



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

A report on

West Monmouth Comprehensive School

**Blaendare Road
Pontypool
Torfaen
NP4 5YG**

Date of inspection: March 2024

by

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

About West Monmouth Comprehensive School

Name of provider	West Monmouth Comprehensive School
Local authority	Torfaen County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	1183
Pupils of statutory school age	1183
Number in sixth form	
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in Secondary is 21.2%)	28.0%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Secondary is 14.8%)	16.8%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	1.6%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	1.4%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/01/2020
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	07/03/2016
Start date of inspection	04/03/2024

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

Staff and governors at West Monmouth School are committed to helping pupils to thrive in a supportive environment. They use a range of strategies to raise pupils' aspirations and provide them with beneficial individual support where needed. Most pupils feel safe in school. They value the opportunities they have to participate in extra-curricular activities, develop their leadership skills and play an active role in school life.

Nearly all pupils behave maturely around the school and show respect to their teachers and their peers. In the many lessons where teachers plan suitably demanding tasks, pupils engage well in their learning and make sound progress. A minority of pupils find it hard to work independently and do not always make the progress that they could. This is often because teaching does not challenge them sufficiently.

Leaders have secured a number of improvements to the school's work. They have been successful in promoting a culture of safeguarding, have improved rates of attendance well and use a range of beneficial strategies to reduce the impact of poverty on pupil outcomes. They have developed a curriculum which meets the needs of nearly all pupils effectively and are making sound progress in developing their Curriculum for Wales. However, the school has not developed a sufficiently effective approach to the progressive development of pupils' skills across the curriculum or ensured that all teaching consistently challenges pupils to achieve as highly as possible. In general, leaders have a sound understanding of the main strengths and areas for development in their areas of responsibility. However, there is too much variation in how rigorously leaders evaluate their provision and how precisely they plan for improvement.

Recommendations

- R1 Ensure that all teaching consistently challenges pupils of all abilities to make progress and develop their independence in learning
- R2 Strengthen provision for the progressive development of pupils' skills across the curriculum
- R3 Ensure that self-evaluation processes are consistently robust and accurate, and that leaders plan for improvement precisely

What happens next

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

Main evaluation

Learning

In lessons, many pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), make sound progress in the development of their knowledge, understanding and skills. A few pupils make strong progress, for example when discussing nuances in language used by Shakespeare in 'As You Like It'. Many recall prior learning appropriately, and a minority, when given the opportunity, apply this well to new contexts. In a minority of cases pupils do not make as much progress as they could. This is often due to a lack of challenge in teaching.

In discussion activities, many pupils are keen to share their ideas and opinions, and do so using a suitable range of vocabulary, including subject-specific terms. A few provide detailed and thoughtful verbal responses. However, too often pupils offer only brief contributions, especially when they are not prompted to develop their answers sufficiently. A minority of pupils' verbal responses are underdeveloped, and they lack confidence in their speaking skills. This makes it difficult for them to express themselves clearly.

Many pupils competently identify and select relevant information from a range of texts. A few use advanced reading skills well. For example, they consider meaning and authorial intent when examining how Dickens presents the character of Scrooge. However, overall, pupils do not use a sufficient range of reading strategies to support their learning.

The majority of pupils write with appropriate clarity and accuracy. When given suitable opportunities, a few write at length well. For example, they produce a balanced argument when considering whether Haig deserves to be called 'the Butcher of the Somme.' A minority of pupils, however, do not proof-read their work often or carefully enough. As a result, they make frequent, basic errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar, and their work lacks control and structure.

In Welsh lessons, many pupils pronounce Welsh words correctly when answering questions and holding basic conversations. They write short pieces in Welsh using basic sentence patterns competently. A few write more extended pieces independently with confidence. However, pupils do not develop their Welsh language skills outside of Welsh lessons well enough.

Many pupils have sound basic number skills. The majority use algebra appropriately to solve equations. More able pupils have a good understanding of reciprocals and surds and use Pythagoras' theorem confidently to solve geometrical problems. A few pupils do not have a secure grasp of basic number facts which limits their ability to solve problems. When given the opportunity, pupils use their numeracy skills appropriately across the curriculum. For example, the majority construct graphs accurately and use them to calculate median and mode or compare population distribution in different countries. Overall, however, pupils do not analyse or interpret graphs consistently well enough because they are not given sufficient opportunity to do so independently.

