



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

A report on

**Aberdare Community School
Ynys Road
Ynys
Aberdare
CF44 7RP**

Date of inspection: March 2018

by

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

About Aberdare Community School

Aberdare Community School is an English-medium 11-18 school maintained by Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority.

There are currently 1,133 pupils on roll, including 154 in the sixth form. Aberdare Community School was opened in September 2014 as a result of the closure of Aberdare Girls' School, Aberdare High School, and Blaengwawr Comprehensive School. These schools were inspected in 2011 or earlier.

Around 29% of the pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is above the national average of 17.0%. Over 39% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas in Wales. Most pupils speak English as their first language and come from a white, British background. The percentage of pupils with special educational needs is around 24%. This is higher than the Welsh average of 21.5%. The percentage of pupils who have a statement of special educational need is 2% which is the average for Wales.

There are two support classes at the school, with 20 pupils attending at present. The classes are for learners with communication and autistic spectrum disorders.

The current headteacher took up post in April 2017. The senior leadership team consists of the headteacher and one deputy headteacher, five assistant headteachers, a director of pupil progress and an associate senior leader.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website at the link below.
<http://mylocalschool.wales.gov.uk/Schools/SchoolSearch?lang=en>

Summary

Aberdare Community School sets out clearly the ambition for its pupils in the school motto 'Strive, Believe, Achieve'. As pupils progress through the school, many gain confidence and develop valuable skills by taking part in a range of beneficial opportunities including engaging extra-curricular activities at the co-located leisure centre. Many pupils behave well in lessons, and a majority participate and engage suitably with classroom tasks. Despite these positive attributes, over the past three years attendance rates have declined and do not compare well with similar schools.

Across the school, a majority of aspects of teaching enable pupils to make suitable progress. However, teaching generally lacks challenge and assessment practices are too variable and do not enable pupils to improve their work.

Senior leaders share a well-understood vision for developing the school. They have a sound knowledge of the school's strengths and areas for development, although tend to be overly positive in their evaluations. In addition, there is too much variation in how effectively senior colleagues hold middle leaders to account. This has limited the school's ability to secure suitable improvement in important areas of its work. Pupil standards and progress do not compare suitably to similar schools. In addition, significant shortcomings in the rate of attendance and exclusions, and in the quality of teaching have not been addressed well enough.

Inspection area	Judgement
Standards	Adequate and needs improvement
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement
Teaching and learning experiences	Adequate and needs improvement
Care, support and guidance	Adequate and needs improvement
Leadership and management	Adequate and needs improvement

Recommendations

- R1 Improve attendance and behaviour
- R2 Improve the quality and consistency of teaching and assessment
- R3 Improve pupil standards and progress
- R4 Improve the rigour and effectiveness of self-evaluation and improvement planning

What happens next

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school is in need of significant improvement. The school will draw up an action plan that shows how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the school's progress about 12 months after the publication of this report.

Main findings

Standards: Adequate and needs improvement

During lessons, many pupils make suitable progress in their knowledge, understanding and skills. In a few particularly effective lessons, many pupils make strong progress. However, over the past three years, the school's performance over time at key stage 4 has been below that expected in most key indicators and weak in those indicators including mathematics in particular.

A minority of pupils recall prior learning suitably and apply new learning successfully, such as when analysing the components of fitness associated with badminton or considering the reliability of source material available to the police during the Jack the Ripper investigation.

Many pupils listen attentively, and with respect, to their teachers and peers. Although most pupils respond to questions if the teacher addresses them directly, a minority only give short, underdeveloped responses and do not extend their answers. A few pupils read aloud confidently, but many lack fluency and do not vary their expression and tone well enough.

Many pupils have sound basic reading skills. These pupils are able to locate information competently, and a majority interpret texts suitably. A few pupils do so with deeper understanding, for example, when selecting relevant quotes from 'An Inspector Calls' to illustrate key themes around social responsibility. However, a minority of pupils lack the vocabulary and skills to gain a full understanding of texts.

