Section 2

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In January 2019 there were 187 secondary schools in Wales. This is eight fewer than in January 2018 and is largely due to schools amalgamating into a new secondary school or a new all-age school (Welsh Government, 2019m).

In 2018-2019, 29 schools were inspected. The findings from all inspections have informed this report.

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Standards

Standards are good or better in nearly half of secondary schools. In these schools, many pupils make strong progress in developing their understanding, knowledge and skills. In the few best cases, pupils think deeply and critically about subject-specific concepts. They use their subject knowledge skilfully to develop their ideas in familiar and unfamiliar contexts. These pupils are able to make reasoned predictions, draw conclusions and form analogies. At the end of key stage 4, many pupils in these schools perform well in their examinations, reflecting their progress during their time at secondary school.

In sixth forms, many pupils make strong progress in their knowledge and understanding. They gain a sound understanding of complex concepts and develop their ability to apply their learning to new situations. A few learners struggle with their studies, particularly those with modest levels of prior attainment. Around one in five Year 12 pupils fail to progress from AS to A levels. These learners often transfer to a more appropriate route such as a vocational course, employment or training.

A levels in sixth forms and further education colleges (Estyn, 2018a)

This reports on standards, provision and leadership of GCE Advanced Levels (A levels) in school sixth forms and further education colleges. It considers a range of factors, such as standards at A level and how these are measured, the quality of teaching and assessment, the nature of the A level curriculum offer and strategic leadership, including partnership working.

In six-in-ten schools, pupils eligible for free school meals make good progress from their starting points. However, this group of pupils continues to perform below other pupils.

Girls continue to outperform boys and the gap between the two increased slightly in most indicators in 2019 (Stats Wales, 2019g). The difference between the two genders is especially stark in developing literacy skills, particularly writing. Fewer boys than girls develop an interest in reading for pleasure. In many cases, boys present their ideas well verbally and girls show less confidence in their verbal responses than boys do. In lessons, there is no appreciable difference in how boys and girls develop their numeracy skills. In general, boys display positive attitudes towards completing mathematical tasks. However, girls outperform boys in GCSE mathematics. Boys' performance in science, which requires high levels of literacy and numeracy as well as subject knowledge, is lower than that of girls.
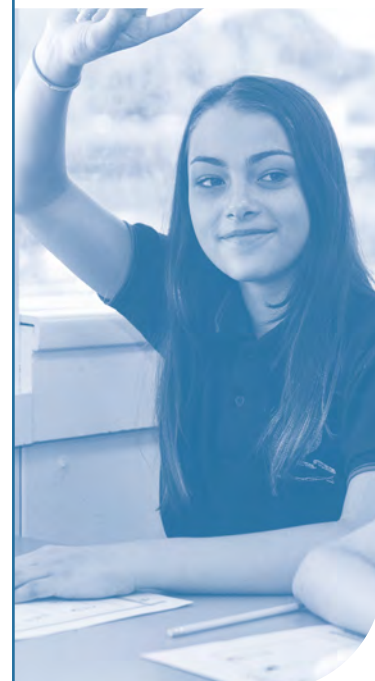
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A majority of pupils listen and respond to others carefully. They use a wide range of general and subject-specific vocabulary and communicate their ideas clearly. They respond well to their teachers' or peers' questions and offer reasoned responses. In the few best cases, pupils engage well with one another in lively, well-natured discussions. They exhibit curiosity and ask as well as answer questions.

In seven-in-ten schools, pupils read a range of texts to enhance their learning suitably. A majority read aloud competently with appropriate expression. They skim and scan texts to gain an overview or search for specific information competently. A minority of pupils develop well their ability to deduce and infer meaning. They synthesise and analyse material skilfully, for example when evaluating the impartiality of a range of sources about Nelson Mandela and apartheid in history lessons. In the best examples, pupils read texts that challenge their ideas, for example when analysing the concept of responsibility in Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol'. In a minority of schools, pupils do not read frequently enough to gain understanding in subjects other than in English or Welsh.

