



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

A report on

**Mountain Ash Comprehensive School
New Road
Mountain Ash
RCT
CF45 4DG**

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by

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

About Mountain Ash Comprehensive School

Mountain Ash Comprehensive School is an 11 to 19 mixed comprehensive school maintained by Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority that serves the town of Mountain Ash and the surrounding villages. Currently the school has 938 pupils, including 88 in the sixth form. Although overall pupil numbers are similar to those at the time of the last inspection in 2012 when they were 935, the number of sixth form pupils at that time was notably higher at 135 pupils.

Around 32% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is much higher than the Welsh average of 16.4% for secondary schools. Around 60% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas in Wales.

Approximately 26% of pupils have an additional learning need, which is slightly higher than the national average for secondary schools of 22.9%. The percentage of pupils with a statement of special educational needs is 0.6% compared with the average of 2.2% for the whole of Wales. Very few pupils are from a minority-ethnic or mixed-race background. Very few pupils speak Welsh as their first language or come from homes where English is not the first language.

The headteacher was appointed in January 2017. The senior leadership team also includes a deputy headteacher and three assistant headteachers.

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

Mountain Ash Comprehensive School's supportive and inclusive ethos has a beneficial impact on pupils' personal development and wellbeing. Most pupils are courteous to visitors, staff and their peers. Many engage and behave well in lessons and the majority of pupils make sound progress in their learning. However, a minority of pupils are not sufficiently resilient in lessons, a few do not always behave maturely in class or respectfully as they move around the school.

Teaching and assessment have many strengths, although overall there is too much variation in the quality of this provision. In a minority of lessons, teachers' expectations are not high enough.

The headteacher communicates a clear vision for the school that every pupil can succeed. The senior team work well together to realise this vision and this has contributed effectively to improved outcomes in 2018 for pupils, particularly at key stage 4. However, self-evaluation activities do not focus on the impact of provision on pupils' learning closely enough. This limits leaders' ability to target improvements in key areas of the school's work.

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

Recommendations

- R1 Improve the progress that all pupils make in lessons, including in the development of their literacy and numeracy skills
- R2 Improve pupils' resilience in learning, and their behaviour in lessons and around the school
- R3 Improve the quality of teaching
- R4 Improve the quality and impact of self-evaluation and improvement planning
- R5 Improve communication and engagement with parents
- R6 Manage finances robustly to address the budget deficit

What happens next

Mountain Ash Comprehensive School will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will review the school's progress.

Main findings

Standards: Adequate and needs improvement

The majority of pupils recall prior learning suitably well and make appropriate progress in their learning. In a very few lessons where teaching is particularly effective, pupils make very strong progress in developing their knowledge, understanding and skills. However, a significant minority of pupils have an insufficient understanding of prior learning, weaknesses in their skills or do not grasp new concepts well enough to make the progress that they should. The majority of pupils in the sixth form make suitable progress.

Many pupils listen attentively and with respect to the teacher and their peers. The majority contribute willingly to class discussion and around half of pupils express their ideas clearly in these situations. A few pupils respond extensively and thoughtfully to questions. However, a minority of pupils' verbal contributions lack clarity and are underdeveloped, often because these pupils do not have sufficient vocabulary, knowledge or skills to develop their ideas.

Most pupils show good understanding of the texts that they read. Many locate and extract information from source material well. While many pupils are able to draw straightforward inference to enhance their understanding of texts, only a few analyse confidently and in depth. For example, sixth form pupils analyse language and style in a Sylvia Plath poem effectively. A few of these pupils were able to give a sophisticated and mature reading of the poem, offering alternative and original interpretations. However, a minority of pupils in key stages 3 and 4 do not always infer meaning from text accurately.

Many pupils write at appropriate length for a wide range of purposes across the curriculum. They make suitable language choices and use subject specific terminology generally effectively in their writing. The writing of a few pupils adeptly interests and engages the reader. However, a majority of pupils make frequent spelling, punctuation and grammar errors. A minority do not structure their writing or explain their ideas in their written work clearly enough. The handwriting and presentation of a minority of pupils' work are weak.

Around half of pupils have sound basic number skills and are confident in making mental calculations. These pupils apply their skills suitably to straightforward written calculations in a few areas of the curriculum. However, they make frequent errors, for example when calculating percentages. More able pupils use their numeracy skills well, such as when calculating the relative atomic mass of various isotopes of chemical elements. Nearly all pupils construct suitable graphs, for example to investigate the extension of a spring. However, a minority of pupils do not draw or label graphs or charts carefully enough or with sufficient accuracy.