When given the opportunity, pupils use their digital skills suitably across the curriculum, for example when they use software to design a charity advert. In general, pupils develop their physical skills appropriately, such as when they devise and carry out warm-up exercises in physical education and use a range of tools to construct a sweet dispenser in design technology. They develop their creativity well, for example when carving a face mask from soap based on African or Mexican art.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Nearly all pupils are polite, courteous and welcoming to visitors. Most behave well around the school and in class, and are punctual to lessons. Many listen carefully to their teachers and peers and work well in pairs and groups to support each other's learning. They take pride in the presentation of their work, settle to tasks quickly and show suitable independence and resilience when attempting challenging tasks. The majority participate enthusiastically in class discussion, although a minority remain passive in lessons, rely too much on support from their teachers and find it difficult to work independently.

Pupils are happy and proud to be part of a caring, supportive and inclusive community. Most feel safe in school and know who to turn to if they have a problem. They value the support the school offers through provision such as the 'Hafan' centre. Pupils feel that the anti-bullying and behaviour policies have a positive impact on their well-being, and, in general, feel that the school responds effectively to issues such as bullying, although a few feel that the school does not always deal with incidents quickly or well enough. Pupils value the recently improved rewards system, although some are not fully aware of the range of rewards on offer for positive attitudes and behaviour.

Pupils enjoy the wide range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities that the school offers, such as the school production, sports clubs and opportunities to gain the Duke of Edinburgh Award. Younger pupils develop a range of personal skills by participating in creative, practical and sporting activities through the fortnightly 'West Monmouth Wednesday' programme. Key Stage 4 pupils appreciate the support that teachers provide via lunchtime and after-school revision sessions.

Pupils take on a variety of roles that enhance their personal development and leadership skills, such as prefect, 'bully buddy' and charity ambassador. The School Council is a representative body that has a positive impact on school life, for example through contributing to the development of the anti-bullying policy and improvements to the changing rooms. However, not all pupils are aware of its work.

Between the academic years 2018-2019 and 2022-2023, the school's rate of attendance fell by a similar amount to that seen nationally. Last year it was in line with that of similar schools. The rate of persistent absence is above the national average and the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals is well below the national average. This academic year rates of attendance, including those of pupils eligible for free school meals, have improved well.

Teaching and learning experiences

In many cases, teaching supports pupils well to make at least sound progress in the development of their knowledge, understanding and skills. In a minority of instances, shortcomings in teaching mean that pupils do not make as much progress as they could.

Most teachers build positive working relationships with their classes and establish well-understood routines that help to create a calm, positive learning environment. In many lessons, teachers have appropriate expectations. They plan sequences of appropriately demanding activities that ensure a suitable pace of learning. These teachers use questioning to involve pupils in discussion activities and to check their understanding. They provide clear explanations and challenge pupils to work independently. In a few particularly effective lessons, teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They plan activities carefully to maximise progress, and use incisive questioning that helps pupils to deepen their understanding and contributes to a brisk pace of learning.

In a minority of instances, teachers' expectations are too low. They ask pupils to complete undemanding tasks that keep them busy rather than helping them to make progress in their learning. In particular, too often they over-scaffold work, which means that pupils do not develop their independence and resilience sufficiently. In these lessons, teachers are often too accepting of pupils' lack of engagement, and they do not use questioning well enough to help pupils to develop their understanding.

In many lessons, teachers monitor pupils' progress closely and give them helpful verbal feedback. In around half of cases, they provide pupils with useful written feedback that makes suitably clear how they can improve their work. Overall, there is too much variation in how effectively feedback is used to support pupils' progress in both their subject understanding and the development of their literacy skills. When they are provided with appropriate guidance, a minority of pupils use it suitably to improve their work. However, there is not a consistent enough approach to ensuring that pupils respond purposefully to written feedback.

Senior leaders ensure that pupils experience a broad and balanced curriculum at Key Stage 3 so that they make informed choices when opting for subjects at Key Stage 4. The school provides a wide range of appropriate options, including vocational courses such as hair and beauty and engineering. Vulnerable pupils benefit from opportunities to study practical courses. Pupils from the Gypsy Roma Traveller community benefit from a tailored curriculum in the specialist resource base. Overall, the curriculum enables nearly all pupils to progress on to further education, employment or training.

The school has experimented with a range of approaches to developing its Curriculum for Wales. Leaders have decided to retain subject specialisms, with an emphasis on teaching important knowledge and skills while seeking to identify and develop authentic links between subjects. Subject leaders have a high level of autonomy with regard to what and how they teach their curriculum. In a few instances, there is an imbalance between developing knowledge and developing skills, which hinders pupils from making as much progress as they could. The

curriculum is enriched in Year 7 by a beneficial programme of active, creative and thinking activities, such as bicycle maintenance, photography, music technology and British Sign Language.

