



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

A report on

**St Mary's Catholic Primary School
Caedraw Road
Merthyr Tydfil
CF47 8HA**

Date of inspection: October 2018

by

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

About St Mary's R.C. Primary School

St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School is in Merthyr Tydfil local authority.

There are 223 pupils on roll, aged from 3 to 11 years including 22 full-time nursery pupils. There are eight classes, including two which are mixed age.

Around 11% of pupils are entitled to free school meals. This is below the national average of 18%. The school identifies around 12% of pupils as having additional learning needs. This is below the national average of 21%. A very few pupils have a statement of special educational need. Around a half of pupils come from an ethnic minority background and most of these pupils have English as an additional language. No pupils speak Welsh at home.

The headteacher has been in post since September 2013. In April 2016, the school joined in an informal federation with St Illtyd's Roman Catholic Primary School. She became executive headteacher of both schools in the federation in September 2017 when this arrangement was formalised. A single senior management team and governing body oversees both schools. The school was last inspected in October 2013. This is the first inspection of the federated school.

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

Most pupils make good progress as they move through the school. Many pupils, particularly those with English as an additional language, achieve high standards in literacy and numeracy. Nearly all pupils behave well show care and consideration for others and have positive attitudes towards learning. Most teaching is successful in helping pupils improve their work. Most teachers provide a wide range of stimulating learning experiences that engage pupils successfully. In a few classes, there is some particularly effective teaching.

Leaders place strong importance on ensuring pupils' wellbeing and providing a high level of care, support and guidance for all pupils. The executive headteacher has been successful in developing a collaborative ethos among staff in the school and across the federation. Leaders have developed and shared their clear vision very effectively and, as a result, everyone involved with the federation is committed to making identified improvements across both schools.

Inspection area	Judgement
Standards	Good
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	Good
Teaching and learning experiences	Good
Care, support and guidance	Good
Leadership and management	Good

Recommendations

- R1 Identify accurately and address effectively the most important areas for school improvement
- R2 Improve standards of Welsh
- R3 Improve foundation phase practice

What happens next

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

Main findings

Standards: Good

A majority of pupils starting nursery have English skills below that expected for their age. This includes around 50% of pupils who have English as an additional language. As pupils move through the school, most make at least good progress in improving their literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. Many pupils with English as an additional language make very good progress. In addition, most pupils with additional learning needs make strong progress towards meeting their individual targets.

Most pupils improve their oracy skills quickly in the foundation phase. In nursery and reception, they begin to listen to each other well and to talk about familiar situations using suitable vocabulary. In Year 1, pupils share their ideas enthusiastically when discussing what Percy the hedgehog could do after his house had blown away. As they move through key stage 2, most pupils develop effective oracy skills. By Year 6, many pupils speak maturely on a range of subjects. They listen attentively when others are speaking and contribute thoughtfully to discussions, offering mature opinions.

In nursery and reception, many pupils acquire early reading skills quickly. They learn an appropriate range of phonics and in reception use this well to help them read simple texts. As they move through the school, many pupils build on this knowledge to begin to read with fluency and for enjoyment. By the end of key stage 2, many pupils are fluent, expressive booklovers. They enjoy reading a range of texts and articulate their favourite authors and genres of books. They use their reading skills well in other subjects, for example to locate information for topic work. Many use skills such as skimming and inference purposefully, and understand the benefits of developing these skills.

As they move through the school, most pupils develop a secure understanding of the writing process. By Year 2, pupils write for a wide range of purposes, for example, to create interesting fact files about dinosaurs. Many pupils write in sentences, using correct punctuation and spelling common words correctly. More able pupils in particular use lively vocabulary to engage the reader. In key stage 2, most pupils write confidently for a range of different audiences. For example, Year 4 pupils use persuasive language and thoughtful superlatives to write interesting leaflets on the benefits of living in Merthyr Tydfil. In Year 6, pupils reply to a letter from a character in 'The Tempest', using mature, imaginative language. In all year groups, pupils use their writing skills regularly and purposefully in other subjects. A minority of pupils do not take enough pride when presenting their work.

