



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

A report on
Ysgol Gynradd Blaenau

**Blaenau
Ammanford
Carmarthen
Carmarthenshire
SA18 3BQ**

Date of inspection: January 2024

by

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

This report is also available in Welsh

About Ysgol Gynradd Blaenau

Name of provider	Ysgol Gynradd Blaenau
Local authority	Carmarthenshire County Council
Language of the provider	Welsh
Type of school	Primary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	38
Pupils of statutory school age	34
Number in nursery classes (if applicable)	1
Percentage of statutory school age pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average <i>(The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in the primary sector is 23.7%)</i>	23.0%
Percentage of statutory school age pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) <i>(The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in the primary sector is 13.2%)</i>	3%
Percentage of statutory school age pupils who speak Welsh at home	23.3%
Percentage of statutory school age pupils with English as an additional language	3%
Date of headteacher appointment	26/02/2024
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	04/01/2016
Start date of inspection	29/01/2024

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different from those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website:
mylocalschool.gov.wales

- a. The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

Overview

The school provides robust care, support and guidance for its pupils, which includes a team of staff who know them very well. This creates a productive learning environment which, in turn, fosters positive attitudes to learning in most pupils. Through this and the valuable teaching and learning experiences provided by teachers, many pupils make sound progress from their starting points.

Teachers plan a curriculum and activities that engage and hold pupils' interest well. This contributes well towards improving their skills in general, for example their literacy and digital skills. Through leaders' thorough knowledge of the school's areas for improvement, they are aware of the need to strengthen pupils' oral skills and the opportunities available to them to apply their numeracy skills. Overall, pupils develop their independent learning skills suitably. Although there are plans in place to improve these areas for improvement, they have not yet had a full effect.

Since she began in the role recently, the acting headteacher's work has provided stability to the school's leadership following challenging periods over a number of years. She is supported well by hard-working governors and staff who have sound knowledge of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Since she took up the role around a year ago, the acting headteacher has set aims, strategic objectives and appropriate policies that focus on meeting the needs of all pupils. As a result, pupils' progress, standards and well-being, along with the quality of teaching, have begun to improve gradually over that period.

Despite the strengths in leadership, there is a significant deficit in the school's financial budget over a number of years. Governors have not addressed this deficit effectively enough.

Recommendations

- R1 Agree and implement a recovery plan to respond purposefully to the deficit in the school's financial budget
- R2 Expand opportunities for pupils to apply their numeracy skills across the curriculum
- R3 Strengthen pupils' oracy skills
- R4 Improve provision to support pupils to develop their independent learning skills

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Main findings

Learning

Many pupils start school with relatively low communication, number and personal and social skills. During their time at the school, many pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), make suitable progress in their skills in comparison with their starting points.

Across the school, pupils' literacy skills develop appropriately. Most of the youngest pupils follow simple instructions and listen attentively to staff presentations. Their oral skills develop gradually from their starting points, with a majority becoming confident speakers in both languages by the end of their time at the school. Across the school, most pupils work and solve problems together, for example when the youngest pupils build a rocket outdoors. However, a few pupils are shy when elaborating on their conversations with their peers or when responding in a discussion with adults. Additionally, a minority of pupils often turn to English in class activities or during break times, rather than continuing to discuss and talk in Welsh.

Many pupils' reading skills develop soundly as they move through the school. The youngest pupils begin to recognise familiar letters and words and pronounce them correctly when reading texts that are in line with their stage of development. A majority of the oldest pupils show enjoyment when reading fictional books and some discuss their favourite authors well. Many recognise obvious features in their reading books, such as when the characters are speaking, and a few more confident readers adapt their tone of voice to imitate characters effectively. Pupils' research skills when reading information in factual texts or online develop well. For example, a majority of pupils at the top of the school skim and scan skilfully when gathering relevant information about their theme work.

The youngest pupils' make relevant marks by using a variety of media and begin to form letters and simple words. By the end of Year 2, many write descriptive and interesting pieces with increasing accuracy, for example when describing the moon as part of their work on the universe. Across the school, many pupils punctuate and structure their work sensibly. The oldest pupils develop their skills firmly and begin to vary their sentences and use a range of suitable vocabulary when writing. At the top of the school, many write to an appropriate standard in Welsh and English in a range of forms. They use the short forms of the verb confidently and meaningfully, placing their text in an appropriate time order. Pupils apply their literacy skills in a relevant range of opportunities across the curriculum.