Teachers in relevant subjects use a range of worthwhile approaches to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, such as a focus on widening pupils' vocabulary and ensuring their graph work is accurate. However, overall, teachers do not implement strategies to progressively develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills consistently or well enough across the curriculum. For example, they plan guided reading tasks that focus too much on basic reading skills or provide too much support when pupils are analysing and interpreting graphs. In addition, teachers do not plan enough opportunities, or seize those that present themselves naturally, to develop pupils' oracy, reading, extended writing and thinking skills across the curriculum. The development of pupils' digital skills is at an early stage.

The school monitors pupils' progress against their targets closely. It puts suitable interventions in place to support any pupils who are underachieving. It also provides worthwhile interventions to support pupils with weaker skills which enable most of them to make suitable progress from their starting points. The school provides a valuable programme of activities for more able pupils to raise their attainment and aspirations for the future. For example, these pupils benefit from external speakers who discuss their careers and life at university.

The school has a comprehensive personal and social education (PSE) programme at Key Stage 3 and appropriate arrangements to promote the development of these skills at Key Stage 4 through a variety of sessions and courses, including beneficial input from external agencies. Together, this provision promotes the development of pupils' social and personal skills well. The school's provision to promote pupils' understanding of the LGBTQ+ community and of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people is developing suitably. The culture and heritage of Wales are celebrated through, for example, the whole-school Eisteddfod.

Pupils' learning experiences are enhanced through a wide range of extra-curricular activities, such as a successful basketball club and two annual school productions, and through educational visits, for example to the Senedd and Houses of Parliament.

Care, support and guidance

West Monmouth School is a caring environment where staff know their pupils well. They are committed to supporting pupils' personal and social development. The pupil core values of respect, honesty, kindness, perseverance and pride play a vital part in the school's ethos.

The school provides a high level of care and support through an extensive range of provision. Pupils' well-being is monitored and analysed carefully by the pastoral team. Staff work effectively with pupils, families and a broad range of external agencies to provide beneficial additional support for those pupils who need it. The school has a range of effective, tailored provision to meet pupils' needs, such as 'Hafan' and 'Hub'. Staff in these areas help pupils overcome barriers to learning in an inclusive environment.

The school's commitment to personal development is underpinned by the strong relationships and mutual respect between staff, pupils and the wider community. The school develops its PSE programme in response to pupil voice and information gathered from questionnaires. Staff monitor this provision carefully and adapt it promptly to deal with current issues that are relevant to pupils, such as the dangers of vaping. There are well-planned opportunities to promote spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in assemblies, registration periods and health and well-being lessons. These allow pupils to explore relevant themes such as self-esteem and mental health.

The school hosts a local authority resource base for pupils from the Gypsy Roma Traveller community. This unit is a notable strength and provides essential support to these pupils and their families to help them integrate within the school community whilst respecting their traditions and culture. The highly committed staff work productively and sensitively with the school to give pupils the best learning experiences.

The school provides beneficial opportunities for pupils to develop their leadership skills and encourages their participation in aspects of school life. The school council helps shape the work of the school, for example the canteen menu and the extra-curricular offer.

All pupils have access to a comprehensive programme of extra-curricular opportunities to develop their mental and physical health. There is a diverse menu of daily clubs that expand pupils' social and cultural experiences, for example the 'Theatre Tech Club' and the politics project. Pupils also benefit from a range of opportunities to enhance their creative skills, for example through school productions like 'Matilda'.

The school has made suitable progress towards the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Act. Individual development plans identify key information about how staff can best support ALN pupils. The ALN team know its pupils' individual needs well and provides valuable interventions to support their learning and skills. Staff are provided with useful one-page profiles for pupils with ALN which identify how they can best support them. However, the use of these in lessons is too variable. The ALN and pastoral team work proactively with primary schools within the cluster to identify pupils with additional learning needs before they enrol in the school. An enhanced transition programme for Year 6 pupils and their parents helps the most vulnerable pupils in particular to settle into school.

The school has a well-established culture of safeguarding and a strategic whole-school approach to supporting pupils' well-being. There are clear processes for reporting and recording safeguarding matters. These are understood well and used appropriately by staff.

In general, staff deal suitably with incidents of bullying, providing helpful support for individuals and their families if issues arise. Throughout the day staff are visible around the school, providing valuable reassurance and support. This contributes well to pupils feeling safe in school.

The introduction of the new behaviour system has had a positive impact on the learning culture within the school. This has been supported by valuable professional learning for all staff, offering strategies for dealing with behaviour in classrooms. There is a clear focus on supporting pupils to recognise and alter their behaviours, and ensure that they are ready to learn.

