils to use Welsh in context other than their Welsh lessons are limited.

Care, support and guidance

St Alban's R.C. High School is a very caring, inclusive and supportive community. The school has established a clear vision for pupil well-being, which is underpinned by its Catholic ethos.

Purposeful and respectful working relationships between staff and pupils have created an environment where pupils feel safe and happy at school. The school has developed many beneficial strategies, including working with external partners, to support pupils' well-being and to address any emotional or mental health issues. The 'Sanctuary and Haven' provision offers opportunities for pupils to share their concerns and to agree on ways to resolve any issues. This impacts positively on pupils' attendance and their feeling of belonging.

The school forges strong relationships with parents, seeking their views regularly, for example through the parent council. Recently, the school has offered a series of well-being talks provided by external agencies, to support parents in dealing with adolescent issues. The school works well with parents, their partner primary schools, and colleges to support pupils' transition to and from St Alban's.

The school promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development very effectively. The PSE programme is well established and is delivered through a range of discrete well-being lessons, form time activities and across relevant areas of the curriculum. This programme is reviewed regularly and considers current issues arising from various questionnaires conducted by the school.

The school has robust arrangements to monitor attendance and regular contact is made with families of pupils whose attendance is lower than it should be. Whenever pupils are unable or unwilling to attend school regularly, staff make considerable efforts to continue to support their educational progress. The school has also developed a useful approach to supporting persistent absentees through its 'Emotional Based School Avoidance' intervention.

Worthwhile transition arrangements for pupils with ALN to experience school visits as part of the health and well-being week enhance pupils' life skills and contribute to secure and trusting pupil – staff relationships. The school offers a broad range of extra-curricular activities, which reflects its inclusive ethos. The liturgical celebrations offered by the school are valued and respected by members of the school community.

There is appropriate provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN). Leaders evaluate its impact suitably through self-evaluation processes and the tracking of pupils' progress against personalised targets. Pupils with ALN are supported well by the school in partnership with external agencies as required. This helps them move forward successfully at the end of their time in the school. Pupils with ALN have a helpful one-page profile to support them with their well-being and learning at school. However, these profiles and other information provided are not always used effectively to meet the needs of individuals across the curriculum.

There is an appropriate range of beneficial interventions for pupils who need extra support with their learning, such as adapted curriculum classes and intensive literacy and numeracy sessions. However, progress within these interventions is not always monitored robustly enough.

Arrangements to keep pupils safe are clear and robust. The school responds to safeguarding concerns promptly and effectively. All staff receive regular training and are clear about the school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils. The school staff have skilfully created a culture of safeguarding through their daily work where they take personal ownership of ensuring that pupils' needs are catered for in a sensitive and safe way.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has a clear vision for the school based on securing the best possible learning experiences for pupils in a caring environment. He is supported effectively by the rest of the senior leadership team and, together, they promote an inclusive Catholic ethos that permeates all aspects of school life. Senior leaders have high expectations of staff and pupils and are strong role models. They communicate their vision clearly to all stakeholders and encourage pupils to foster the '3R's' – Respect, Responsibility and Resilience. The consistent manner in which staff promote these values contributes to high standards of behaviour and positive attitudes to learning among pupils. As a result of strong leadership, pupils receive high-quality teaching and excellent care support and guidance. Pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning are notably good.

Leaders are well organised and ensure that the school runs smoothly and efficiently. Roles and responsibilities are distributed equitably among senior leaders who

understand their duties well. A few middle leaders have beneficial opportunities to take on whole-school responsibilities and develop their leadership skills as part of the extended senior leadership team.

Line managers meet regularly with middle-leaders to check progress against school priorities and offer them strong support when needed. The school has systematic performance management arrangements that align closely with leaders' main priorities and lead to relevant professional learning opportunities for staff. Progress towards individual members of staff's targets is monitored regularly.

In general, middle leaders fulfil their roles well. They have a sound understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in their areas of responsibility. Departmental leaders respond positively to initiatives from senior leaders. They keep a close track of their departments' progress towards improvement priorities. They are supportive of staff in their departments while also holding them to account for their performance.

Partnerships with parents are strong. There are regular newsletters and a useful website that keep the community well-informed of the school's activities. The parent council provides leaders with a valuable sounding board to explore new ideas. Leaders are approachable and often conduct informal discussions with parents at short notice.

The headteacher and business manager ensure that spending decisions are focused on providing worthwhile learning experiences for pupils. Governors have a suitable oversight of the school's financial situation. Leaders use grant funding, including the pupil development grant, thoughtfully to support a wide range of relevant provision, for example literacy and numeracy interventions. They ensure that disadvantaged pupils benefit from access to a wide range of extra-curricular experiences, such as peripatetic music lessons.

The school's grounds are clean, tidy and well-maintained. However, several parts of the building are in a poor state of repair.

Governors are passionate about the school and suitably informed about much of its work. They have an appropriate understanding of the school's financial situation and have offered suitable challenge regarding a few areas of the school's work. Governors understand their role in promoting healthy eating and drinking.

All leaders carry out a wide range of activities to gain first hand evidence about the quality of teaching in their areas of responsibility. These include short visits to lessons, whole lesson observations, scrutiny of pupils' work, meeting with pupils to discuss their experiences, gathering parents' views and analysing data and information from examination boards. As a result, leaders know the school's strengths and areas for improvement well. They use this information beneficially to plan for improvement. There is close alignment between school and departmental priorities, which has helped ensure consistency of expectations around teaching.

The school has an increasingly strategic approach to professional learning that aligns helpfully with its other improvement processes including performance management. The clearly understood principles that underpin this work ensure it supports whole-

school improvement priorities, and the needs of individuals effectively. Staff benefit from a suitable range of professional learning opportunities, including helpful sharing of good practice within and across subject areas and working with external agencies where appropriate. Senior leaders evaluate professional learning thoroughly and adapt their approaches accordingly.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent 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 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 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, where appropriate
- visit a broad sample of lessons, 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 (<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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