In general, many pupils have an appropriate understanding of audience and purpose when writing. A majority are able to write with sufficient technical accuracy such as when they discuss whether the rights of asylum seekers are being upheld. A few more able pupils have a sophisticated writing style and are able to vary sentence type and use vocabulary for effect skilfully. For example, they write 'think pieces' to consider if religion can change the world after gathering views from a range of local people, and use inference and deduction to explain why Donald Trump thinks climate change is a hoax. Many pupils make relevant use of subject-specific terminology with support, although a minority of pupils use a limited range of vocabulary in their writing. A minority of pupils, especially those with weaker skills, make common and frequent spelling errors and fail to paragraph and punctuate their work securely.

Many pupils have a suitable grasp of number skills but have gaps in their understanding of other mathematical skills. In particular, these pupils find it difficult to recall and apply rules they have previously studied, such as when calculating the compound area of irregular shapes. A majority are able to analyse straightforward data from various sources competently and come to sensible conclusions. Many pupils have a sound understanding of the main features of a graph and a majority construct and interpret a variety of types of graphs confidently, for example when evaluating the costs of treating kidney failure. However, in a minority of cases pupils draw graphs and diagrams inaccurately.

Most pupils use basic information and communication technology (ICT) skills fittingly across the curriculum, for example, when capturing evidence and reporting on the difference between the armed forces, police, fire and rescue service. They are competent in their use of the internet to research a range of topics and when using presentation software to create interactive quizzes about topics that interest them, such as football club trivia or to aid their revision of greetings in different languages.

While pupils generally follow instructions from their teachers appropriately, a majority are less adept in the skills required for independent learning. For example, when writing, they are over-dependent on support from scaffolded prompts and therefore do not develop their independent writing skills well enough. Likewise, these pupils rely on the teacher to offer strategies to enable them to tackle numerical problems.

Over the past three years, performance in the level 2 indicator including English and mathematics has declined. Performance in this indicator has been lower than that in similar schools for two of the past three years and well below in 2016. The performance in mathematics over the last two years has been particularly weak. Performance in the capped points score has been variable over the past three years and generally compares well with that in similar schools. Over the past three years, the performance in the level 1 indicator that includes five grades A*-G has been strong and above that of similar schools. The proportion of pupils gaining five or more GCSEs or equivalent at grades A*-A has been below that in similar schools over the last three years.

In most indicators, the performance of boys has been above that of boys in similar schools. However, overall, the performance of girls has been below that of their peers in similar schools in about half of the key performance indicators and well below in a minority of indicators for grades A*-C.

The performance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals has been below the average for the same group of pupils in similar schools in most indicators in recent years and has fallen well below in 2017. Their performance in level 1 has remained strong, but has been extremely variable over time in, for example, the level 2 indicator.

Performance in the sixth form has remained around the average of similar schools in terms of the proportion of pupils gaining two or more A level grades at A*-E. A majority of sixth form pupils provide mature, informed written responses to specific prompts, however, a few pupils do not give sufficient detail in their verbal responses. Most pupils are able to describe how they use feedback to improve their performance.

At the end of Year 11, nearly all pupils remain in education, employment or training.

At key stage 4, around half of pupils achieve a level 2 GCSE qualification in Welsh as a second language. Many pupils display positive attitudes towards the language but lack confidence when speaking Welsh.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement

Overall there are strengths in pupil wellbeing. However, poor attendance, exacerbated by high exclusion rates, is having a detrimental effect on pupils standards and progress.

Attendance rates are declining over time and in 2017 do not compare well with similar schools. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals is particularly weak. Persistent absence is also too high and increasing. In 2017 it was well above the rate of similar schools and nationally. The rate of fixed term exclusions has risen sharply in recent years and is considerably higher than in secondary schools overall.

