

### **Context**

In January 2021, there were 37 independent mainstream schools in Wales. This figure is one fewer than in January 2020.

This year, as part of our programme of engagement work with the sector, we contacted all schools remotely at least once and made a very few engagement visits. Our discussions with headteachers and senior leaders focused on the wellbeing of pupils and staff, how schools have supported learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic.

This report is based discussions during these remote meetings with headteachers and senior leaders and a very few engagements visits.

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# Sector summaries: Independent mainstream schools

## Compliance with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003

In independent schools, we inspect the extent to which the school complies with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

This year, the Welsh Government formally requested us to undertake three announced focused inspections under section 160 of the Education Act 2002 (Great Britain, 2002). The inspections had a particular focus on standard 3 of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, which relates to the welfare, health and safety of pupils (National Assembly for Wales, 2003).

At the time of the focused inspections, one school met the requirements for this standard. However, two schools did not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard fully and, in addition, one school failed to meet the requirements for standard 6 relating to the provision of information and standard 7 relating to the handling of complaints.

We will engage with these schools and monitor whether they make the required improvements to maintain registration.

## Wellbeing

In the autumn term, schools maintained a strong focus on promoting the wellbeing of pupils and staff. Around one in ten schools identified that a very few pupils or staff did not attend school as they were shielding themselves or members of their family. Around a fifth of schools reported an increase in safeguarding concerns. The issues reported by pupils included domestic violence, anxiety and concerns about body image. Schools have responded thoughtfully. For instance, one school arranged for each year group bubble to meet with the designated safeguarding person to address any concerns they had.

In the spring term, the wellbeing focus shifted to ensuring that all pupils were 'visible'. For example, leaders said that they maintained contact with learners through regular phone calls, social media and online platforms, or through visits to the family home. There was an upward trend in the number of pupils who were exhibiting concerns such as eating disorders, gaming addiction, or anxiety relating to the virus. In a few schools, leaders invited small groups of pupils to come into school to receive additional support and attend the live lessons that their teachers were streaming to others. One school established a dedicated helpline for pupils needing specific support. In addition, teachers monitored pupils' engagement in online lessons, submission of work and attendance at 'check in' sessions. One headteacher reported that, in general, parents monitored the involvement of younger pupils and helped facilitate the learning process. If staff had concerns about the engagement of older pupils, the school contacted parents to reinforce expectations and discuss possible wellbeing issues.

## Addressing pupil wellbeing

At Cardiff Muslim School, there has been a focus in the school on addressing the wellbeing of staff and pupils. There is a feelings box in each class and regular assemblies on achieving happiness. Each child has been given a 'happiness journal', which they write in every day, and staff address any concerns.

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In the summer term, as staff and pupils returned to school, a few pupils were anxious about their return, and a very few required support from services, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) or their general practitioner. In general, pupils were pleased to be able to return to school. A few teachers identified that many pupils have found the level of work that would be usual at this time of year to be challenging. A few teachers noted a range of 'socialisation' issues, resulting to some extent from long periods away from school and isolation. These included more frequent friendship issues and some degree of conflict among younger pupils who appeared to have 'forgotten how to play together'.

### Teaching, learning and the curriculum

When schools re-opened in September, while all leaders followed Welsh Government operational and learning guidance, a very few sought additional support, for example in relation to music and sport. Adaptations to school routines varied between schools. Around half of schools considered that no adaptations to the curriculum had been necessary. Where curriculum adaptations did occur, they included:

- changes to the personal and social education programme to include a greater focus on wellbeing
- the introduction of touch typing to the curriculum in response to an increase in online work
- more oral work in modern foreign languages when pupils returned to school
- an increased emphasis on learning outdoors

Nearly all teachers adapted their practice and teaching strategies during the pandemic to meet pupils' needs and the difficulties of learning online. There was strong development in staff's ICT skills. Teachers had to be more creative in the tasks that they set for pupils to complete, and leaders believe that this resulted in improved pupil engagement. However, the most significant impact on the quality of provision was the reduction in the ability of staff to deliver more practical lessons, such as drama, art, music, physical education, and practical aspects of science.

