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

A report on

St Helen's Catholic Primary School

Maes-Y-Cwm Street
Barry
CF63 4EH

Date of inspection: October 2022

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

About St Helen's Catholic Primary School

Name of provider	St Helen's Catholic Primary School
Local authority	Vale of Glamorgan Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Primary
Religious character	Roman Catholic
Number of pupils on roll	324
Pupils of statutory school age	235
Number in nursery classes	48
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 Primary is 23.0%)	12.8%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Primary is 16.1%)	10.2%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	*
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	16.6%
Date of headteacher appointment	N/A
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	N/A
Start date of inspection	03/10/2022

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

This is a faith school that cares deeply for its school community. The high-quality support and guidance provided by the staff and leaders is a strong feature of the school. Nearly all pupils and staff feel safe and valued. Most are kind and respectful to each other. This results in the happy learning environment that welcomes all pupils, whatever their family background, religion or home language.

Most pupils make at least the progress they should in developing their English literacy skills, including those who speak English as an additional language. In mathematics, science and information technology (IT), pupils develop their knowledge and skills well. However, pupils do not always make the progress they could in acquiring the Welsh language, because the provision is inconsistent across the school.

Classroom practice is generally effective and nearly all pupils make appropriate progress from their starting points. There are a few occasions when pupils sit and listen for too long, for example on the carpet, or when the tasks that they are asked to do are not challenging enough. When this happens, pupils become restless, disengaged and do not achieve as well as they should.

The acting headteacher, ably supported by the senior leadership team, has successfully sustained a school that has the well-being of pupils and the wider school community at its heart. Leaders communicate well with parents. The governing body supports the school effectively, for example overseeing some difficult financial and staffing decisions. However, leaders' extensive monitoring work is often too broad to focus precisely enough on pupil outcomes. Where this happens, it is difficult for leaders to know whether the planned improvements have made a difference to pupils' achievements.

The two separate school sites create some challenges that the staff manage well. The learning environment on each site, including the outdoor areas, is bright and welcoming. The staff have worked together to create valuable opportunities for all pupils to experience an exciting range of engaging learning activities.

Recommendations

R1 Ensure that self-evaluation and monitoring processes are manageable and focus tightly on improving pupils' outcomes

R2 Ensure that teaching challenges all pupils, especially the more able

R3 Support all staff to secure systematic progression in pupils' Welsh language skills

What happens next

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

Main evaluation

Learning

When they start in the nursery, around a half of pupils have underdeveloped communication skills. By the time they leave, most are articulate and confident speakers who generally listen carefully.

Across the school, most pupils develop a growing vocabulary that they use effectively, for example in role play and well-planned oracy activities. This oracy work supports pupils to develop both their reading and writing skills well, including those pupils learning English as an additional language. The few pupils who find learning to speak, listen, read or write difficult receive patient and appropriate additional support, that helps them to make appropriate progress from their starting points.

As they move through the school, pupils make links between listening and reading and between talking and writing. For example, most nursery and reception pupils start learning the sounds that letters make. They listen carefully to the adult and repeat the sounds and begin to blend them to form simple words and sentences. In a Year 2 class, many pupils try out different adjectives as they rehearse their sentences orally, before successfully writing the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

By Year 2, many pupils read a simple text accurately. When reminded, they use good intonation and expression to read aloud. Many make strong use of their phonic knowledge to sound out and blend unfamiliar words. Increasingly, they use other cues to help them to decipher a text, for example looking at the picture or thinking about the context. Many younger pupils can answer literal questions about the book that they are reading, referring to the text for their answer.

By Year 6 most pupils read fluently, with a good understanding of the text. Many have a range of appropriate strategies that they use to work out unfamiliar words or to make sense of new vocabulary. Increasingly, older pupils think carefully about the text, for example inferring what the writer might mean by a particular phrase. Many pupils speak positively about the range of books and authors they enjoy reading, both within school and at home.