In the foundation phase, many pupils use their Welsh language skills appropriately to talk about themselves and how they feel. In key stage 2, many pupils are beginning to use basic Welsh sentence patterns and vocabulary to talk about familiar situations and their hobbies. However, only a minority extend their answers and pupils do not use their Welsh oracy skills outside Welsh lessons often enough. Although older pupils write in Welsh regularly, the majority cannot do so at a suitable level without considerable support. In key stage 2, many pupils read simple Welsh texts with appropriate pronunciation and understanding.

Most pupils develop their numeracy skills well in the foundation phase. In reception, for example, they add and subtract numbers up to 10 correctly. By Year 2, many pupils work confidently with three digit numbers and solve simple addition and subtraction problems independently. Most continue to improve their numeracy skills well in key stage 2. Many use number knowledge well to solve complex real-life problems. For example, Year 6 pupils use their understanding of area to calculate the cost of replacing smashed windows correctly. More able pupils use a variety of strategies to solve multi-step problems, for example to calculate the original cost of items when the discounted price is given. In a minority of classes, pupils apply their numeracy skills beneficially in other subjects. However, overall, pupils do not use their numeracy skills often enough and at an appropriate level across the curriculum.

As they move through the school, most pupils' develop good ICT skills and use these skills to support their learning successfully in a range of curriculum areas. In the foundation phase, many use word-processing and simple paint programs to create pictures and to add text, changing the colours and font size with growing independence. Many older foundation phase pupils give clear instructions to a program to make an object move and follow a route. In key stage 2, most pupils search for information online well and use a range of programs confidently to present their findings. They use an online software platform successfully to enrich learning experiences across the school and have a good understanding of databases and spreadsheets.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Good

Pupils' standards of wellbeing and their attitudes to learning are a strong feature of the school. Most pupils are polite and well behaved, and treat one another and adults with respect. They move around the school sensibly when changing activities, settle quickly in class and are ready to learn promptly. They demonstrate a secure awareness of their rights and understand their responsibilities as local and global citizens. They actively support a variety of charities, including a local food bank and one overseas. This gives them an important understanding of people less fortunate than themselves.

Nearly all pupils show enthusiasm for school. This includes those who take on additional responsibilities, such as becoming a member of the various pupil voice groups in the school. Members of the school council worked together effectively to achieve a recent award for their work on children's rights. A national initiative to develop pupils as responsible citizens enables an elected group of pupils to recognise and reward other pupils who demonstrate the school values. Most pupils develop a worthwhile awareness of sustainability through the work of the eco-committee. Members actively encourage others to recycle, save water and turn off lights.

Nearly all pupils understand the importance of regular exercise and the need to eat and drink healthily. Pupils throughout the school use the fruit tuck shop run by older pupils and Year 6 play leaders help organise physical activities for younger pupils at playtimes. Pupils in key stage 2 participate in local athletics competitions and enjoy rugby sessions run by Cardiff Blues. Nearly all pupils understand the need to stay safe, including when using the internet, and are aware of the possible dangers of making friends online.

Most pupils have positive attitudes towards learning and are developing as resilient learners. They sustain a high level of concentration when working alone and cooperate well with others when working in pairs and small groups. Throughout the school, most pupils have a good understanding of what they need to do to improve their work. For example they respond positively to teachers' 'Power Prompts' by improving their work in the way suggested. This is particularly effective in upper key stage 2 where pupils address individual comments to extending their learning successfully.

Over the last four years, attendance has shown a general upward trend. However, over this period, it has not compared favourably with levels in similar schools.

