



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

A report on

**Brecon High School
Penlan
Brecon
Powys
LD3 9SR**

Date of inspection: November 2018

by

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

About Brecon High School

Brecon High School is an 11-18 mixed comprehensive English-medium school with a very small Welsh first language stream. It is situated on the Penlan campus within the town of Brecon. Pupils come from the town of Brecon and the surrounding rural area.

There are 478 pupils on roll which is very slightly more than at the time of the last inspection although the number in the sixth form has fallen considerably to 53. Less than 8% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is well below the national average of 16.4%. Less than 1% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas in Wales. About 16% of pupils have a special educational need, which is well below the national average of 22.9%. In addition, less than 1% of pupils have a statement of special educational needs, which is also lower than the national average of 2.2%. The school has an autistic spectrum disorder centre on site.

About 7% of pupils speak Welsh as their first language or to an equivalent standard and just over 8% have English as an additional language.

The headteacher took up his post in November 2014. The senior leadership team consists of the headteacher a deputy headteacher, one assistant headteacher and a business manager.

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

Brecon High School has an inclusive and caring ethos that supports pupils' personal development well. Most pupils feel safe and many behave well in lessons and around the school. However, over time, weaknesses in leadership and governance have contributed to insufficient and un-sustained improvement in key areas of the school's work, including the quality of teaching, pupils' attendance and the standards they achieve.

Positive working relationships between teachers and pupils are a feature of most lessons. Teachers work hard and are committed to supporting pupils, but in a minority of lessons, pupils, particularly the more able, are not challenged well enough and they do not make sufficient progress. The curriculum at key stage 4 does not meet the needs of all pupils and although the school does provide a few useful opportunities for pupils to develop their skills, there is no coherent and co-ordinated approach to developing those skills progressively across the curriculum.

The school has accumulated a large budget deficit. Although there is an agreed recovery plan with the local authority, senior leaders have not been able to set balanced in-year budgets nor are they able to plan to reduce the deficit over the next five years.

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

Recommendations

- R1 Improve standards at key stage 4, including those of more able pupils
- R2 Improve attendance
- R3 Improve the learning experiences of pupils including the quality of teaching, the curriculum at key stage 4 and the provision to develop their skills
- R4 Improve the quality and impact of leaders at all levels including their ability to self-evaluate robustly and accurately to support effective school improvement
- R5 Provide robust financial management
- R6 Address the health and safety issue raised during the inspection

What happens next

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school is in need of significant improvement. The school will draw up an action plan which shows how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the school's progress about 12 months after the publication of this report.

Main findings

Standards: Adequate and needs improvement

In many lessons, pupils show secure recall of previous learning, including historical events such as the limitations on immigration into the United States of America following the First World War and the Butler Act which barred the teaching of the theory of evolution. In a majority of lessons, pupils make secure progress in developing their subject-specific skills and improving their knowledge and understanding of topics such as the properties of light and the laws of reflection.

Many pupils listen to their teachers with attention and respect. The minority who do not occasionally miss information and instructions that contributes to them not making as much progress as they should. A majority of pupils usually provide brief, underdeveloped verbal responses to teachers' questions. When teachers' questioning encourages them to do so, a minority are able to articulate their viewpoints coherently and, for example, explain their reasoning about literary characters such as Scrooge and Curley's wife. Most pupils in the Welsh stream answer questions confidently and generally communicate with their peers effectively. They speak clearly and express themselves well, using appropriate subject-specific terminology.

Many pupils make suitable use of information retrieval strategies, such as skimming and scanning, when learning about the traditions of Christianity and Sikhism, for example. A majority use basic inference and deduction appropriately to enhance their understanding of a range of literary characters in texts including 'A Christmas Carol' and 'Of Mice and Men'. A few pupils synthesise information well when, for example, deciding whether organised crime was the biggest problem facing America in the 1920s and how Henry VIII should be remembered. Many of the sixth form pupils studying English Literature are able to analyse the implications and underlying meaning of Edmund's first soliloquy in Shakespeare's 'King Lear'. Many of these pupils analyse the effect of language choices appropriately and a minority do so with flair and perception. However, overall, a minority of pupils do not use a sufficient range of reading strategies in different subjects which limits their understanding and progress.

A majority of pupils produce well-structured and technically secure writing including narrative and descriptive pieces, and when discussing topics such as the effects of exercise on the body. A few pupils proof-read and edit their work well but overall too few pupils take responsibility for improving the accuracy and content of their writing before they hand it to the teacher. A minority continue to make too many basic errors and do not structure or organise their writing well enough. In the Welsh stream, many pupils write well. This includes reports on experiments with useful hypotheses, evaluations and conclusions on, for example, how the effect of changing the surface of objects affects frictional forces.