In a majority of schools, pupils write suitable extended pieces for a variety of audiences and purposes across subjects. A majority of pupils organise their writing into paragraphs systematically and communicate their ideas clearly. A few write with increasing sophistication and produce creative and engaging pieces of writing. A minority of pupils, particularly boys, are unable to communicate their ideas coherently. These pupils do not understand how to structure their writing. They make frequent errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation and do not check their writing to ensure that it makes sense.

Many pupils use their numeracy skills across the curriculum suitably. In general, graph work is completed to a high standard, especially in science lessons. A majority of pupils have a sound understanding of proportion and when to use specific techniques to answer questions or solve problems. However, in a minority of schools, pupils do not use their problem-solving skills frequently enough, including in mathematics lessons. In these schools, they tend to use only very basic numeracy skills and do not develop these further across subjects. In a few cases, pupils undertake contrived numeracy exercises that do not develop their subject understanding or their numeracy skills.

In a few cases, pupils in English-medium schools develop their command of Welsh well as they transition from primary school. They gain a wide vocabulary and communicate with increasingly accurate pronunciation as they move through the school. However, in many cases, pupils' progress in Welsh is slow in secondary school. While they are often able to answer written examination questions appropriately, many pupils have poorly developed verbal skills. They are often unable to understand or reply to simple questions or statements orally.

In Welsh-medium schools, most pupils become fluent Welsh speakers. Many also develop their ability to write Welsh well and gain a firm grasp of syntax and grammar. However, too many pupils do not use Welsh when discussing their work or in informal situations. In bilingual schools, the majority of pupils tend to use English in social conversations and in class discussions, often due to the need to avoid excluding those not fluent in the language.
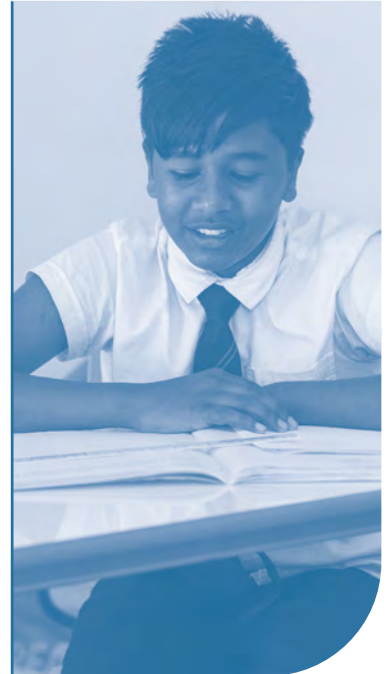
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This limits their fluency and inclination to use the language. In a few cases, pupils develop their ICT skills well across the curriculum. They use features of software such as the ability to create formulae in spreadsheets, programming robots to negotiate a maze in their design technology lessons, and interrogating databases to inform their understanding of issues around global migration. In these schools, pupils are also beginning to develop an understanding of the skills that underpin digital technologies. In many schools, pupils use ICT in a more limited manner. For example, they use simple word processing or make basic slide presentations. These types of activity do not develop or extend the range of their ICT skills. In particular, pupils do not use more challenging applications such as spreadsheets to handle data or produce mathematical models.

In a majority of cases, especially in Welsh-medium and bilingual schools, a majority of pupils develop their creativity very well. The pupils who develop these skills the furthest are those who take advantage of opportunities to take part in cultural events such as a school Eisteddfod, art or music competitions, and drama productions.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning

In around one-in-ten schools, pupils' wellbeing and attitudes to learning are excellent. In these schools, nearly all pupils enjoy coming to school and attendance rates are very high. Most pupils are enthusiastic, resourceful and independent learners. They treat each other with respect and develop a strong sense of responsibility and citizenship. In these schools, the school council is proactive and has a wide impact on pupils' experiences such as influencing the curriculum and teaching.