In most lessons pupils behave well and are respectful of each other. As a result, pupils settle well and are prepared and ready to learn. For example, many pupils work effectively in groups when discussing conflicting opinions in history about the death of King Charles II. Although a majority of pupils sustain concentration throughout lessons, a minority display a lack of resilience and tenacity when the work is challenging.

The majority of pupils feel safe and secure at school. Many pupils are developing a suitable awareness and understanding of appropriate approaches to resolve conflict. However, a minority of pupils are concerned about poor behaviour, particularly at break and lunchtimes. In addition, a few are unwilling to share their concerns openly with the school. In a few lessons, poor behaviour is also impacting on the progress of pupils and their ability to learn

Nearly all pupils know how to maintain healthy lifestyles and understand the need for a balanced diet and physical exercise. A majority of pupils participate appropriately in a wide range of extra-curricular activities through the valuable opportunities offered at school and in partnership with the adjacent sport centre.

Many pupils are developing a clear understanding of fairness and tolerance and have a desire to be ethical citizens. Through the eco committee they promote recycling and take care to keep the school free from litter. They are proud of their building and are welcoming to visitors.

Most pupils in the sixth form show a strong commitment and a mature attitude towards their studies. They are positive learning role models for younger pupils, particularly through their leadership roles as prefects and in sporting activities.

Teaching and learning experiences: Adequate and needs improvement

Overall, the quality of teaching is adequate and needs improvement.

In most lessons, teachers have good working relationships with their pupils and succeed in creating a positive learning environment. Most teachers have secure subject knowledge. Many teachers manage the classroom behaviour effectively and ensure that pupils settle quickly and are ready to learn.

The majority of teachers have suitably high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They plan lessons carefully to ensure that all pupils are challenged appropriately.

These teachers explain concepts clearly and plan activities that build suitably on pupils' prior learning. They monitor pupil progress closely and offer timely and effective verbal feedback that allows pupils to progress in their learning. These teachers ensure that the pace of the teaching engages pupils throughout the lessons.

In a few lessons where teaching is very effective, teachers prepare engaging activities that inspire pupils. They draw them into the lesson by, for example, incorporating local and current issues such as the Swansea earthquake. In these lessons, teachers have high expectations and provide carefully structured activities that challenge pupils at a high level.

In a minority of lessons, pupils do not make sufficient progress. Common shortcomings in teaching include activities that are not challenging enough and teachers not ensuring that pupils have sufficiently secure understanding of the work before they attempt tasks independently. A few teachers are not good language role models when speaking, and make spelling and grammar mistakes in written handouts.

Many teachers provide effective verbal feedback when addressing individuals or a group of pupils. However, in general teachers do not question pupils effectively enough to check and develop pupils' understanding. In the majority of cases, the quality and usefulness of written feedback varies too much and does not lead to pupils improving their work.

School leaders consider pupils' educational needs and their aspirations carefully when planning the curriculum. At key stage 4, the school offers a wide and beneficial range of academic and vocational courses such as construction and horticulture. The school works well in partnership with other local schools to broaden the sixth form curriculum.

There is a wide variety of enrichment opportunities available to pupils. This includes local and international educational visits, sporting and academic activities as well as clubs devoted to a range of interests such as the carpentry and chess clubs.

The school provides pupils with appropriate opportunities to develop their appreciation of Welsh heritage and culture, for example through the annual Eisteddfod, the Welsh club, trips to Glan-Llyn, and the study of local themes in their academic studies. Most pupils are entered for a Welsh language qualification at the end of key stage 4, and the number of pupils studying Welsh second language in the sixth form is increasing.

The school plans appropriately for the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. School leaders use data from external skills tests to identify key priority areas and work closely with subject leaders to plan activities that suitably address these areas.

The school has identified a suitable range of relevant opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy skills across the curriculum. However, in general, teachers do not give sufficient priority to the development of pupils' skills in lessons.