In subjects other than mathematics, most pupils make very limited use of their number skills in worthwhile contexts. Many are able to draw suitable graphs, for example to demonstrate the rate of photosynthesis or the extension of a spring, though a minority do not label axes suitably or complete lines of best fit well enough. Only occasionally, when, for example, interpreting personal fitness tests, do pupils use graphs well enough to pose hypotheses or draw conclusions.

Most pupils make very limited use of their information and communication technology (ICT) skills across the curriculum. A very few do so creatively in art when using a graphics programme to manipulate imagery to create compositions to make a statement on the theme of war.

In 2018, a majority of pupils achieved a level 2 qualification in Welsh GCSE. A minority of pupils who study Welsh as a second language do not make enough progress during lessons. They find it difficult to recall previous work, lack the confidence to use new vocabulary and have difficulty with their pronunciation.

Over the last four years, performance at key stage 4 has fluctuated considerably but generally has not compared well with that in similar schools. In the three years up to and including 2017, pupils made less progress than expected in many indicators and significantly less in a minority. In 2018, provisional data shows that performance at key stage 4 improved in every indicator, following a very poor year in 2017, and compares favourably with that in similar schools in a minority of indicators.

Performance in the level 2 threshold, including English or Welsh and mathematics, improved considerably in 2018 following a dramatic decline the previous year. Provisional data indicates that it is now slightly above expectation and compares favourably with similar schools. Although performance in the capped points score, and the proportion of pupils gaining five GCSE or equivalent qualifications at A*-A improved in 2018, both are below expectation and continue to compare poorly with that in similar schools.

In 2018, the performance at key stage 4 of boys and of girls improved in every indicator after very weak performance the previous year. However, the performance of boys remains below the average for boys in similar schools in most indicators, and that of girls is below the average for their counterparts in many. Over the past four years, the performance of boys and girls respectively has been below the average for boys and girls in similar schools in many indicators.

At the end of Year 11, nearly all pupils remain in full time education either in the school or a further education college.

In the sixth form, the proportion of pupils achieving three A* or A grades improved in 2018 and is very close to the average for similar schools after being well below in each of the previous two years. Pupils' average wider points score and the proportion achieving three grades at A*-C also improved in 2018. Performance in the latter indicator is now better than the average for similar schools, although the average wider points score remains lower.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Adequate and needs improvement

Most pupils feel safe in school. Many believe the school deals well with any incidents of bullying and are aware of who to talk to if they are upset or worried. A majority of pupils participate in sports and physical activity, and have a strong understanding of how to keep healthy and safe.

Many pupils behave well and treat others with respect and courtesy in lessons and around the school. Most sixth form pupils are good role models, for example as peer mentors and by supporting the reading of younger pupils. Outside of the sixth form though, very few pupils demonstrate leadership skills.

The majority of pupils work productively in small groups, for example when discussing organised crime and government corruption in prohibition era United States of America. A few pupils develop their independent learning skills well, for example, when acquiring an appreciation of Pythagoras' theorem. However, a minority of pupils are too reliant upon the teacher and lack the resilience needed to work well independently.

In those lessons where teaching is effective, pupils settle quickly, stay on task and are eager to learn. Where teaching is less effective, a few pupils do not show enough respect or consideration for each other and lapse too easily into off-task talk and behaviour. This disrupts their learning and that of other pupils around them.

Occasionally, pupils show real enthusiasm for their learning, when, for example, designing and making 2D and 3D shapes, discussing their empathy, sympathy, or antipathy towards characters in 'A Christmas Carol' and developing their netball skills. However, overall, few pupils demonstrate this enthusiasm for and curiosity in their learning, or pose questions to extend their knowledge and understanding. A minority of pupils of all abilities have missing or incomplete work in their books.

Attendance has declined during the last two years and is now well below expectation. In addition, persistent absence has increased and is now high.

Teaching and learning experiences: Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement

Positive working relationships between teachers and pupils are a feature of most lessons. Many teachers have sound subject knowledge and structure their lessons suitably. These teachers establish helpful classroom routines and manage behaviour effectively.

In a majority of lessons, teachers use assessment information suitably to plan appropriate activities and provide helpful resources. They provide clear explanations and objectives, and offer useful support, including verbal feedback, to pupils. In these lessons, teachers develop pupils' subject-specific skills well and pupils make secure progress as a result.

In a majority of lessons, occasionally those with other significant strengths, teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are not always sufficiently high. In these lessons, teachers do not plan activities that challenge pupils well enough. As a result, pupils do not fulfil their potential, and this is particularly the case for more able pupils.

In a minority of lessons, the pace of learning is too slow and pupils are not given enough opportunities to learn for themselves. In these lessons, teachers do not plan well enough to meet the needs of pupils of all abilities. They take too much time explaining tasks and do too much for the pupils. In addition, pupils spend too long on low-level tasks such as copying or completing simple worksheets. As a result, pupils in these lessons do not make sufficient progress.