In seven-in-ten schools, pupils display positive attitudes to their work. In these schools, most pupils are well motivated and show high levels of resilience when tackling difficult tasks. In these schools, pupils attend after-school revision sessions, often during weekends and holidays. While this generally has a positive impact on their examination results, pupils often feel that pressure from schools to attend these impacts negatively on their wellbeing. In a minority of schools, pupils lack independence and resilience, and lose concentration too easily.

In many schools, pupils understand well the importance of good attendance. However, in a few schools, poor attendance contributes to poor outcomes in learning and wellbeing. In the majority of schools, pupils develop their social skills well and treat others with respect and courtesy. Behaviour is good in around six-in-ten schools. In these schools, most pupils are confident in how school leaders respond to incidents of bullying. However, in a minority of schools, poor behaviour from at least a few pupils disrupts their learning and that of others. Just over one-in-ten pupils do not feel safe at school as a result of frequent poor behaviour from other pupils or bullying.

Many pupils develop a sound understanding of how to lead a healthy lifestyle. However, many of these pupils struggle to apply this learning to their own lives. They make unhealthy food choices and do not engage enough in exercise.

Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bryn Tawe

Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bryn Tawe felt not enough pupils were being represented on their school council. They decided to create six different councils, with each working on specific priorities.

For more information, please read our **case study**

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Most sixth-form pupils enjoy their studies, although many find the demands of their courses stressful. In general, they provide good role models for younger pupils and, in many cases, help support their learning and wellbeing.

Teaching and learning experiences

In the few best examples, teachers show passion for their subject and use in-depth knowledge to plan learning experiences that capture pupils' interest and stimulate their curiosity. They encourage and support pupils consistently and offer them high levels of challenge. They use questioning skilfully to examine pupils' thinking and deepen their understanding. In these cases, teachers are not usually wedded to a particular teaching style. When planning their lessons, they consider their methods carefully to suit the topic and ensure that they bring out the best in their pupils.

In schools where teaching is at least good, most teachers secure positive working relationships and have good subject knowledge. Many offer clear explanations and provide suitable encouragement. They plan their lessons carefully to capture pupils' interest and include a variety of approaches over time. There is an appropriate level of challenge for all pupils, including the more able and those with additional learning needs. In these schools, teachers make effective use of questioning to check pupils' understanding. In a minority of cases, teachers ask probing questioning to challenge pupils' understanding and develop their ability to respond verbally.

In schools where there are significant areas for improvement in teaching, many of the shortcomings are the result of poor planning. These shortcomings include:

- a lack of challenge, particularly for the more able
- teachers offering pupils too much help or 'scaffolding' that limits their independence
- an inappropriate pace to learning activities
- poorly structured or contrived literacy or numeracy activities
- poor support for pupils with additional learning needs
- teachers persisting with strategies that are not working because they feel that they need to use them to comply with school policy

In most lessons, teachers monitor pupils' progress closely and help them improve their work through skilful and sensitive questioning that promotes thinking, reflection and problem solving. However, the quality of written comments on pupils' work is too variable. In the most useful examples, leaders encourage a strategic approach to marking pupils' work. In these cases, teachers do not mark every piece of work in detail. Rather, they devote their attention to tasks that demand an extended response from pupils and offer them feedback focused on specific skills, knowledge or understanding. They follow this up with opportunities for pupils to improve specific aspects of their work and ensure that they complete these. In too many cases, teachers mark work exhaustively but do not offer meaningful advice or give pupils opportunities to improve aspects of their work. This practice is time consuming and does not bring about improvement in pupils' skills or subject understanding.

Cwmtawe Community School

In Cwmtawe Community School, pupils take ownership, and feel involved in creating the curriculum. They are encouraged to research appropriate courses and consider potential career pathways.

For more information, please read our **case study**

Cydnabod Rhagoriaeth
Recognising Excellence

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Cardiff High School

Investment in learning and teaching has helped Cardiff High School to create a new vision for improvement, with emphasis on leadership and professional learning. To achieve this vision, teachers are empowered to provide a balance of support and challenge in their classrooms.

