



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

A report on

**Afon Taf High School
Yew Street
Troedyrhiw
Merthyr Tydfil
CF48 4ED**

Date of inspection: February 2019

by

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

About Afon Taf High School

Afon Taf High School is an English-medium 11-16 school in Merthyr Tydfil and serves communities in the southern part of the borough. There are currently 644 pupils on roll. This is fewer than at the time of the last inspection in March 2014. Around 24.9% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is above the national average of 16.4% for secondary schools. Over 67% of pupils live in the 30% most deprived areas in Wales. Very few pupils come from an ethnic minority background and nearly all speak English as their first language.

Nearly 37% of pupils have additional learning needs which is above the Welsh average of 22.2%. Just over 2% have a statement of special educational needs. This is close to the Welsh average of 2.2%. The school has a local authority special educational needs resource base for pupils with communication difficulties including Autistic Spectrum Disorder, hearing and visual impairments.

The current headteacher took up post in January 2017. The senior leadership team consists of the headteacher, one deputy headteacher and three assistant headteachers. All of the senior leadership team have been appointed within the last four years.

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

Afon Taf High School is a happy, caring school that supports its pupils well. Almost all pupils feel safe and behave very well in lessons and around the school. Most pupils enjoy school and appreciate the strong working relationship they have with staff. Despite these positive attitudes, pupils do not make enough progress at key stage 4, most particularly in the indicators that contain English and mathematics.

Most teachers show considerable care for the wellbeing of their pupils. In classrooms and through their day relationships with pupils, they take into account pupils' personal and social needs very well. However, the majority of teachers do not challenge pupils sufficiently well or provide enough opportunities for pupils to develop their skills progressively.

The school has a range of valuable strategies to support the emotional, social and behavioural needs of pupils. However, the process for setting and reviewing targets for pupils with additional learning needs and whole school planning for personal and social education are under-developed.

Senior leaders and staff share a well understood vision for improving the school. Governors support the school appropriately. They are particularly effective at monitoring the school's expenditure and, working with senior leaders, have eliminated the school's budget deficit. Senior leaders have a suitable understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. However, their work has not had enough impact on important aspects of the school's work such as the quality of teaching and pupils' standards in key areas.

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

Recommendations

- R1 Improve standards at key stage 4, particularly in English and mathematics
- R2 Strengthen the quality of teaching and assessment
- R3 Improve the planning for progression in developing pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills
- R4 Strengthen leadership at all levels, including that for additional learning needs and personal and social education
- R5 Improve the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations in this report. Estyn will review the school's progress.

Main findings

Standards: Adequate and needs improvement

Many pupils make suitable progress in lessons. They recall prior learning appropriately. The majority of pupils answer recall questions confidently and apply their learning to new situations to help them understand new concepts. For example, in drama pupils apply their knowledge of slavery from history and music lessons to reflect on Bob Marley's Redemption Song. They use this skilfully to help them develop their own views about modern day slavery. A minority of pupils do not make sufficient progress in lessons and do not apply previous learning well enough. In a few instances, pupils lack resilience and are reluctant to experiment with new approaches or make mistakes.

Many pupils listen attentively to teachers and their peers and the majority express themselves appropriately. The majority of pupils respond to questions thoughtfully, using appropriate subject specific language. A minority of pupils provide extended verbal contributions. In these instances, they use a comprehensive range of vocabulary to explain their ideas. For example, in music, pupils engage in lively discussions about their choice of notation to create a sequence of music. However, the majority of pupils do not express themselves clearly enough in discussions. They use only short, underdeveloped sentences and limited vocabulary.

Many pupils enjoy reading and engage well in whole school reading initiatives. They extract key points from texts efficiently and accurately. For example, in health and social care, pupils select accurately important information about diet-related conditions from a range of texts. A minority of pupils use deduction effectively to help them understand and interpret meaning in texts. In a few cases, pupils demonstrate effective reasoning and inference skills to interpret a range of texts and different forms of evidence. For example, in history, pupils interpret effectively how different sources present the strengths and weaknesses of Elizabeth I as a monarch. However, generally pupils do not develop these skills well enough across a variety of contexts. When provided with opportunities, the majority of pupils read aloud fluently and confidently.

Many pupils produce extended writing that is organised suitably and is technically secure. They write appropriately for a range of purposes, although in a few instances writing lacks a sense of audience and suitable tone. A few pupils write in a particularly engaging way, showing a sound awareness of audience. For example, they express their views about terrorism fluently and maturely, showing an awareness of global issues and media representation. However, the majority of pupils' written work contains too many grammatical and spelling errors. A minority of pupils do not produce enough extended writing. They do not develop their writing skills well enough and are over-reliant on writing frames.