Most pupils' mathematics skills develop appropriately. Many of the youngest pupils place numbers up to 20 in order confidently in the learning and play areas. By Year

2, most solve simple mathematical problems correctly by using various methods fairly competently. By the time pupils reach the top of the school, most have an understanding of place value, which enables them to calculate confidently. They understand most relevant mathematical concepts appropriately. When they are given an opportunity to do so, they use their mathematical understanding appropriately in other areas of the curriculum, particularly in science activities. For example, they draw graphs skilfully when measuring the Newton force of objects. However, overall, pupils do not apply their numeracy skills in other areas of the curriculum effectively and consistently enough.

Many pupils' digital skills develop effectively across the school. Many of the youngest pupils control a programmable robot effectively when giving it instructions to move it from one planet to another. Many use devices maturely for different purposes, for example to create a poster to advertise missing aliens. Many of the oldest pupils use a range of programs confidently, for example when creating tables and graphs to compare the weight of different food. At the top of the school, many use a database successfully to gather and collate information, for example when interrogating for facts about the planets.

Most pupils develop their creative skills regularly across the school. The youngest pupils experiment well when mixing white and black paint when trying to create a picture of the moon with impressive colour scales. The oldest pupils consider colour and tone carefully with pencil and paint when emulating the style of a famous artist, by creating patterned circles when depicting the planets. Pupils enjoy taking part in folk dancing sessions, which give them a taste of Welsh traditions. Pupils have experienced success at Urdd eisteddfodau.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Most pupils have positive attitudes to learning and behave politely at school. They have a clear understanding of what is acceptable and, as they mature, they are increasingly aware of other people's feelings, opinions and beliefs. Most understand the concept of fair play, respect the school rules and appreciate why they have been created. They are caring towards each other, take turns sensibly and help each other thoughtfully, for example when playing games and socialising during break time. They show pride in their school and happily sing the unique school anthem they have composed, *'Ysgol Blaenau yn ein calonnau ni; teulu Ysgol Blaenau ydyn ni!'*

In lessons and when activities allow, many pupils work together effectively in groups and pairs and concentrate for appropriate periods. Overall, a majority of pupils across the school demonstrate suitable perseverance and resilience when learning. Most of the time, they are keen to explore new things and a majority ask and answer questions to deepen their understanding.

Through appropriate opportunities for pupils to represent their peers, they are beginning to influence the school's life and work and undertake additional responsibilities, for example when making decisions to provide free fruit to their peers. This contributes well to their understanding of a healthy lifestyle.

Pupils develop an elementary understanding of their strengths and what they need to do to improve their learning. For example, at the top of the school, many understand

and appreciate success criteria as a guide to their learning and begin to consider them when measuring their achievement. There are a few opportunities available for pupils to influence how and what they learn. However, overall, a majority of pupils do not develop their independent learning skills robustly enough.

Nearly all pupils state that they feel safe at school. They know whom to approach if they need support and are confident that staff will listen and deal appropriately with any concerns they may have. Most understand how to stay safe online; for example, they know that they should not share their personal details with others. Many understand the importance of taking care of their own well-being, including the importance of regular exercise for keeping fit.

Most pupils enjoy attending school and attendance rates are improving slowly.

Teaching and learning experiences

The school engages successfully with its stakeholders to create a vision for its curriculum, namely 'Lighting the pathway to the future'. Teachers develop a broad curriculum with the aim of providing valuable experiences for pupils. For example, teachers plan a theme based on the universe, which captures the imagination of all pupils successfully.

On the whole, pupils play an active role in the content of the themes they learn. Teachers expand learning opportunities well by using visits to local area and visitors to the school to enrich teaching. For example, pupils visit a local wildlife site to learn about the food of birds of prey by analysing the content of a pellet from a bird's stomach. This ensures that all pupils are given an opportunity to experience rich first-hand activities that intensify their learning successfully.