For more information, please read our **case study**

Cydnabod Rhagoriaeth
Recognising Excellence

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In the majority of schools, there are suitable projects or initiatives to help pupils settle when transferring from their primary school. Around two-in-ten schools design their curriculum to build effectively on pupils' experiences at key stage 2. In these cases, leaders from secondary schools meet regularly with their counterparts in their primary feeder schools to adjust their schemes of work to ensure that they build on pupils' prior learning. However, in many cases, subject leaders do not do this and consider that moderation of work with their primary feeder schools alone is sufficient to ensure smooth progression. This approach often leads to pupils working at too low a level at the start of Year 7 or simply repeating work previously covered in key stage 2.

Many schools are discussing aspects of Curriculum for Wales with their staff and/or pupils. At this stage, this consultation involves gathering feedback about the draft curriculum as well as discussions and evaluations about the current curriculum. A majority of schools are engaging in interesting small-scale projects linked to Curriculum for Wales, for example planning revised learning experiences for Year 7 and Year 8 pupils, strengthening transition arrangements with partner primary schools or building stronger links with community groups and organisations to strengthen the experiences that they offer to their pupils.

A few schools place little emphasis on key stage 3 and have reduced the curriculum time allocated to two years, starting the key stage 4 curriculum in Year 9. This allows a greater focus on the acquisition of qualifications but reduces opportunities for schools to plan creatively and offer a broad curriculum for pupils. In a minority of schools, pupils are required to work towards qualifications that will enhance the school's performance indicators. This practice takes time and focus away from qualifications that pupils and employers value, and does provide pupils with valuable learning experiences.

Most schools set less able pupils in smaller class sizes, allowing teachers to spend more time catering for individual pupils' specific needs, although this can lead to large top set groups, which can restrict the interaction that the most able pupils have with their teacher. Many schools plan suitable additional or flexible curriculum pathways for specific groups of pupils such as for those at risk of disaffection or for more able pupils. However, the number of vocational pathways available to pupils is generally constrained, covering a limited range of curriculum areas.

In many schools, the options offered in key stage 4 and key stage 5 maximise the opportunities for pupils to select appropriate qualifications. However, in a few schools, the curriculum is designed with an eye on the impact on performance indicators, for example starting GCSE courses in Year 9 and collapsing the timetable for pupils to study additional qualifications. Overall, the range of choice in key stage 4 has diminished in recent years and more time has been given to core subjects. Only a few schools have been successful in promoting uptake of modern foreign language or music courses.

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In many schools, there is suitable provision for developing pupils' literacy across the curriculum. In these schools, departments plan useful opportunities for developing pupils' oracy, reading and writing across the curriculum. A majority of departments ensure that there are relevant opportunities for pupils to refine their extended writing and improve the accuracy of their written work. In a minority of schools, planning for the co-ordinated development of pupils' literacy skills, especially writing, is not effective enough.

The majority of schools plan appropriately for the development of pupils' numeracy across the curriculum. In the main, the most beneficial activities are planned by science, technology and geography departments. These departments provide pupils with authentic and challenging opportunities to solve problems. In general, many of these departments plan well to ensure that pupils develop their graph skills. In a few cases, departments offer pupils activities that include a relatively low level of challenge, for example completing basic bar charts, then colouring them in. In a minority of schools, opportunities to solve problems using numeracy are too limited. There is effective literacy and numeracy intervention for groups of pupils in most schools.