Many schools recognised early on that it was unlikely that public examinations would take place as normal this year. Nevertheless, they recognised their responsibility to help pupils to prepare for the next stage of education. Leaders believed that this included some form of 'higher-stake exam' to help pupils to develop the necessary skills and confidence to take exams in the future. These schools established policies and approaches to replicate typical examination conditions, as far as possible, to help determine grades in each subject.

Although schools adopted slightly different approaches to help determine grades, they were approved by the relevant English and Welsh examination boards. These arrangements commonly included a mixture of assessments and ongoing coursework that helped to create a portfolio of evidence to support secure grades.

### Ensuring pupils are 'visible'

During the second national lockdown, pupils at Rougemont School accessed four lessons each day, including a pastoral session. This allowed staff to monitor pupils' engagement with learning on four occasions each day in addition to their assessment of pupils' work.

In the preparatory school, each morning, there were 'welcome' videos or live calls that set out the schedule for the day. This session involved celebrations of pupils' birthdays or other special events. Similarly, at lunchtime, staff and pupils would 'share a song', and there was an assembly at the end of the afternoon.

In the senior section of the school there were daily pastoral check-in sessions of between 45-60 minutes where staff provided guidance and talked to pupils about a range of matters and generally checked on pupils' wellbeing. Subject leaders used a tracking system to assess pupils' engagement fortnightly using a ten-point scale. Pastoral leaders then analysed the information to help identify where the form teacher should contact the parents of pupils who might require extra encouragement or support.

### Checking pupil wellbeing

OneSchool Global in Newtown used a 'Feel Good Indicator' to monitor wellbeing. Pupils regularly self-evaluated on a 1-10 scale. For those pupils scoring themselves below 5, staff followed up and liaised with parents to provide necessary support.

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Co-curricular programmes, which are activities provided outside of the normal daily timetable, are usually a strength in this sector. However, many schools adjusted their co-curricular programme in response to the pandemic. These changes include around a fifth of schools cancelling all co-curricular activities, and many reducing the amount of sport provided. The range of weekend activities for boarders has also reduced, along with sporting fixtures. Leaders in one school reported that one of the reasons parents chose their school was the strength of the sporting provision. Due to the restrictions, pupils were unable to participate in the usual wide range of sporting activities. However, in a few schools, extra-curricular activities continued online to retain the sense of being part of the school community, especially for pupils who have returned to their homes abroad.

In the spring term, nearly all schools had a smooth return to online learning, with staff applying lessons they had learnt in the previous lockdown. These included reducing the length of lessons to allow time for teachers and pupils to 'move' between activities, offering more opportunities for independent work and incorporating time 'offline' into the school week.

### Developing a distance learning curriculum programme

St Clare's is part of an international group of schools and used the knowledge and experience of other schools that had experienced the pandemic to help inform their work. Leaders produced a distance learning curriculum programme that was shared with all families.

This booklet contained a message from the headteacher as well as relevant information regarding:

#### Academic systems

- The structure of a distance learning week
- Timetables for each stage of the school
- Information about the technology platforms being used
- Guidance relating to screen time
- Expectations for registration, marking and assessment and homework

#### Pastoral systems

- Reward systems
- The school counsellor
- The broader curriculum

#### Communication procedures

- How to keep in touch
- Expectations – of the school, pupils and families
- Safeguarding guidance for working online

In the summer term, nearly all pupils returned to school and continued with the planned curriculum.

### Preparing for and completing a virtual camp out

Myddelton College adjusted its learning through the outdoors programme to include sessions where pupils prepared for and completed a virtual camp out. This included preparing a menu, packing a virtual or actual rucksack, deciding where to place the tent and explaining the reasons for their choice.

The programme also included a webinar with a motivational speaker who spoke to the full school community about adapting to the 'new normal' in education and the importance of showing resilience and the ability to adapt to different challenges. Pupils have engaged with the online programme enthusiastically.

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### Overseas pupils

Maintaining continuity of learning for overseas boarders presented significant challenges. This was particularly the case regarding quarantine requirements for pupils returning to the United Kingdom, but also providing accommodation and a programme of activities for those who remained here throughout the year. Schools with overseas boarders have implemented a range of strategies, including adaptations to the school day and extension activities to support these pupils when in quarantine.