The school develops an effective partnership with parents and local organisations. For example, pupils have worked with members of the local Community Council to develop a wild area in front of the school. Through this, pupils develop their understanding of being active citizens appropriately and deepen their appreciation of the school and its community.

Teachers plan suitably to develop pupils' skills. They set clear expectations and provide pupils with firm guidance to develop their skills progressively. Overall, learning activities are valuable in supporting pupils to apply a majority of skills across the areas of learning. For example, within their work to develop their digital skills, pupils create attractive presentations about the planets. However, although there are good opportunities for pupils to practise and apply their numeracy skills in science lessons, there are very few opportunities in other areas across the curriculum.

All of the school's staff know the pupils well and care for them skilfully. Teachers have a sound awareness of pupils' needs, which includes appreciating their interests to stimulate and support them to concentrate on learning activities. Activities are usually tailored subtly to respond to their needs. Staff promote pupils' good behaviour carefully and thoughtfully, which helps them to persevere sensibly. However, overall, staff have a tendency to guide learning, which limits pupils' ability to develop their independent learning skills.

Teachers encourage pupils to speak and respond in Welsh in the classroom and other areas around the school which, in turn, has a positive influence on their oracy skills. From an early age, they are immersed in the language skilfully and in a supportive manner. The use of a daily language carousel is an effective means of reinforcing the oldest pupils' spoken Welsh skills. However, teachers are aware of the need to continue to promote pupils' use of the Welsh language further and they practise sentence patterns aloud with pupils regularly. Beneficial activities are provided for pupils to discuss in pairs and groups, several of which encourage pupils to expand their knowledge of different themes. Teachers question pupils masterfully and support them to extend their answers and develop their thinking skills further, for example. However, in Welsh and English, opportunities to build the confidence of a minority of pupils to discuss, reason and explain their views and opinions by using increasingly mature language are limited.

Teachers explain clearly what they would like pupils to understand and set clear goals for activities, along with providing relevant criteria so that pupils know what they need to complete successfully. Activities have a purposeful pace and support pupils to enjoy their learning and make progress in their skills. On the while, teachers challenge pupils to achieve to the best of their ability.

During activities, teachers, and usually assistants, provide pupils with useful oral feedback and support to help them to improve their work further and deepen their understanding. Teachers also provide written comments on pupils' work so that they have a better understanding of their achievement but also so that they can improve their work further. Occasionally, teachers provide enough time for them to redraft their work. Recently, pupils have been given a few opportunities to consider their own progress and evaluate the work of their peers, but the effect of this on improving pupils' skills is in its early days.

Care, support and guidance

The school has a familial and homely ethos which creates a supportive learning environment and a culture in which everyone cares tenderly for each other.

The school provides pupils with robust care, support and guidance. There are valuable arrangements for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, such as provision for them to understand and appreciate religious, moral and global issues. Pupils are given valuable opportunities to develop their personal skills, for example when taking part in creative arts activities.

The school council is beginning to provide opportunities for pupils to become active citizens and to influence the school's life and work, such as securing additional resources for break time.

Leaders give regular consideration to the extent to which provision ensures that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are given opportunities to take advantage of all activities and learning experiences. Valuable ideas are implemented within the school, for example the '*pethau plant: pethau ni*' initiative, which provides a clothes and shoes exchange for families. The school provides valuable opportunities for pupils to take part in performances and events, individually and in groups, to nurture

their self-confidence and expressive talents. As a result, the school is a central part of the community and is valued greatly by pupils, parents and local residents.

The support provided for pupils with ALN is robust, which includes a close and close-knit link with parents. The school works productively with external agencies to use resources to support pupils and their families and to provide particular expertise, as necessary. The additional learning needs co-ordinator uses useful assessments to create a profile of pupils' specific needs, together with a sensible support plan to support pupils to improve their well-being and make progress in their skills. Staff know and work with each other well to share information and support the specific needs of these pupils and those who are eligible for free school meals. Overall, these procedures and provision are suitable in assessing and supporting pupils to improve in line with their ability and individual personal targets. Staff also support pupils to make progress by providing specific programmes, for example to improve their reading skills.