Teaching and learning experiences: Good

Most teachers and support staff have effective working relationships with pupils and use positive behaviour management strategies that help them to settle quickly to their tasks. This supports pupils' learning well and enables them to make good progress over time. Most teachers encourage pupils to recall previous knowledge, and prepare interesting activities that build well on this prior learning. They match tasks appropriately to pupils' abilities and ensure that pupils are motivated and challenged. In these classes, introductions are brisk and purposeful and teachers use a range of approaches that engage pupils well. There are examples of outstanding teaching in the school. In these classes, teachers have very high expectations of what pupils can achieve, question effectively and engage all pupils successfully in improving their own learning. As a result, many pupils in these classes make excellent progress.

Nearly all teachers give regular feedback about how well their pupils are doing, for instance by praising specific contributions in class. Most feedback is purposeful and efficient and indicates clearly what the pupils need to do to improve. Most teachers encourage pupils to use a range of self and peer assessment to identify strengths and areas for improvement. For example, pupils check their work against jointly produced success criteria. Most teachers provide appropriate opportunities for pupils to set their own targets for improvement.

Most teachers provide a wide range of valuable learning experiences that engage and motivate pupils to succeed. Recent improvements in planning have helped to ensure that the curriculum builds systematically on pupils' existing knowledge, understanding and skills as they move through the school. Increasingly, teachers plan collaboratively across the federation. The school has incorporated the literacy and numeracy framework suitably in its plans. As a result, planned provision for the development of pupils' oracy, reading and writing skills, in particular, provides opportunities for pupils to write in a broad range of genres.

Across the school, there are good opportunities for pupils to make choices about how and what they want to learn. However, in the foundation phase, there are too many occasions when adults over-direct tasks. In a minority of classes, provision that supports pupils' independent learning does not always provide enough challenge.

The school arranges stimulating opportunities to enrich the curriculum and pupils enjoy visits to local places of interest which link well to class topics. For instance, a study of the Egyptians in Year 6 started with a visit to the Egyptian Centre in Swansea and pupils in Year 5 visited a centre for education to enhance their technology skills.

The school provides a beneficial range of activities that promote Welsh history, culture and the local environment well, for example through the study of the area's coal mining heritage, with visits to 'Big Pit', Cyfarthfa Castle and St Fagan's. Many members of staff use their bilingual skills to provide suitable opportunities for pupils to hear the Welsh language spoken. However, the school does not ensure that pupils respond in Welsh or practise the Welsh they learn often enough in informal situations around the school and this limits the progress that pupils make.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The school is a safe, happy and caring community that nurtures pupils' personal, social, spiritual, moral and cultural skills well. In particular, the daily meditation sessions in all classes help support pupils' spirituality well. Staff provide an encouraging environment that successfully builds pupils' confidence and self-esteem. There is a clear emphasis on developing pupils' understanding of their human rights and this has a positive influence on pupils' positive attitudes and behaviour.

Staff support the needs of individual pupils well. The school has very good monitoring, tracking and reporting systems. For example, leaders analyse data and use assessment information thoroughly to plan effective support for targeted pupils. Well-trained support staff deliver a range of effective intervention programmes that help improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills and support pupils' emotional needs. For example, sessions to support pupils' wellbeing have had a positive impact on engaging identified pupils well in school life. Pupils with additional learning needs have individual education plans that include measurable and achievable targets. As a result of this, nearly all targeted pupils make good progress in line with their abilities.

There is a beneficial range of opportunities for parents to engage with the school. This enables parents to find out about the work their children are doing in school and how to support their child's learning at home. For example, the school's reading café provides valuable opportunities for parents of pupils with English as an additional language to develop their own literacy skills. The school works closely with parents and the local authority's educational inclusion officer to implement a range of strategies to promote good attendance and punctuality. This has helped to improve attendance in recent years.

The school has appropriate arrangements to promote healthy eating and drinking. Staff organise a suitable range of curricular and extra-curricular activities, including cookery, athletics, gymnastics and netball, to promote pupils' fitness and all pupils have swimming lessons every year. Staff teach pupils about how to stay safe when online effectively.