Only a few schools plan suitably to develop pupils' ICT skills across subjects. In many schools, barriers to developing this provision include:

- insufficient up-to-date ICT equipment
- a lack of confidence among staff to develop pupils' ICT skills
- poor planning across the curriculum to develop ICT skills

In English-medium schools, most pupils follow an appropriate qualification path for Welsh, although opportunities for pupils to practise their Welsh in contexts other than their Welsh lessons remain limited. Often, there is too much focus on pupils' technical understanding of grammar at the expense of ensuring that pupils can understand spoken Welsh and offer suitable verbal responses to questions. In Welsh-medium schools, nearly all pupils are entered for the GCSE first language qualification. This contributes well to the development of their ability to communicate in writing and orally.

Care, support and guidance

In the best examples, schools offer high quality care, support and guidance for their pupils. In these schools, there is an extremely caring and supportive ethos that promotes pupils' wellbeing and attitudes to learning effectively. Staff support pupils' personal development in the classroom and beyond to help them achieve their full potential.

Bassaleg School

Bassaleg's vision is to develop a culture where equality and diversity are celebrated. They do this with a range of programmes, which are created by the pupils.

For more information, please read our **case study**

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In the majority of schools, there are useful systems for tracking pupils' academic progress and behaviour together with suitable arrangements for dealing with any potential issues or underperformance. In these schools, staff use a wide range of strategies, including engaging with parents and outside agencies, to address any issues. In a minority of schools, systems for tracking pupils' performance do not lead to effective interventions. This is either because information from teachers' assessments is inaccurate, pupils' targets are insufficiently challenging, or staff focus too much on pupils in Year 11. These shortcomings mean that staff do not tackle gaps in pupils' understanding in a timely manner. When combined with poor teaching, these shortcomings have a substantial impact on pupils' performance.

Pupil support at Ysgol Bae Baglan

Bringing four very diverse schools together into a brand new all-age required high quality, seamless support and wellbeing for all pupils, but especially for those with additional learning needs. Tailored interventions address the needs of individual pupils very successfully and with great sensitivity. The philosophy and work practice stem from the fundamental belief that every pupil can make a valued contribution, in all aspects of their lives, be it their social, civil and educational development.

In many schools, there is useful personal and social education programme that covers themes such as citizenship, social skills, anti-radicalisation, substance misuse, mental health, sex and healthy relationships. In a few cases, schools do not cover the whole range of issues important to young people's lives such as dealing with mental health issues well enough, and the quality of learning experiences is not good enough. In nearly all schools, arrangements to promote the importance of healthy eating and drinking are suitable. Many schools offer pupils suitable careers advice and guidance when choosing courses for key stage 4 or key stage 5. However, in a few cases, schools do not offer pupils unbiased advice. This results in pupils following unsuitable courses.

Many schools employ a wide range of useful strategies to communicate with parents. These include using social media platforms, parents' evenings and specific focused evenings, on topics such as staying safe online or curriculum changes. In many cases, reports to parents on their child's progress are useful and informative. However, in a few instances, the structure and content of reports are confusing and unhelpful to parents.

In most schools, collaboration with external support agencies and services is beneficial and complements the school's support for vulnerable pupils. This has a positive impact on improving pupils' resilience and wellbeing.

Bishop Hedley High School

The innovative Enrichment Programme addresses the development of important life skills and supports the introduction of the new curriculum for Wales through a whole-school experience for pupils. It is designed to provide pupils with meaningful opportunities to consider and gain expertise in the skills and attributes they will need and want to possess as they make their way in the world.