A few overseas boarders did not return to school to resume their education in September 2020 due to concerns about the level of COVID-19 infections in the United Kingdom. In some cases, these pupils left the school, but continued to access online learning throughout the year. Where pupils returned home before Christmas, they began the next term in quarantine in their boarding houses but were able to access all learning online.

During the spring term 2021, one school provided a full timetable of live lessons but made several adaptations to the timetable, such as bringing forward some afternoon lessons to lunchtime to make it more convenient for international students who remained at home in different time zones. Staff also recorded or pre-recorded some lessons so that pupils could access this material and undertake work when most convenient for them.

Despite these adaptations and initiatives, leaders recognised that pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) have been disadvantaged to some degree. For example, some of these pupils did not always understand everything during streamed lessons and were often reluctant to ask for clarification or help. When pupils are actually in class, it is easier for teachers to appreciate misunderstandings and misconceptions as part of the ongoing monitoring of their work.

In a few cases, virtually all overseas pupils remained in boarding accommodation throughout the year, including the Christmas and Easter breaks, rather than returning to their home countries.

### Leadership

Throughout the year, around half of leaders identified concerns about the impact on staff of evolving work practices. Staff were on duty constantly to ensure that pupils were safe, and the move to online provision and the increased use of electronic communication meant that parents and pupils regularly communicated with staff outside of normal school hours. Leaders emphasised that it had been critical to monitor closely the wellbeing of all staff and to support individuals to 'keep things in perspective' in what has been an intense period of activity. In response to these concerns, one school appointed a staff wellbeing officer, and another planned for a staff wellbeing week.

Good communication with parents was vital. Around three quarters of schools conducted surveys of parents and around a quarter also surveyed their pupils or staff. This feedback was used to refine provision throughout the pandemic.

### Provision for overseas pupils

Since September 2020, the Haberdashers' Monmouth Schools have provided holiday camps for overseas boarders during the Christmas, Easter and half-term holidays. The schools contracted an outside agency to organise these camps, which were based at the school and used the school and local facilities to provide a range of experiences. During this time, the pupils were able to take part in an array of activities ranging from roller skating to playing golf, from knitting to festive paper-cutting, as well as receiving study support. This enabled these pupils to remain in the United Kingdom rather than facing the potential risks and quarantine requirements associated with travel when returning to their home countries.

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Quality assurance activities were difficult to carry out with restrictions in place. Also, leaders did not wish to add to staff pressure. In the many cases where quality assurance did take place, this led to further improvements and adaptations including:

- developing the use of online provision to meet pupils' individual needs more closely
- supporting individual teachers to ensure consistency in provision
- restructuring lessons to reduce the amount of 'teacher talk'
- more live input for younger pupils
- combining online learning with other activities to reduce screen time

When pupils returned in September and again after Easter, many schools completed assessments for all pupils to identify possible learning gaps and where catch-up activities and individual support was required. Generally, leaders did not consider that there were significant gaps in pupils' learning during lockdown due to their provision and pupils' engagement. Leaders recognised that many pupils with additional learning needs, such as dyslexia, had fallen further behind, echoing research from the OECD (2020b, p.2) that identified pupils with special educational needs as one of the groups that are 'likely to lose the most in terms of educational outcomes'; and 'risk falling further behind' during the pandemic. In addition, younger pupils tended to exhibit a decrease in their attention span or a reduction in fine motor skills.

In a few cases, pupils were further ahead than expected in certain aspects of learning, as teachers had gained teaching time from other activities, such as sports days or concerts.

Many schools saw an increase in professional learning, including accessing external provision and the internal exchange of good practice. The two main areas of focus were staff and pupil wellbeing, and use of ICT. For example, in two schools, staff training days in September placed an emphasis on supporting pupils' wellbeing, with a focus on the pressures children might feel from home and how they might adapt on their return to school. A few schools established information communication champions, enabling staff to develop their skills in using information technology more effectively to support learning. In other schools, proprietors invested in hardware for staff and pupils, supported by training. There was a strong focus on sharing good practice internally and staff were willing to ask questions and ask for support as they realised that everyone was in the same position and had similar concerns.