The school is active in promoting pupils' attendance, which includes communicating with parents, and outlining the educational and other value of their child's good attendance. Pupils' attendance rates are improving slowly; however, they still do not compare as well as the pre-pandemic attendance rates. Leaders are aware of the need to improve attendance further and have self-evaluated their arrangements. By doing so, they have set a priority to improve attendance in their current school improvement plan.

Methods for promoting pupils' positive attitudes to learning and promote and support their behaviour are sound. The school has a robust culture of safeguarding and safeguarding arrangements, which include the training and awareness of staff of the steps that should be taken in different situations.

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher has a sound vision based on care and respect and she conveys this vision clearly. She is supported by a small team of staff who share the vision successfully. Since taking on the roll around a year ago, the acting headteacher has set appropriate aims, strategic objectives, plans and policies which focus on meeting all pupils' needs. As a result, pupils' well-being, progress and standards, along with the quality of teaching, have improved gradually over that period.

The acting headteacher sets high expectations for herself, staff and pupils. This contributes firmly to developing an effective and supportive team of teachers and assistants, including promoting their well-being. They embrace professional values and behaviour that contribute effectively to improving the school and ensure that regular co-operation is an integral part of the school's arrangements.

There are valuable opportunities for staff at all levels to develop professionally. Professional learning links clearly with self-evaluation findings and improvement priorities, such as purposeful training on the curriculum and pedagogical principles. The school has an active relationship with the local secondary school, which includes opportunities to co-ordinate relevant training. Performance management procedures promote staff's professional learning suitably and are beginning to have a positive

effect on standards and provision. Leaders manage staff performance regularly to improve their practice and address issues relating to underperformance firmly and directly, where necessary. Relevant grants, including the pupil development grant, are used appropriately, for example to provide training for an assistant to support vulnerable pupils.

On the whole, inspectors' findings during the inspection align fairly closely with what the school's leaders themselves have already identified as areas for improvement. From the outset, the acting headteacher has put sound self-improvement strategies in place to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the school quickly and thoroughly. She collects and analyses first-hand evidence of pupils' progress and standards, along with provision, for example by observing learning activities and tracking pupils' progress over time. The headteacher consults fully with staff, governors, parents and pupils. The findings of the self-evaluation process, together with other relevant information, are used to formulate relevant priorities and actions for improvement. Leaders plan purposefully to meet local and national priorities, for example in introducing the principles of Curriculum for Wales and ALN provision.

The school's leaders foster a productive and highly effective relationship with parents. Regular meetings are held to help them with how to support their children with their learning; for example, pupils' achievements were celebrated successfully by holding 'Bwrlwm Blaenau' recently. Leaders ensure that they have effective communication arrangements with parents so that they can raise any issues that may affect pupils' learning and well-being. For example, annual questionnaires are sent to parents to seek their views on the school's strengths and issues that concern them.

On the whole, governors understand and fulfil their roles and responsibilities conscientiously and contribute purposefully to the evaluation of the school's standards and provision. They ensure that the food and drink that is provided by the school comply with legislation, for example that the water fountain is accessible to pupils and healthy fruit is available to them free of charge. With the headteacher, they discuss and respond appropriately to the school's improvement activities, for example by holding learning walks to listen to pupils reading. Governors contribute purposefully to setting the school's strategic priorities and have a relevant understanding of strengths and areas for improvement. They are supportive of the school's work and know the community it serves well. Governors provide the school with an appropriate balance of support and challenge and are beginning to hold the school to account.

However, over time, the governing body has not addressed the significant deficit in the school financial budget effectively enough. This deficit has continued to increase over the past 5 years. Ysgol Blaenau is among the lowest of Carmarthenshire local authority's schools in terms of its level of reserves carried forward. Although the authority has arrangements to accept plans from school to recover financial deficits, in this case there is no plan for responding to the deficit. As a result, this does not support the school to address the improvement priorities, for example to support teaching and learning, effectively enough over time.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body/members of the management committee through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors, senior, middle leaders, and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee
- visit a broad sample of lessons, including learning support groups and the specialist resource base (where appropriate), and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups (where appropriate) and in outdoor areas
- visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning (where appropriate)
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (<http://www.estyn.gov.wales>)

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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This document has been translated by Trosol (Welsh to English).