



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

Report following monitoring

Level of follow-up: Significant improvement

**Abertillery Learning Community
Alma Street
Abertillery
Blaenau Gwent
NP13 1YL**

Date of visit: February 2022

by

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

Outcome of visit

Abertillery Learning Community is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the most recent core inspection.

As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is removing the school from the list of schools requiring significant improvement.

Progress since the last inspection

R1. Improve standards, in particular outcomes at the end of key stage 4

Since the core inspection, the school has developed and implemented successful strategies to raise pupils' standards. During the Covid-19 pandemic, staff ensured that pupils had access to suitable provision to continue with their learning. This has contributed towards maintaining pupils' literacy and numeracy skills as well as enhancing their information communication and technology (ICT) skills. As a result, standards of pupils' work seen in lessons and books during this visit are better than at the time of the core inspection, particularly in the secondary phase.

Many pupils make sound progress in lessons and over time. They recall previous information well, for example by applying their understanding of the character of Eric in 'An Inspector Calls' to subsequent work on the play. Most pupils listen attentively to the teacher and their peers and respond eagerly to questions. Many respond to the teacher's questions accurately, using a range of appropriate vocabulary. A few pupils make strong progress in lessons. These pupils develop their verbal responses well, especially when encouraged by teachers' questions

Many pupils take pride in the presentation of their work. A majority extract relevant information from texts and summarise their findings well. In a few lessons, pupils simply copy the text into their written responses without exploring its meaning. Most pupils write at length with an appropriate sense of audience across many subjects. Many reflect carefully on their writing and redraft and refine their work well to make improvements. More able pupils write at length, express themselves fluently and use a wide range of vocabulary. A majority of pupils make basic errors in their spelling and a few struggle to express their ideas suitably in their writing.

The majority of pupils apply their numeracy skills in subjects other than mathematics appropriately. For example, they calculate energy released from chemical reactions accurately in science. Pupils draw appropriate graphs to display data but, in a few cases, do not take enough care in labelling and plotting. In addition, they do not choose the appropriate type of graph to display data for different purposes. Pupils' use of ICT in subjects across the curriculum has developed well and they are now suitably confident in, for example, constructing spreadsheets and producing animations.

R2. Improve standards of behaviour in the secondary phase

Since the core inspection, standards of behaviour have improved considerably in the secondary phase. Most pupils behave well in lessons, when moving around the school and during lunch and break times. In lessons, they adopt positive attitudes to learning and engage well in their work. They are respectful to each other and to adults in the school.

The 'ready to learn' behaviour policy is well established and understood clearly by nearly all staff and pupils. It is used consistently in most faculties and generally applied consistently by teachers. The policy was recently relaunched following pupils' return to school after a prolonged period at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has supported the improvements in behaviour across the school well and reduced disruption of pupils' learning by others.

The use of an internal exclusion area, the 'ready to learn' room, is effective in dealing with more challenging behaviour. The staff in this area ensure pupils are engaged in meaningful activities during their withdrawal from usual lessons. Since the core inspection, the overall number of fixed term exclusions has reduced considerably and the number of pupils that attend the 'ready to learn' room for poor behaviour has also declined.

The school has recently reviewed its pastoral staff structure to improve efficiency and accountability. Pastoral leaders record and monitor pupils' behaviour closely. They identify issues of concern regarding behaviour and implement suitable support strategies to address these concerns. They communicate their actions and strategies clearly with other staff.

R3. Improve the quality of teaching

Since the core inspection, the school has established a suitable range of helpful processes and systems to support the development of teaching. As a result, teaching in the secondary phase has improved overall, and has had a positive impact on pupils' progress, behaviour and attitudes to learning.

The school now monitors teaching rigorously. There is a structured approach to the quality assurance of teaching which includes lesson observations and work scrutiny. This is helping the school to identify strengths and areas for improvement more precisely. However, in a few areas, the evaluation of teaching is too positive, and this means that actions to improve teaching are not specific enough.

Senior leaders provide valuable support for teachers who need to improve. This includes careful action planning and supportive coaching. The school is also beginning to share good practice in teaching and learning across subjects and phases. As a result, teachers demonstrate a willingness to explore new ideas and this is contributing to the development of a learning culture in the school.

Most teachers establish and maintain a productive learning environment in their classes. They start their lessons purposefully, help pupils settle to their work swiftly and manage behaviour positively. Overall, teachers, have much higher expectations of pupils than at the time of the core inspection. They plan more challenging work

and use a wider range of teaching approaches to maintain pupils' interest and concentration. However, in a minority of subjects, teachers use worksheets too frequently which restricts how well pupils can develop their ideas and extend their writing.

In the majority of lessons, teachers plan activities that build pupils' learning sequentially and effectively. The school has focused on developing pupils' independent learning skills, and overall, this has had a positive impact, particularly on the quality of pupils' extended writing. However, in a few instances teachers place too much emphasis on developing independence by allowing pupils to continue working without appropriate input or monitoring. This leaves pupils unable to improve their skills, knowledge and understanding sufficiently.