The school arranges a variety of valuable experiences to help pupils engage with creative arts and cultural activities. For example, the Royal College of Music and Drama recently visited the school to deliver singing and drama workshops. This helped to enrich pupils' creative learning experiences. The school ensures that pupils have opportunities to contribute to and support events in the local area. For example, the choir regularly sings at venues in the community.

Staff provide pupils with opportunities to have a meaningful voice within the school. There are many opportunities for pupils to play an active part in decision-making and to undertake leadership roles. Most teachers ensure that pupils have a say in what and how they learn.

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

Leadership and management: Good

The executive headteacher and senior leaders have worked successfully to develop a vision for the federation based on collaborative working and high expectations. They engage with staff and governors effectively to develop consistent policies and systems across the two schools. For example, collaborative work on planning for the development of pupils' skills in literacy has led to improvements in the curriculum across the federation. However, staff do not deliver all aspects of the curriculum equally well in both schools.

The executive headteacher has established a leadership structure that supported the smooth introduction of the federation and encourages the development of leadership skills at all levels. For example, the newly-introduced role of assistant headteacher in both schools is key to developing common approaches and acting as a first point of call for staff, parents and pupils on both sites. Similarly, arrangements that release members of the senior leadership team from class to work together at the same time, such as the leader of skills and the leader of learning, encourage effective inter-school working.

The newly-established governing body has managed the federation process with skill and sensitivity. For example, ensuring an equal number of parent governors from each school has led to balanced representation from both school communities. The governing body reflects thoughtfully on its performance and regularly seeks ways to improve its effectiveness. Recent work with a consultant governor has improved governors' understanding of the characteristics of effective governance and how to ensure that they maintain high ethical standards. Through regular gathering of first-hand evidence, governors have a good understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement of both schools. This enables them to make valuable contributions to discussions with senior leaders about the quality of provision and the necessary actions to raise standards.

Senior leaders have extensive arrangements to evaluate the quality of provision and the standards achieved by pupils. This involves leaders undertaking regular learning walks and classroom observations, looking at pupils' work and meeting with pupils to gauge their opinion on the work of the school. Generally, they use the information from these activities well to draw conclusions about the work of the school that are broadly accurate. They increasingly identify and share good practice well across the federation. For example, the sharing of effective approaches to the teaching of reading skills through daily guided reading sessions has led to improvements in many pupils' reading skills in both schools.

However, leaders do not always use the outcomes of self-evaluation activities well enough to prioritise the most important areas for improvement. For example, not

enough has been done to improve the quality of provision in the classes of the older foundation phase pupils or pupils' Welsh language skills across both schools, but particularly in St Illtyd's.

The outcomes from self-evaluation activities link appropriately to the federation's planned improvement actions. Senior leaders and staff are keen to improve provision and raise standards across both schools as rapidly as possible. The school implements many improvement activities at the same time. As a result, not all school improvement actions achieve the level of impact that leaders intend.

Both schools have been successful in addressing the national priority of reducing the impact of poverty on the achievement of pupils. Leaders have ensured good quality provision for the development of pupils' literacy skills across both schools and for ICT skills in St Mary's. However, leaders have not been successful enough in developing pupils' Welsh oracy skills or embedding the use of the language in both schools.

Senior leaders have high expectations of staff. They challenge robustly any underperformance they identify. Performance management procedures link well with identified actions for improvement in each school. Staff objectives link closely to their individual development needs and the current priorities of the school improvement plan. Senior leaders are beginning to introduce systems for cross-federation professional learning that impact positively on the quality of standards and provision. For example, the 'IMPACT Team' initiative enabled learning support assistants to work collaboratively to observe and reflect upon each other's practice and make improvements. This has enhanced the provision for the teaching of basic reading skills.

Senior leaders allocate resources to support school improvement priorities well. For example, they recently invested in improvements to the foundation phase outdoor learning environment in St Illtyd's. Both schools have large budget surpluses. Senior leaders and governors have realistic plans to spend this money in line with school improvement priorities and to reduce the budget surplus to acceptable levels.

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.

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