Many pupils prepare presentations, create documents and spreadsheets suitably across the curriculum. However, how well they develop their information communication technology (ICT) skills beyond these simple tasks is limited. In addition, pupils often do not search or check the reliability of sources effectively enough when retrieving information from the internet to supplement classroom learning.

In a very few lessons, pupils develop their creativity and thinking skills well. For example in drama, pupils used controlled movement and facial expressions successfully to show subtlety and nuance in their depiction of life in the trenches. However, too often pupils do not extend their thinking and creativity beyond the requirements of the tasks given.

Between 2014 and 2018, performance in the level 2 threshold, including English and mathematics has fluctuated. It was just below that of similar schools in three of the last five years including a significant decline in 2017. In 2015 and in most recent performance in 2018, performance in this indicator is above that in similar schools. Performance in the capped points score has compared favourably with that in similar schools during the last five years, despite a dip in 2017. The proportion of pupils gaining five A*-A at GCSE is above that in other similar schools in 2018, after being below in the previous four years. Despite the dip in 2017, generally pupils make sound progress from previous key stages in many indicators. At the end of Year 11, most pupils continue into full time education, training or employment.

At key stage 4, boys' and girls' performance rose in 2018 in around half of indicators. It is now similar to or above that of other boys and girls in similar schools in many or all indicators respectively. In particular, girls' performance in level 2 mathematics improved notably in 2018 after a two-year decline. The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has fluctuated over the last five years when compared with that of this group of pupils in similar schools. In 2018, their performance improved and now compares favourably with that of their counterparts in similar schools in many indicators.

In the sixth form, the school's performance is mixed. Performance in both the level 3 threshold and the proportion of pupils achieving three grades at A* to C has fluctuated over the last five years. Performance in these indicators is above that of similar schools for the first time in 2018. The proportion of pupils achieving three grades at A* or A and in the average wider points score also improved notably in 2018 and is above the average for similar schools after being consistently below during the previous four years.

Many pupils with additional learning needs perform well against their learning targets.

Many pupils make suitable progress in their understanding and use of the Welsh language. A majority form sentences independently using past and present tenses accurately. They are able to give reasons for their views both in writing and orally successfully. More able pupils have a secure grasp of spelling and grammar and produce suitable extended writing in a range of forms, for example to write articles on Y Cartref. Although pupils demonstrate good pronunciation in Welsh, a minority lack the confidence to engage in discussion work. Performance in Welsh at level 2 has been strong for the last two years.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Adequate and needs improvement

Most pupils feel well supported by the school when they have personal challenges or concerns. Many feel safe in school and agree that the school deals well with the few incidents of bullying. They believe that the continued focus on improving relationships, for example through circle time and assemblies, has helped more pupils to be respectful of others in most aspects of school life.

Many pupils understand the contribution that a sensible diet and participation in healthy activities make to their wellbeing. Pupils with additional learning needs value the opportunities to access beneficial programmes which aim to raise their aspiration and motivation. For example, a few pupils, both boys and girls, participate successfully in 'Fighting Chance', which uses a combination of non-contact boxing, education and individual support to improve how well they manage their own behaviour.

Most pupils are courteous and polite to staff, peers and visitors and in many lessons, pupils behave well. However, a minority of pupils lack tenacity and resilience when tackling their work and allow their concentration to drift. A few pupils do not engage in their learning and their behaviour disrupts the learning of others. During changeover periods in particular, the inconsiderate actions of a few pupils make many of the younger pupils uneasy and anxious on the corridors. In addition, the number of incidents of fixed term exclusion has risen over the last few years and is too high.

A very few pupils undertake leadership roles and responsibilities in areas such as global citizenship and by becoming digital leaders. However, there are no associate pupil governors on the governing body. The school's pupil leadership group 'The Senedd' is not sufficiently influential in whole-school decisions. Although the school does canvas pupils' opinions on a wide range of matters frequently, the findings are not shared well enough. As a result, many pupils feel that their views are not taken into account sufficiently, for example regarding recent changes to the lunch hour.

Through a wide range of trips and experiences, many pupils participate in enriching events, such as visits to a university lecture on Sanskrit literature, or to celebrations of Welsh language and culture such as the Eisteddfod. A high proportion of young people also engage regularly in a wide range of extra-curricular activities offered by the school. These include sports teams as well as more specialised opportunities such as driving lessons and volunteering with the police.

Teaching and learning experiences: Adequate and needs improvement

Nearly all teachers have strong subject knowledge. Many build positive and supportive relationships with pupils. In the majority of cases, teachers plan carefully sequences of activities that support pupils to make suitable progress in their learning. In these lessons, teachers explain new concepts clearly and pay appropriate attention to pupils' skills, for example by revisiting key terms regularly to reinforce pupils' understanding of them. Many teachers provide beneficial individual advice to pupils in lessons and check their understanding suitably.