The school has robust procedures to monitor attendance and uses a range of interventions to help pupils with low attendance to improve. They work closely with families to encourage engagement through interventions like the Woodlands centre. The school promotes the importance of good attendance during form tutor sessions and assemblies and through the 'Attendance league' rewards programme. These strategies are having a positive impact on rates of attendance, particularly on those of pupils eligible for free school meals, although the school recognises that raising attendance remains an important priority.

Leadership and management

The headteacher provides thoughtful strategic leadership underpinned by a strong sense of moral purpose that benefits the school and its wider community. Leaders have established a strong culture of safeguarding that has contributed positively to pupils' behaviour, attitudes to learning and attendance. Leadership has also supported effective developments in the curriculum, although currently it has not had the same impact on the quality of teaching and learning, including the progressive development of pupils' skills.

Staff and governors are strongly committed to supporting the school's core mission of enabling pupils to 'believe, achieve, succeed'. They are very aware of the school's important role in raising the aspirations and shaping the life chances of its pupils. Communication with parents and carers is generally effective and links between the school and the community are well established, including opportunities for parents and carers to learn about financial literacy and cooking on a budget.

A rolling programme of temporary appointments to the senior leadership team provides staff with valuable professional learning opportunities and potential for succession planning. Senior leaders work well as a team and support the headteacher competently. Their roles and responsibilities are mostly distributed equitably and make the most of their skills and experiences. Overall, they understand their areas of responsibility suitably and bring an energy to those roles. However, they do not always hold middle leaders to account robustly enough, particularly with regard to their evaluations of teaching and learning and provision for pupils with ALN.

Middle leaders demonstrate a clear commitment to the school and to its continuous improvement. They are positive about their work and have a developing understanding of their roles and responsibilities. They have positive working relationships with their line managers who they feel provide helpful support and suitable challenge. Line management meetings benefit from a common agenda and generally focus suitably on important aspects of the school's work, including staff well-being and pupils' progress. However, middle leaders' ability to evaluate teaching and learning within their areas of responsibility is too variable and is frequently too positive. The rigour of actions set following these meetings is inconsistent and it is mostly unclear how they are followed up by senior leaders. As a result, it is difficult

for those leaders to hold individuals to account for improvements in their areas of responsibility.

There is a strong emphasis on the national priorities of fostering a culture of safeguarding and reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment. The pupil development grant is used well to address specific challenges faced by many pupils and their families. Evaluation of the impact of this funding identifies clearly how it has supported improvements in pupils' attendance, behaviour and attainment.

Leaders at all levels gather a suitable range of evidence to evaluate the school's work. The headteacher provides valuable support to senior and middle leaders to improve their ability to gather first-hand evidence and to consider how they can plan for improvement. These processes have been beneficial in improving pupils' behaviour, establishing effective routines for learning and in identifying broad areas for improvement. When evaluating pupils' progress, senior leaders have established a helpful balance between performance data and pupils' learning in lessons and in books, although middle leaders' understanding of this remains too variable. Senior leaders are developing a clearer understanding of the school's main strengths and areas for improvement, but self-evaluation is not always precise enough, particularly about the aspects of teaching and learning that require improvement. As a result, improvement planning does not always focus on the specific aspects of teaching that will have the biggest impact on learning. This is more notable in departmental and faculty level planning.

Processes to manage the performance of staff are clear and robust, and align suitably with the school's priorities in order to support the improvement process. The headteacher and her senior team are developing a culture of professional learning across the school. Staff benefit from a broad range of activities through the universal and targeted offer provided. This helps to make professional learning more personalised whilst ensuring a focus on school and national improvement priorities. Professional learning has supported improvements in pupils' behaviour and the quality of verbal feedback in lessons, but it has not had a consistent enough impact in improving teaching or middle leaders' ability to drive improvement.

Governors are very supportive of the headteacher and are proud of the school community. They share fully the moral purpose of the school and have high ambitions for its staff and pupils. They understand their responsibility for ensuring that the school promotes healthy eating and drinking. Currently, they are developing their understanding of national priorities to help them shape the strategic direction of the school and provide challenge as critical friends.

There are robust processes for managing the school's finances. The governors' resources committee, the business manager and the headteacher manage and monitor spending carefully, ensuring that it aligns well with the school's improvement priorities.

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 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 and middle leaders (where appropriate) 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, where appropriate
- visit a broad sample of lessons, including learning support groups 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 and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- 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 publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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