A few teachers use questioning skilfully to probe pupils' understanding and knowledge. These teachers encourage pupils to expand on and justify their answers in order to deepen their learning. The majority of teachers question pupils effectively to gauge their recall, but, in general, teachers' questioning is not sufficiently probing

or challenging. As a result, teachers do not determine the extent of pupils' progress or understanding well enough and often move on either too quickly or too slowly. In many cases, teachers ask too many simple or closed questions and do not give pupils enough time to respond to the few, more challenging questions they ask.

Across the school, the quality and impact of teachers' written feedback to pupils are too variable. In a minority of cases, teachers provide specific and helpful feedback that enables pupils to learn from their mistakes and make suitable progress. However, the majority of written comments are not sufficiently precise or are related to effort rather than the quality of the work. Consequently, pupils do not have a secure enough understanding of what they need to do in order to improve. Teachers' expectations of pupils' responses to feedback are also too variable. In a few cases, pupils are expected to spend time on specific actions identified by the teacher and they improve their work well as a result. However, in a majority of cases, pupils' responses are either superficial or they do not respond at all.

The school works well with the local college and other schools to provide a broad range of options in the sixth form, including a few vocational courses. It provides an appropriate curriculum at key stage 3, though arrangements to plan the curriculum alongside partner primary schools are underdeveloped. The school has made appropriate adaptations to the timetables of a few less able pupils and those experiencing difficulties in order to support their learning and wellbeing. However, the key stage 4 curriculum does not meet the needs of all pupils well enough. There is a narrow range of options available to pupils and the combination of subjects available in each option column is restricting. This is a significant shortcoming.

The school provides a wide range of valuable extra-curricular activities that enrich pupils' learning experiences suitably. The provision for sport, music and drama is particularly strong and includes opportunities such as musical productions, the school orchestra and a variety of sports teams.

Overall, provision to support and challenge more able pupils, particularly in lessons, is limited and does not enable them to make sufficient progress. The school offers a very few beneficial extra-curricular opportunities to support more able pupils in the sixth form. These include a helpful support programme for pupils intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge universities.

The school provides a few helpful opportunities to improve pupils' skills. 'Skills Days' for example, have had a positive impact on pupils' standards in the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification at key stages 4 and 5. However, there is a lack of strategic leadership and overview of this aspect of the school's work. The school does not have a coherent and co-ordinated approach to develop pupils' skills progressively across the curriculum. Many teachers provide regular opportunities for pupils to use their skills, but they do not support them well enough to develop these skills. For example, across a range of subjects, pupils have opportunities to write letters but they are not guided sufficiently well to apply the conventions of letter writing or to take responsibility for improving their technical accuracy. Although there is suitable intervention to support pupils with weak literacy skills, currently there is no similar provision for those who require support with their numeracy skills. Provision for the development of pupils' ICT skills is very limited.

The school provides suitable opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding of Welsh culture, such as the school Eisteddfod. However, pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to practise their Welsh language skills outside of Welsh lessons. A very few pupils in key stage 4 do not have appropriate provision for Welsh.

Care, support and guidance: Adequate and needs improvement

Brecon High School has an inclusive and caring ethos. The school works effectively with external providers to offer a comprehensive personal and social education programme that supports pupils' personal development well. This programme offers a diverse range of topics through which pupils develop their social, moral, spiritual and cultural understanding, such as when considering the dangers of botox and tanning injections, and how to become 'dementia friendly'. Pupils are encouraged to make healthy eating choices and are informed clearly about healthy lifestyles and the safe use of social media. The school provides an appropriate range of opportunities for pupils to participate in extra-curricular sporting activities, such as boxing, squash, and 'rugby rounders'.

Positive attitudes towards equality and diversity are developed well by the school. Pupils with English as an additional language benefit from the support of a specialist teacher along with teaching assistants and make strong progress as a result. In addition, the long established link with the local Gurkha community enables pupils to understand and value the traditions and celebrations of these families. Service children and military families benefit from the helpful work of the forces families support officer, who enables smooth transitions when pupils join and move on from the school, as well as supporting these pupils' wellbeing generally.

The 'wellbeing centre' provides beneficial and timely support for those pupils who face barriers to their learning. The centre facilitates access to a broad range of specialist provision to meet individual pupils' needs as they arise. For example, a few pupils participate in specific programmes to support their wider development. This includes targeted pupils joining the Welsh Fire and Rescue Service 'Phoenix project'. They participate in activities such as hose running and search and rescue techniques to develop their personal attributes, teamwork skills and their ability to deal with demanding tasks.