In a very few lessons, teachers demonstrate a secure understanding of how to apply highly effective teaching techniques in their subjects to ensure strong progress. They plan their lessons skilfully with tasks and resources that are highly successful in engaging and developing the thinking and problem solving skills of pupils of all abilities. These teachers often use a wide range of questioning techniques to probe and strengthen all pupils' understanding. For example in French, skilful questioning by the teacher challenges pupils highly successfully to use their thinking skills to make sense of and apply rules of language independently.

Overall, however, the quality of teaching is too variable. In a minority of lessons, planning does not consider the needs of all pupils well enough and teachers do not use all of the information available to them to support individual pupils. In these lessons, teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low and tasks are repetitive or lack sufficient challenge. In these cases, teaching keeps pupils occupied but does not ensure high levels of learning and engagement. In addition, when using success criteria, teachers frequently do not make clear enough to pupils what is expected of them with regards to the quality of their work. A minority of teachers do not use questioning effectively enough to develop pupils' understanding, and they do not ensure that they involve all pupils in class discussion. A minority of teachers do not manage pupils' behaviour well enough.

The majority of written feedback helpfully identifies what pupils need to do to improve. However, too often, teachers' feedback focusses overly on the existence of certain features but does not consider the quality of pupils' work well enough. In these cases, feedback does not explain effectively enough how pupils can improve. A minority of pupils do not respond purposefully to teachers' feedback.

The school considers learners' needs and prior learning from previous key stages suitably when planning its curriculum. At key stage 3, it caters appropriately for the literacy and numeracy needs of its pupils. However, the curriculum choices made by the school narrow pupils' learning experiences in a few instances. At key stage 4, there are a useful range of academic and vocational courses such as triple science and engineering. The school works appropriately with local schools to broaden the curriculum opportunities available to students in the sixth form.

The school provides a wide variety of enrichment activities, such as visits to science and technology sites, participation in sporting events and the Duke of Edinburgh Award. There is also a wide range of activities and events for more able pupils in each key stage. For example, visits from Russell Group universities provide support and advice to pupils with planning for their future progression to university. These programmes enhance pupils' learning and their personal development effectively.

Most departments have identified suitably opportunities for developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills in their subject areas. School leaders use assessment data to identify helpful interventions for pupils with weaker skills. Pupils have appropriate opportunities to read for pleasure and to practise their numeracy skills in registration time. However, the effectiveness of provision for the development of pupils' skills, particularly in cross-curricular contexts is too variable. For example, provision in subjects other than English, mathematics and ICT frequently does not develop pupils' skills in authentic, meaningful contexts or it does not effectively help pupils to develop competence in those skills. Overall, provision for the progressive development of pupils' numeracy and ICT skills across the curriculum is underdeveloped.

The school offers relevant opportunities for pupils to develop their appreciation of Welsh heritage and culture, for example through the school Eisteddfod and visits to local places of interest such as the Big Pit national coal museum. Pupils also have appropriate opportunities to study local themes and cultural heritage in their academic studies. Nearly all pupils are entered for a level 2 Welsh language qualification at the end of key stage 4.

Care, support and guidance: Good

Mountain Ash Comprehensive School is an inclusive and caring community that provides encouraging and helpful support to its pupils. The school is working hard in creating a culture of ambition framed around the vision that 'Every pupil will succeed.' The school undertakes to ensure that pupils' wellbeing needs are met through its strong commitment to pastoral care and inclusion.

The school has a systematic tracking system to monitor the progress made by groups of pupils. It makes beneficial use of this information to provide valuable interventions for groups of pupils at key stage 4. This has contributed effectively to an improvement in the outcomes for pupils in most indicators in 2018. This system has recently been refined further to improve intervention strategies for pupils at risk of underachievement and for the more able and talented pupils across all year groups. However, many of these actions are very recent and these processes have not had enough impact on pupils' progress.

The school has strengthened its procedures for managing the attendance of pupils. The behaviour of all pupils is monitored closely. Over the last two years, the school has revised the system for fostering positive behaviour, including new approaches to managing behaviour and a review of the rewards system. This new system is understood well by pupils and staff and enables the school to provide effective support to help pupils understand the consequences of poor behaviour and rebuild relationships with their teachers in many cases. This has contributed well to improvements in behaviour. Although there is a suitable system in place to deal with any instances of bullying, it is not well understood by a few parents and pupils.

Interim and annual reports keep parents well informed about their children's progress in school. Appropriate advice and guidance is available for pupils at key transition points to help them make informed choices about their learning and career pathways.