Many pupils complete basic numeracy tasks accurately and apply their knowledge suitably. For instance, they calculate voltage and current in circuits. However, a few pupils do not recall numeracy concepts well enough. For example, they struggle to apply simple formulae and geometrical terminology to solve scientific and mathematical tasks.

Many pupils demonstrate appropriate information technology skills in a few subjects across the curriculum. When provided with appropriate opportunities, a few pupils use software packages competently to help them develop subject specific skills.

In a few subjects, pupils experiment creatively with a range of ideas or concepts to produce original work. In these instances, pupils take risks to find effective ways of using different materials and design processes to achieve a successful outcome. For example, in fashion and textiles, pupils investigate the potential of different fabrics and ergonomics to design a soft toy for a child. However, in general pupils do not develop their creative and thinking skills well enough across the curriculum.

In a few instances, pupils show control and dexterity when engaged in activities that require fine motor skills. For example, in engineering most pupils show discipline and focus when soldering a circuit board.

Over the last four years, performance at key stage 4 has been variable and, in the last two years does not compare well with that of similar schools in most indicators.

Performance in the level 2 threshold, including English and mathematics has fluctuated and has been below the average for similar schools for three of the last four years. Performance in the capped points score has remained relatively stable for the last two years and has been in line with that in similar schools for two years and better than the average for similar schools for two. The proportion of pupils gaining five GCSE or equivalent qualifications at A*-A increased in 2018, but remains below the average for similar schools. In the majority of non-core subjects, many pupils make strong progress and achieve well.

Since 2016, the performance of boys has been below the average for boys in similar schools in most indicators at key stage 4 and declined in 2018 in just over half of the indicators. The performance of girls has fluctuated over the last two years when compared with that of girls in similar schools. In 2018, their performance improved in the majority of indicators and is above the average performance of girls in similar schools in a minority of indicators.

The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has generally declined since 2016 and is below that of their counterparts in similar schools in many indicators. Most pupils with additional learning needs do not make sufficient progress against their targets, particularly in the indicators that contain English and mathematics.

At the end of Year 11 almost all pupils remain in education, employment or training. No pupil has left school without a recognised qualification in the last three years.

The majority of pupils make suitable progress in Welsh. In 2018, the majority of pupils were entered for a Welsh language qualification. Nearly all of these achieved a qualification and many achieved a level 2 qualification.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Good

Most pupils enjoy their life at school and appreciate the strong relationships they have with staff and their peers. They take pride in their school and, in particular, value the recent refurbishment of the learning environment. Many pupils feel safe, included and valued. They have a secure understanding of the range of support and guidance available to them.

Most pupils arrive promptly to lessons and are quick to settle to work. They demonstrate positive attitudes to learning and engage constructively in lessons. They work well collaboratively, sharing ideas and supporting one another to improve their work. In a few cases pupils are curious and inquisitive about new concepts. For example, when discussing the motivations behind the actions of Romeo and Juliet they are keen to find out why the characters make particular decisions. A few pupils pose insightful questions to extend their knowledge and understanding. Many pupils complete their work diligently and take care in the presentation of their work. However, a few pupils of all abilities have missing or incomplete work in their books.

Many pupils have an appropriate understanding of what they do well and what they need to improve. They are able to explain how they refine and redraft their work. A minority of pupils develop their independent learning skills well. For example, they undertake independent research on the characters in Zephaniah's novel, 'Face', and find interesting facts to share with other pupils. However, in a few cases, pupils are too reliant upon writing frames and lack the resilience to work well independently.

Most pupils exhibit exemplary behaviour in lessons and around the school and are courteous to staff and visitors. This is reflected in the notable reduction of fixed term exclusions over the last three years. Many pupils demonstrate respect for the feelings of others and an awareness of global issues. For example, when discussing sensitive issues such as the media portrayal of stereotypical attitudes to terrorism, pupils are receptive to the views of others and aware of prejudice. A few pupils raise concerns regarding bullying. However, many believe that the school deals effectively with their concerns.

Participation rates in extra-curricular activities are high. Pupils enjoy participating in a range of activities that help them develop their creative, social and physical skills, such as the robotics club and the school choir. Sporting activities, such as the popular and successful rugby teams for girls and boys, are well supported by pupils.

A few pupils take responsibility for leading activities for other pupils. These include organising lunchtime provision for vulnerable pupils, running the school stationery shop and providing a computer coding club for their peers and pupils in primary schools. By taking on whole-school leadership roles, a few pupils have suitably enhanced their leadership skills. For example, Year 11 prefects act as role models for younger pupils by taking on duties at lunch and break times and act as ambassadors for the school. Through well-established links with community organisations, such as the local home for the elderly, pupils show care and thoughtfulness as they give of their time and their talent for the benefit of others.

Teaching and learning experiences: Adequate and needs improvement

Most teachers have strong working relationships with pupils and establish supportive learning environments. Many work very sensitively with pupils, taking into account the personal and social needs of their pupils well. However, a minority of teachers do not provide pupils with sufficiently challenging tasks, set high enough expectations for pupils to improve their work and are over-generous with their praise.