The school tracks suitably the progress of pupils with additional learning needs, including those identified through strong links with local primary schools. A comprehensive range of beneficial interventions is in place to support these pupils. However, teachers across the school do not use this information well enough, nor does the school evaluate the quality of provision for these pupils robustly enough. As a result, these pupils do not make sufficient progress. In addition, the school's provision to enrich and extend the learning experiences of more able pupils is underdeveloped. Consequently, they do not make the progress expected either. A very few pupils have benefited from participation in projects with other young people in the area, for example, to consider approaches to sustainable energy management in the Severn Wye. However, overall, there are too few opportunities for pupils to develop their leadership skills.

There are suitable opportunities for pupils to express their views about the school's work though many feel they are not listened to. In addition, pupils do not feel supported well enough when making their option choices for key stage 4.

The school does not evaluate well enough the systems in place to monitor and improve pupils' performance and attendance. This has impacted negatively on the performance of groups of pupils and pupils' attendance.

Safeguarding procedures generally meet requirements and there are no significant areas for concern. However, a health and safety issue was raised with the school.

Leadership and management: Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement

The school has recently restructured the senior leadership team and reviewed their responsibilities. However, the inequitable allocation of responsibilities, respective teaching commitments and operational duties limit the capacity of the senior team to prioritise strategic issues. This has contributed to insufficient and un-sustained improvement in key areas of the school's work, including the quality of teaching, attendance and the standards pupils achieve. In addition, the senior leadership team has not secured sufficient progress in the school's delivery of national priorities, including literacy, numeracy and the Welsh language.

The headteacher and the senior leadership have worked together to develop a clear vision for the school. This vision aims appropriately to 'prepare students for their future by developing strong values, and maximising personal potential in a safe and caring learning environment'. The vision is shared suitably with pupils, staff and parents.

The middle leadership structure has recently been reviewed appropriately in response to the school's financial difficulties. However, this restructuring is on-going and will not be implemented until 2019. The current middle leaders have a secure understanding of their subject responsibilities. However, their understanding of how they contribute to whole-school improvements is less secure, particularly regarding improving the quality of teaching. Senior leaders have clarified the arrangements for holding middle leaders to account. These include an appropriate calendar of meetings and clear line management arrangements. Although these meetings have a common agenda, they concentrate too much on processes and procedures and not enough on the impact of these actions on the quality of teaching and the standards pupils achieve.

Governors have a good understanding of the school's staffing and financial issues. However, their understanding of the quality of teaching and learning, and of pupil outcomes is not as secure. For example, their understanding of the core data sets is not detailed enough to enable them to challenge the school on its progress in key areas. Governors are improving their understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in individual departments through their governor link activities. Although governors are very supportive of the school, they have not provided a robust enough challenge to the senior leadership team in key areas, including raising standards and dealing with the substantial budget deficit.

The school has a useful range of systems and processes to collect first-hand evidence of teaching and learning. These, together with information gathered from surveys of pupils, staff and parents, provide the school with a basic overview of its strengths and weaknesses. Many teachers undertake work scrutiny and lesson observations. This gives them a useful insight into the teaching approaches used by their peers, and a valuable understanding of the work of pupils across the curriculum. However, the outcomes of lesson observations, learning walks and work scrutiny do not identify clearly enough good features and shortcomings in teaching and learning. Furthermore, leaders do not consider well enough the impact upon learning when evaluating the quality of teaching and assessment in lessons, experiences in tutorial time or the quality of provision for developing pupils' skills across the curriculum.

Overall, the school has an over-generous view of standards, provision and leadership. Areas for development arising from self-evaluation are not identified specifically or precisely enough to form the basis of effective school improvement planning, at departmental and whole-school level. Recently, the school has taken steps to review and refine quality assurance processes, although progress in improving important areas of the school's work has been too slow.

The school has appropriate arrangements to manage the performance of staff. Objectives are generally suitable and actions include beneficial opportunities for professional learning. However, there is too little focus on the intended impact on pupil outcomes through specific and measurable success criteria.

There are suitable opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning. Recent whole-school training has focused on appropriate areas, such as developing teachers' skills and understanding of the Digital Competence Framework. However, there is no overarching strategy for professional learning that is linked to the most important areas for development in the school. There are too few opportunities for leaders at all levels to develop their leadership skills.

The school has accumulated a large budget deficit. Although there is an agreed recovery plan with the local authority, senior leaders have not been able to set balanced in-year budgets nor are they able to plan to reduce the deficit over the next five years. The school has an appropriate number of qualified teachers to staff the current, reduced curriculum, although a significant number of teachers teach two or more subjects. Arrangements to support teachers teaching outside their areas of specialism are not robust enough and this often impacts negatively upon pupils' learning.

The school uses grant funding, including the Pupil Development Grant, suitably to meet the needs of a range of pupils. This includes breakfast clubs and a number of appropriate interventions to help pupils to improve their literacy skills. These activities have been beneficial in improving pupils' wellbeing and in supporting their participation in extra-curricular activities.

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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