A comprehensive personal and social education (PSE) programme contributes effectively to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. This provision is well planned and themes are threaded through a valuable programme of tailored focus days, assemblies and outside speakers. The school provides worthwhile opportunities for pupils to learn about and reflect on a wide range of ethical, local and global issues. The programme also provides pupils with beneficial opportunities to learn about and understand prejudice and discrimination so that they respect diversity and the rights of others. For example, the 'We are More' ambassadors share their expertise and experience at several conferences promoting gender equality and positive relationships. The programme is supplemented further by the school's beneficial partnerships with a wide range of external agencies such as 'Mindfulness' and 'Treatment and Education Drug Services'.

The PSE programme covers key areas of health and the school has appropriate arrangements for healthy eating and drinking. It helps pupils to make healthy lifestyle choices and understand the impact this has on their wellbeing.

The school makes effective arrangements for the few pupils who require alternative curriculum routes to progress to post-16 learning or employment. These arrangements lead to worthwhile qualifications and experiences, for example by supporting pupils into apprenticeships or work placements through initiatives such as the 'Groundwork' project.

The school provides valuable support for pupils with additional learning needs. It has suitably targeted interventions and learning experiences across all key stages to meet these pupils' academic and pastoral needs. For example, the provision in the 'Cwtch' nurture room, emotional literacy self-awareness (ELSA) and therapy using games provide strong support for these pupils to improve their behaviour, wellbeing and personal skills. Personal individual educational plans contain relevant, measurable targets and appropriate strategies for teachers to support pupils in their lessons.

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

Leadership and management: Adequate and needs improvement

The new headteacher provides strong leadership. She has a clear vision for the school focused on wellbeing, respect and meeting the needs of all pupils. School policies and plans reflect this well. The roles and responsibilities of senior leaders have been reviewed and reorganised suitably to align with these ambitions. This means that the vision permeates school life, is well understood by all, and there is a strong sense of purpose across the school community. However, leadership has not had enough impact on standards, wellbeing and the quality of teaching.

Over the last few years, the school has introduced a number of systems and processes to strengthen leadership across the school. In a relatively short period of time, the headteacher and her senior team have established an ethos of collaboration and consistency of approach. This, together with systematic accountability arrangements and a more forensic use of performance data are beginning to result in improvements, for example in the support for more vulnerable pupils and in rates of attendance.

Most middle leaders have a sound understanding of their role. Management meetings provide regular opportunities for senior leaders to monitor progress across the school, and to hold middle leaders to account appropriately for their areas of responsibility. Line management arrangements are suitably robust and are linked to beneficial professional learning opportunities.

Governors know the school well and are well-informed about the strengths and weaknesses in standards and provision. They support the school and challenge appropriately.

The leadership team has a clear understanding of the school's strengths and many of the areas for development. Senior leaders have developed a useful calendar of self-evaluation activity to inform the systematic gathering of first-hand evidence, including the views of pupils. This has begun to contribute positively to improvement, for instance in recent outcomes in key stage 4 and the sixth form.

Senior and middle leaders use data and the scrutiny of pupils' work suitably to highlight good practice and identify appropriate improvement priorities. However, leaders do not evaluate the effectiveness of teaching in terms of its impact on pupils' skills and progress in learning well enough. This means that evaluations are often overly generous and this limits leaders' ability to identify and address areas for development.

Although school improvement planning is appropriately focused upon key aspects of the school's work, planning at all levels is not sufficiently clear about the specific actions required to secure improvement, for example in the steps required to improving the quality of teaching.

The school provides valuable opportunities for staff to reflect and evaluate their own practice. This is contributing to a developing culture of professional learning and a positive team spirit amongst staff. Professional learning activities link suitably to the school's identified priorities. They include useful in-house collaborative working to improve and share practice, and access to a valuable range of suitable external programmes to support staff in their roles. While there is a sound awareness that the outcomes of professional learning are measured by their impact on standards, processes to evaluate professional learning are in an early stage of development.

The school seeks the views of parents on a regular basis although many parents are not aware of the impact of any contributions. In addition, the school's efforts to engage with parents and to communicate with them, for example on changes and improvements to the school, has had a limited effect on parents' understanding of the school's work and also on how confident they feel in approaching leaders with concerns and suggestions.

The school manages its budget appropriately. The headteacher and the business manager align budget expenditure to the school development plan suitably. Resources and buildings are maintained appropriately to create a positive learning environment. However, the school currently has a deficit budget. Grant funding, such as the pupil development grant, is used appropriately to support vulnerable pupils and this has had a positive impact, for instance on the attendance of these pupils.

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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