Many teachers organise lessons in a structured way that helps pupils make appropriate progress. A few teachers plan challenging tasks that enable pupils to

progressively build on their knowledge, skills and understanding of concepts. However, a minority of teachers plan tasks that keep pupils busy but do not provide effective enough opportunities for them to work independently, develop their thinking and creative skills or build usefully on prior learning.

A few teachers provide useful explanations and demonstrations that help pupils place their learning in context. Many teachers model language effectively. A few do this particularly well. For instance they emphasise the use of key terminology and have extremely high expectations of how pupils respond verbally and in their writing. However, in too many cases, teachers do not explain concepts clearly enough. In a few instances, teachers require pupils to complete tasks without a secure understanding of the topic. As a result, pupils are not clear about what teachers expect of them.

Many teachers use questioning suitably to check understanding and basic recall of prior learning. A few teachers challenge pupils well to extend and deepen their verbal responses. However, the majority of teachers do not challenge pupils sufficiently when questioning them or, in a few instances, limit their questions to a small group of pupils who provide nearly all of the responses.

The quality of marking and assessment is too variable within and across subjects. In a minority of cases, feedback on work identifies what pupils need to improve and includes useful diagnostic comments. A few teachers provide suitably targeted written questions that relate to the learning and require pupils to extend their work. This helps pupils focus their approach to improving their work. However, too much marking is superficial and does not contribute helpfully to improving pupils' subject specific knowledge or literacy skills.

The school has a suitable curriculum at key stage 3, which meets the needs and interest of the pupils. The menu of options in key stage 4 offers pupils a wide range of subjects that enables appropriate progression to post 16 education or training. The Welsh Baccalaureate skills challenge certificates in key stage 4 provides valuable opportunities for pupils to develop appropriate work related skills. The school has nurtured links with local businesses to provide worthwhile opportunities for pupils to engage in the world of work. In addition, there are appropriate opportunities for a few pupils at risk of disengagement to engage in courses that meet their needs, for example through the local college.

The school has an appropriate range of opportunities for pupils to engage in additional activities that enhance their learning. The school's '#Wednesday' programme provides enrichment opportunities for pupils to develop a range of valuable skills such as computer coding and problem solving. The school provides a wide range of opportunities for pupils to broaden their horizons. These include educational visits abroad, the Duke of Edinburgh Award, a science club at lunchtime and visits to universities.

The school's planning for literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum is developing suitably. In most subjects, there are appropriate opportunities to develop pupils' literacy skills. However, in a minority of cases, teachers do not provide pupils with appropriate guidance for them to produce high quality, extended written or verbal responses. Where appropriate, individual subjects include suitable

opportunities for pupils to use their numeracy skills. However, planning for the progressive development of these skills across the curriculum is at an early stage. Although a few subjects offer pupils suitable opportunities to use their ICT skills, the school has not planned for the progressive development of these skills across the curriculum sufficiently well.

There are appropriate opportunities for all pupils to practise literacy and numeracy skills through reading and numeracy challenges during the first lesson of each day. However, this provision reduces the curriculum time of other subjects unevenly. Interventions to improve the reading skills of specific pupils in key stage 3 have led to an overall improvement in their skills in a short space of time. The school has recently introduced appropriate numeracy interventions for pupils with weak numeracy skills in key stage 3.

Provision for the development of pupils' Welsh language skills is appropriate. The majority of pupils follow and, in previous years, pupils have been able to follow a vocational course in Welsh. The school provides pupils with valuable opportunities to develop their appreciation of Welsh heritage and culture, through organising an annual Eisteddfod and visits to Llangrannog and Glan Llyn.

Care, support and guidance: Adequate and needs improvement

Afon Taf High School has a supportive culture that promotes successfully the wellbeing of pupils. Staff provide a high level of sensitive support and care for individual pupils. However, a few aspects of care, support and guidance are underdeveloped.

The school supports effectively pupils with emotional, social and behavioural needs. This is achieved through a wide range of strategies, including the positive reward system, the 'Check In Check Out' mentoring programme and the Blue Room lunchtime provision for vulnerable pupils.

The Learning Resource Base (LRB) provides beneficial personal support for pupils with a variety of additional learning needs. These pupils are able to access relevant courses and develop their social and life skills well through this provision. Pupils who attend the nurture group have the opportunity to have breakfast in a very well supported, safe environment.

The Blue Room and LRB provide beneficial areas for vulnerable pupils during break times that offer a range of activities and options including quiet time, use of computers, games and an opportunity to socialise with friends. Pupils who attend this provision feel safe and appreciate being able to access the facility when they need support.

The school keeps parents well informed of their child's progress. Annual reports to parents are detailed and provide useful information on their child's progress, strengths and targets for improvement.