For more information, please read our **case study**

Cydnabod
Rhagoriaeth
Recognising
Excellence
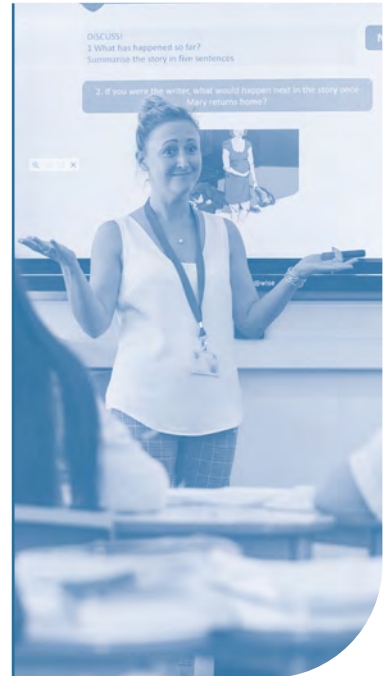
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In many schools, there is a comprehensive behaviour policy that is implemented suitably by most staff. In the best examples, leaders focus on values that they are trying to promote rather than the rules themselves. Most secondary schools operate internal facility arrangements for supporting pupils exhibiting very challenging behaviour in lessons. In many cases, these arrangements ensure that these pupils continue to make progress in their work. In the best examples, staff support pupils well and they return swiftly to their lessons. They engage pupils in productive discussions about any issues they may have and help them plan to avoid repeating any poor behaviour. However, in a few cases, pupils remain in these rooms, isolated from their peers, for extended periods including lunchtimes and break times. This can have a negative impact on their wellbeing and does not lead to improved behaviour.

Many schools have high expectations of pupils with additional learning needs and support their learning well. The additional learning needs co-ordinator understands pupils' needs well. They discuss the best way of supporting specific pupils thoroughly with the pupils, their parents and support agencies to formulate useful learning plans. In these schools, teachers use these well to adapt their teaching and ensure that these pupils make suitable progress against challenging targets. In the best examples, teachers work closely with learning support assistants to plan the most appropriate learning strategies for these pupils. However, in a few cases, learning plans are too generic, do not offer enough challenge to pupils and do not give useful guidance to teachers. As a result, these pupils do not make enough progress in their subject knowledge or skills.

In many schools, arrangements to promote good attendance are effective. In these schools, leaders consistently emphasise the link between high attendance and good academic achievement. They have high expectations around attendance and communicate these regularly with pupils and parents. However, rates of unauthorised absence increased slightly in the last academic year and pupils eligible for free school meals remain more likely to be absent (Welsh Government, 2019a). In a very few schools, leaders are not successful enough in engaging with parents or pupils to ensure good attendance.

Leadership and management

Leadership is good or excellent in nearly four-in-ten schools. In the best examples, the senior leadership team work together successfully to communicate a clear vision based on a culture of high expectations for all pupils. Staff, pupils and the governing body embrace fully the school's aims and expectations. Leaders place a strong emphasis on teaching, but do not demand unthinking compliance with school policy. Instead, they expect teachers to draw on a wide range of strategies and select the appropriate method for their class and the topic under consideration. Leaders at all levels have a deep understanding of the strengths and weaknesses across the school and evaluate different strategies objectively in light of their impact on learning and on pupils' wellbeing. Leaders in these schools evaluate the quality of teaching through a range of different activities and tend not to offer judgements on individual lessons. Rather they engage in a professional dialogue with staff about aspects that deserve sharing with other staff and areas for improvement.

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Leaders in these schools set ambitious targets for pupils and plan assiduously to achieve these. In these schools, there is a common sense of purpose and extensive collaboration focused on continuous improvement. Staff feel valued and trusted.

Where leadership is good or better, leaders are supportive, caring and encouraging but also challenging when necessary. Leaders in these schools understand positive aspects well and those needing improvement. They foster positive relationships with parents and the community. Paperwork is kept to a minimum, but important aspects to ensure accountability are done well. Systems to manage the performance of staff are applied consistently and inform a well-considered programme of professional learning. There is a strong culture of objective evaluation and planning for improvement. In these schools, leaders appraise the impact of the school's work continuously and respond swiftly to any aspects that require improvement. They understand how well pupils perform in relation to other similar schools and set ambitious goals. Governors are well informed and have a secure understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They play an influential role in setting the school's strategic direction.

Where there are shortcomings, these are mostly because leaders are unable to identify areas for improvement in teaching across the school. In a few cases, leaders focus so much on improving examination outcomes that they do not place enough importance of securing pupils' broad education or their social and personal development. In a few schools inspected this year, poor behaviour and bullying have not been tackled by leaders.