A majority of teachers use questioning suitably to help pupils recall previous learning and to check their understanding. They prompt pupils to improve their answers, but do not promote extended verbal responses, or encourage discussion well enough. A minority of teachers provide helpful written comments that help pupils to improve. In a few subjects, for example in English, pupils are encouraged to reflect on their work and then make improvements. This has had a positive impact on their writing. Overall, improvements to feedback to pupils are at an early stage of development.

R4. Improve planning for progression of skills, including the Welsh language, and the breadth of the secondary phase curriculum

Since the core inspection, the school has taken effective steps to plan for skills progression across the curriculum. The co-ordinators, who work across phases, have implemented a strategic plan and introduced beneficial opportunities to develop pupils' skills. They have provided useful professional learning and support for staff to strengthen the provision for skills. Through appropriate monitoring and evaluation, they measure the impact of planned rich skills tasks.

The school focuses on providing suitable opportunities for pupils to develop their writing, and this is having a positive impact on the standards of pupils' written work. However, teachers' assessment of pupils' skills does not always help pupils to improve.

The school has a suitable programme to develop pupils' reading skills in key stage 3 and provides appropriate support for basic reading and numeracy skills across the whole school. These programmes have been evaluated carefully and are having a beneficial impact on many of the pupils who access this support.

Since the core inspection, the school has continued to increase the expectation of pupils' progress in learning Welsh. Nearly all pupils in key stage 4 follow the GCSE full course in Welsh. Many teachers use everyday Welsh in their lessons, and this means that pupils hear Welsh frequently. However, pupils are not given sufficient opportunities to develop their spoken Welsh within and outside of Welsh lessons.

The school offers a suitably broad curriculum for key stage 4 pupils. Pupils now benefit from vocational courses at levels 1 and 2 and more choices that suit their needs. This has contributed to pupils being more engaged and interested in

their learning than at the time of the core inspection. For pupils with specific needs, the school has begun to implement a curriculum that is tailored suitably .

R5. Improve the quality and impact of leadership at all levels, including in self-evaluation and planning for improvement

Abertillery Learning Community now has stability in leadership that serves the school well. The headteacher provides strong leadership across the school and is committed to securing high quality teaching and provision for all pupils. With the full support of the senior leadership team, she has established useful cross-phase working and ensured that this is central to effective strategic planning across the school. As a team, they have led the school well through the considerable challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, while at the same time focusing firmly on school improvement and addressing the recommendations from the core inspection.

Staff roles and responsibilities are clear and concise and as a result, staff have a good understanding of what is expected of them and what they can expect from leaders. This has helped to improve the morale of staff, create a sense of teamwork across the school and raise expectations around what pupils can achieve.

Leaders have strengthened arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning across the school. All leaders have received appropriate professional learning to help them carry out their responsibilities. This has been particularly helpful to middle leaders in developing their confidence and leadership skills. They are involved in a suitable range of evaluation activities, including a robust and consistent process of lesson observations. This process has been successful in raising the expectations of staff and promoting worthwhile professional reflection and dialogue. Leaders' feedback to teachers highlights their strengths and areas for improvement and encourages personal reflection. Leaders tailor professional learning specifically to suit the needs of individual teachers and support staff. They follow up on any targets for improvement routinely. Whilst there are notable improvements in the way leaders evaluate the work of the school, there remains inconsistency amongst middle leaders. This means not all have sufficiently high expectations of staff and pupils.

Leaders and teachers have strengthened their use of pupil voice across the school to support improvement. Pupils of all ages elect a representative for the school council. Class ambassadors provide valuable feedback on issues taken forward to the whole school council meetings. Their input has led to notable changes such as changing provision in the school canteen and the implementation of gender neutral changing rooms and improving transition arrangements for Year 6 pupils. This gives pupils a sense of ownership of important aspects of the life and work of the school.

Governors have a secure understanding of their roles and responsibilities. They receive regular reports from leaders about the school's progress against the core inspection recommendations. In addition, they are involved in gathering first-hand evidence, such as when joining school leaders on learning walks and talking to pupils about their learning. Governors use their skills effectively to provide a suitable level of challenge to school leaders.

R6. Provide robust financial management to address the deficit budget

The school has implemented an agreed recovery plan and addressed the deficit budget appropriately. It is forecast that the school will hold a healthy surplus by the end of the current financial year. Careful financial management by the business team, headteacher and governors and benefits from the redistribution of the individual schools budget has decreased the budget deficiency year on year. They consider carefully the impact of any planned spending in order to reduce unnecessary costs. A strategic budget plan aligns closely with a workforce plan to ensure that spending is affordable and contributes towards meeting the schools' priorities. Substantial restructuring of staffing and a review of service level agreements have contributed to making significant and savings.

The school has planned appropriately this financial year for its use of grant funding, including the pupil development grant. The school's use of significant grant funding, including the pupil development grant, is beginning to impact positively on pupils' outcomes and better engagement by pupils eligible for free school meals.

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