A majority of curriculum areas have identified an appropriate range of worthwhile opportunities for pupils to improve their numeracy skills. For example, in geography, pupils analyse data that compares birth rates and death rates in Wales with those in other countries, and explain any trends that they notice. However, in a minority of instances, numeracy tasks are not matched to pupils' ability closely enough.

The school uses an appropriate range of baseline test data to identify pupils with weak literacy and numeracy skills. A programme of effective interventions is in place to support these pupils and the school monitors their progress closely.

There are relevant opportunities for pupils to use their basic ICT skills across the curriculum. However, the planning for the development of pupils' higher-level ICT skills is at an early stage. Sixth form pupils in a few subjects are provided with a range of beneficial tools that allow them to use, for example, databases and spreadsheets, to good effect.

Care, support and guidance: Adequate and needs improvement

The school has an inclusive and caring ethos and is developing a sense of community. Relationships between staff and pupils are usually positive and most pupils feel staff are very approachable and supportive.

Behaviour management arrangements have recently been reviewed to take a more restorative approach, but a minority of teachers do not apply these consistently. The occurrence of incidents during breaks and at lunchtime remain too high, and are a cause of concern for a minority of pupils. The school's extensive use of exclusion is not in line with the restorative approach it is aiming to adopt, and does not address the needs of the most vulnerable learners. Overall, it has a negative impact on pupils' progress and attendance.

The school has a detailed tracking system to monitor the progress made by individual pupils and groups of learners at all key stages. This information is used appropriately by many staff to monitor pupil progress and to target additional support. The school also tracks the attendance of all pupils closely, but does not always follow up absences swiftly enough. As a result, the school's work to address issues with attendance is only having a limited impact.

Overall, the school provides good support for pupils with additional learning needs. The school's nurture base 'The Learning House' provides effective support for vulnerable pupils. Alternative curriculum arrangements are made through the 'Activate' programme for a very small number of pupils in Year 11 who are identified as being at high risk of disengaging with their education. This programme leads to worthwhile qualifications for these pupils and prepares them well for further education, training and employment. The school hosts a local authority specialist provision for pupils with an autistic spectrum disorder, who receive part of their education alongside their mainstream peers. Pupils in this provision are supported well and have good learning experiences. However, when these pupils are in mainstream lessons, teachers do not consistently tailor their lessons to meet the needs of these pupils.

The positive and constructive relationships with partner primary schools and transition arrangements support pupils to settle quickly at the school. In particular, the school uses information provided from its partners well to continue to support targeted pupils' wellbeing and learning needs.

The school communicates well with parents and provides them with regular information about the life and work of the school through, for example, coffee mornings, information evenings, letters, social media and text messages. Interim and annual reports keep parents well informed about their child's progress at school and include personalised strategies for improvement.

Overall, the school supports pupils well in their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The school encourages pupils to have a strong sense of social responsibility. As a result, pupils have raised significant amounts of money for local and national charities in recent years. The school provides a range of helpful opportunities for pupils to contribute to the school life and community work. For example, some pupils serve as ambassadors around the school, some pupils volunteer as peer mediators and other pupils participate in working groups focused on promoting sexuality equality, anti-bullying and the environment.

There are opportunities for pupils to participate in a wide range of stimulating activities that successfully enrich the curriculum. These help to develop pupils' social and creative skills and broaden pupils' cultural awareness. Examples include school popular musical and theatrical productions such as 'Bugsy Malone' and many beneficial educational visits.

The school council makes useful contributions to the school. However, the school does not provide regular opportunities for all pupils to influence the work of the school council through their representatives and discuss the outcomes of school council meetings.

The school provides high quality information and guidance to pupils about their options at key stage 4 and post-16. The school has useful links with universities and raises pupils' aspirations by giving them valuable opportunities to consider a wide range of possible career paths.