In a minority of schools, procedures for self-evaluation tend to focus on compliance with the school's policy instead of evaluating the impact of their provision on pupils' progress. In too many instances, schools judge the quality of teaching across the school by counting the number of lessons judged to be 'good' or better. They do not link teaching with its impact on learning closely enough. In a minority of schools, leaders and governors have a poor understanding of the performance of their school in comparison with other similar schools. In a minority of cases, leaders do not collect information about pupils' wellbeing in a strategic manner. As a result, they do not have a sound understanding of existing issues and are unable to plan for improvement. Often, there are too many priorities for improvement in whole school development plans.

In a majority of schools, leaders use findings from self-evaluation well to plan and evaluate professional learning activities. They plan their programme of professional learning carefully to ensure that any training aligns closely with individual, departmental, school and national priorities. They give time for individual departments to reflect on any training given and modify their practice in a way that best suits their subject. In these schools, there is a constant focus on improving teaching and on planning the most worthwhile activities for pupils. However, in a minority of schools, leaders do not plan well enough for professional learning. Often, staff are only offered opportunities to ensure up-to-date knowledge of examination requirements. In a few cases, staff do not receive this essential training. In these schools, there is a lack of focus on improving teaching. Instead,

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staff rely on providing pupils with after-school revision sessions, sometimes at weekends and during holidays, to ensure good outcomes. This strategy impacts negatively on staff morale and their wellbeing.

In schools with weak leadership, meetings involving senior leaders and middle leaders often focus heavily on operational matters and do not consider strategic matters such as the impact of whole school or departmental strategies on outcomes. In addition, leaders in these schools lack focus on national priorities, such as developing pupils' ICT, literacy or numeracy skills, pupils' grasp of Welsh or the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals.

All schools inspected this year report the need to make difficult financial decisions due to reduced budgets. Often these result in increasing class sizes or a loss of learning support assistants. Through prudent spending decisions, around seven in ten schools succeeded in managing their budget well. Just over a three-in-ten secondary schools inspected this year have not succeeded to do this and are operating in a budget deficit. In a few cases, these are very large and, although they are operating under licence by the local authority, it is unclear how these schools will succeed in eliminating their deficits.

Follow-up activity

Of the 29 secondary schools inspected this year, about six-in-ten require some level of follow-up. Thirteen schools were placed in Estyn review, three are in need of significant improvement and two require special measures.

At the beginning of the autumn term, seven schools were in special measures. One of these schools made good progress against its recommendations and was removed from the category following a monitoring visit. Another two received their first visit following its core inspection. This visit focused on ensuring that the school had a suitable post-inspection action plan in place. The other four schools had made insufficient progress against their recommendations and remain in special measures. In these schools, leaders at all levels do not have enough impact on pupil outcomes. In particular, they do not focus closely enough on the extent to which teaching has a positive impact on standards, progress and pupils' engagement in their learning.

There were ten schools requiring significant improvement at the beginning of this academic year. Estyn carried out visits to monitor the progress of eight of these schools. Five had made enough progress to be removed from this category. One school had made limited progress against its recommendations and was judged to require special measures. Two schools had made progress against their core inspection recommendations, but not enough to remove them from this category.

In November, we reviewed the progress of eight schools in Estyn review.

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We evaluated the progress reports submitted by the schools and their local authorities to consider progress against the recommendations as well as undertaking analysis of key stage 4 outcomes. Following the review, four of these schools were judged to have made enough progress and did not require further monitoring by Estyn. Of the remaining schools, one remains under Estyn review. The other three schools received a monitoring visit. One school was judged to have made enough improvement and was removed from the list of schools requiring Estyn review. Two schools had not made enough progress against the recommendations from their core inspections and were judged to be in need of significant improvement.

At the end of the academic year 2018-2019, there are nine schools in special measures, nine requiring significant improvement and 23 under Estyn review.