Pupils receive appropriate advice and guidance when making their choices for key stage 4 options. They are provided with helpful information when making decisions about the next stage in their education, training or employment. For example, the school hosts a careers fair that is attended by the local further education college and local employers.

The school has a very detailed and comprehensive tracking system in place to monitor the academic progress made in every subject by individual learners. These relatively new arrangements are appropriate and enable all teachers to identify individuals and specific groups of pupils who are underachieving. However, not all teachers use this information well enough and therefore it has not had sufficient impact on standards.

Individual education plans do not include appropriate strategies to help teachers support pupils with additional learning needs. The school's process for setting and reviewing targets does not include enough input from pupils or parents.

Recently, the school has revised its system for encouraging positive behaviour, including beneficial remedial approaches that promote positive relationships and an updated, whole school, reward system. These are well understood by pupils, consistently applied by staff and contribute to high levels of good behaviour.

The school provides suitable opportunities in subjects such as science, physical education and food technology for pupils to develop their knowledge of healthy lifestyles and to consider healthy choices carefully. The school makes appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking. However, the provision for personal and social education is underdeveloped.

The school provides an appropriate range of extra-curricular activities to develop pupils' social, creative and physical skills. These include many sporting clubs, Duke of Edinburgh Bronze and Silver awards, a school and staff choir and engineering clubs. Activities such as the school production, musical events and the Eisteddfod make an important contribution to pupils' cultural development.

The school has suitable resources to support pupils' spiritual development. However, the use of these resources are too variable to ensure that the school meets the requirement to provide a daily act of collective worship.

The worthwhile transition activity, '#Wednesday', fosters a desire to learn and develops the social skills of both Year 5 and Year 7 pupils. These activities support pupils successfully as they transfer from primary school to the high school. Pupils have suitable opportunities to express their views through the completion of frequent surveys. However, the school council is not sufficiently influential in whole school decisions.

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

Leadership and management: Adequate and needs improvement

Senior leaders work well with one another to promote an inclusive culture and positive community spirit within the school. Since his appointment, the headteacher has communicated his vision for improving standards suitably and managed the school's budget well. However, leadership has not had enough impact on securing consistently high outcomes for pupils nor in ensuring consistently high quality teaching.

In general, senior leadership roles are distributed appropriately. Lines of accountability are clear and leaders manage the performance of staff with suitable rigour. In many cases, staff are supported well to achieve their objectives through tailored professional learning opportunities. For example, the directors of learning attend training courses on aspects that align with specific issues identified in their year group. The school has provided valuable opportunities for middle leaders to develop their leadership skills through secondment to the senior team.

The majority of middle leaders carry out their roles suitably. However, in a minority of cases, these leaders do not fully understand the strategic nature of their role. In general, departmental meetings focus appropriately on school priorities. In about half of these, records of meetings produce useful actions that are followed up in subsequent meetings. The rest of these meetings produce actions that are too focused on administrative aspects or compliance with school policy rather than promoting improvements in teaching and learning.

Leaders have an appropriate, overarching understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. The school has a well-structured programme of self-evaluation activities across the year. This provides useful, regular opportunities for the school community to contribute to an evaluation of the school. Senior and faculty leaders scrutinise performance data thoroughly. This gives them a suitable understanding of how well pupils achieve. They also observe teachers regularly, and gather suitable information about teaching across the school. However, leaders do not use information from lesson observations and the scrutiny of pupils' work to identify the most important strengths and aspects for improvement in teaching sufficiently or evaluate the impact of teaching on pupils' progress well enough.

The school improvement plan identifies five suitable overall priorities aligned to strategic vision of the school. However, improvement planning overall is not based securely enough on the outcomes of self-evaluation. Faculty improvement planning does not focus well enough on the issues that will make the biggest impact on improving pupils' standards in each subject. This also means that important shortcomings in skills, for example in oracy, are not identified specifically as a whole school priority. In many instances, actions are overly focused on gathering more evidence rather than promoting strategies to bring about improvement.

The school is beginning to develop a learning culture. There are valuable opportunities for teachers to explore aspects of their work and to share and discuss effective practice, for example, through fortnightly 'Teach Meets'. However, this work has not had time to impact sufficiently on the quality of teaching. Senior leaders provide beneficial coaching for individual teachers to help them to develop their practice, and support middle leaders to improve their leadership skills appropriately.

Governors are very supportive of the school and are developing their understanding of its work suitably. They monitor the school's expenditure closely and offer leaders an appropriate level of challenge.

Over the last four years, leaders have successfully eliminated the school's budget deficit. In general, financial decisions are carried out thoughtfully. However, plans for spending the pupil deprivation grant are vague and have not been considered carefully enough. Although the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved recently, the school's support for this group has not been successful enough in improving their outcomes.

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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