There are useful learning experiences in the curriculum that encourage pupils to have a healthy lifestyle. For example, through personal and social education, the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness course and physical education lessons. Outside of the curriculum, the school promotes healthy eating in its dining areas and offers a wide variety of clubs and activities that promote physical activity. The school works successfully with a range of external partners to support pupils' health and wellbeing, such as the Eye to Eye counselling service, local youth services and TEDS, a charity that provides education and support services around substance misuse.

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Leadership and management: Adequate and needs improvement

Leaders have a clear vision for developing the school as an inclusive community in which all pupils achieve their full potential. This vision is embodied in the school motto "Strive, Believe, Achieve" and is communicated suitably through policy

documents and school publications. The recently appointed headteacher is developing a supportive ethos within the school where members of staff feel valued.

Roles and responsibilities of all senior leaders are defined clearly and distributed suitably. They cover the main areas of the school's work appropriately.

The school's key strategic priorities, which include improving pupil performance and ensuring excellence in teaching, have been identified suitably by senior leaders. However, the strategic vision for the school and its implementation has not resulted in sustained improvements, for example in standards and attendance. Many of the key indicators in key stage 4 remain below those in similar schools, and leaders have not set high enough expectations regarding pupils' attitudes to learning. Progress to address other important issues, for example behaviour and weaker teaching, has also been too slow.

Senior leaders are beginning to develop and implement useful systems to help middle leaders drive forward improvements in their areas of responsibility. Through their line management meetings, senior leaders provide relevant support in analysing performance data and as a result, many middle leaders are effective in this aspect of their work. However, senior leaders do not hold middle leaders to account rigorously enough for the quality of teaching and assessment in their departments.

The performance management cycle is undertaken appropriately in most instances. However, performance management targets are not clear enough to enable teachers to plan for, or measure, their improvement successfully enough.

Many governors have a sound knowledge of the school and are linked usefully to departments. Although many governors are committed to supporting the school, their role in challenging the school's performance is not robust enough. They do not hold leaders at all levels sufficiently to account for their areas of responsibility.

The school has a range of useful processes for collecting first-hand evidence of its work. However, overall, systems for self-evaluation have focused too heavily on supporting staff, and strengthening team-working rather than identifying incisively specific areas for improvement. For example, the information gathered from lesson observations is generally helpful in highlighting positive features in teaching, but does not assist teachers well enough to identify where they need to make improvements. As a consequence the school's self-evaluation provides an overly positive view of many aspects of performance, provision and leadership.

Departmental self-evaluation reports are detailed and include a useful analysis of outcome data. A few departments draw out areas for development well to identify relevant strategies for improvement. However, overall, these reports are too descriptive. In particular, they do not evaluate teaching or evidence from work scrutiny critically enough. As a result, departmental improvement plans do not provide clear enough strategies for improving subject-specific aspects of teaching and learning that require improvement.

The school improvement plan identifies suitable areas for development. However, because self-evaluation processes do not identify precisely enough areas for improvement, the plan does not specify well enough how the school will improve important areas of its work, such as attendance, behaviour and teaching. Actions and success criteria are not explicit enough to help the school to measure progress.

There are many beneficial opportunities for staff to develop their professional learning. These include internal programmes, visits to other schools and external courses. All teachers are members of professional learning working groups where they focus on relevant and useful areas of work to support improvement.

The school has an appropriate number of well-qualified members of staff. Teachers are deployed suitably to deliver the school's curriculum and are supported efficiently by a range of other staff.

The budget is monitored carefully by the headteacher, the finance director and the finance sub-committee of the governing body. Spending decisions relate suitably to the agreed school and departmental priorities. However, improvement plans are not costed.

Plans for the use of specific grants are appropriate and are suitably costed. However, the contributions of the Pupil Development Grant to improvements in outcomes and attendance for pupils eligible for free school meals are weak.

The school has very good facilities, which leaders manage well.

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Estyn evaluates a provider's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

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 going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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