Many younger pupils develop their early writing skills well. For example, nearly all pupils in the nursery and reception classes enjoy engaging in a range of mark making activities. As a result, by Year 1, many pupils begin to write and spell common words correctly, and more able pupils write a short sentence. Many older pupils develop their writing skills and writing stamina appropriately. By Year 6, more able pupils especially become engaging writers, using a depth of vocabulary and an intuitive sense of language and pattern to engage the reader.

Despite the limited opportunities for pupils to use Welsh during the pandemic, many pupils are keen to regain their skills, and are developing their ability to speak basic Welsh appropriately. Younger pupils sing songs and respond to simple instructions in Welsh early on and, as they move through the school, they build a useful vocabulary, for example in relation to the weather, and ask and answer simple questions. However, too often, pupils repeat the word patterns they have learnt from previous years and as a result, many pupils do not make enough progress in learning the Welsh language.

Across the school, many pupils make sound progress in developing their mathematical skills. In the nursery and reception classes, most pupils are beginning to recognise and form their number digits correctly, and by Year 1, many pupils are confident recognising and ordering numbers to 10, for example using blocks in the outside area.

By Year 3, many pupils have a sound understanding of place value, for example they write, order and partition numbers to 1000. By the end of Year 6, many pupils are confident solving real life problems, for example when using negative numbers to compare temperatures of cities around the world. Many pupils handle data successfully in other subjects, for instance to collate and interrogate the results of a science investigation. However, there are too few opportunities for pupils to use and apply their broader numeracy skills across the curriculum regularly and progressively.

Many younger pupils confidently use an electronic hand-held device to upload photographs and videos they have made of their work to an online platform. Pupils in Years 3, 4 and 5 construct and interrogate databases and spreadsheets effectively, for example to design a Roman mosaic. Across the school, most pupils use IT to communicate effectively, and by Year 6, most pupils use their digital skills well to support their learning.

Many pupils develop their artistic, creative and musical skills well, for example during well-focused art and dance lessons. Younger pupils develop their fine and gross motor skills appropriately, for example in the well-resourced outdoor areas. From Year 3, most pupils develop their physical skills and problem-solving skills well on the well-utilised sports pitches, outdoor spaces and forest school area.

Across the school, all groups of pupils make progress from their starting points. Pupils with additional needs and those eligible for free school meals generally make slower progress than their peers, and boys generally make slower progress than girls. However, pupils who speak English as an additional language often make more rapid progress than their peers, from their individual starting points.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

The school is a happy and welcoming environment where nearly all pupils feel safe and valued. Nearly all pupils behave well, both in lessons and around the school. They are kind and respectful to adults and to other pupils. Year 6 pupils are very good role models for younger children. They respond well to responsibilities around school and take pride in carrying out their duties. A good example of this is the Sports Ambassadors who organise playground games at break time.

Nearly all pupils are developing well as ethically informed citizens. They have a sound understanding and awareness of the needs of others and welcome pupils whatever their family background, religion or home language into the inclusive school community.

Most pupils have a good understanding of their emotional well-being which is well supported by a wide range of strategies within school. For example, emotional check-ins help younger pupils develop their awareness of their feelings through the day, and older pupils appreciate the opportunities for thinking times to reflect and regulate their mental health.

Nearly all pupils are aware of the importance of healthy eating and how to keep themselves fit and healthy. Super Ambassadors have worked with pupils to develop a Food and Fitness policy for healthy snacks and drinks in school. As a result, they have a strong understanding of the need for a balanced diet and keeping active. Most pupils know how to keep themselves safe online and understand why it is important.

Pupils develop their physical skills well as they progress through school. They regularly participate in physical activities that help them to learn about the importance of a healthy and active lifestyle. For example, younger children are adept at using the climbing wall, skipping and playing a range of ball games. Older pupils skilfully engage in a range of physical activities at playtimes and extra-curricular sports clubs.

Most pupils are interested in their work and respond with enthusiasm to new challenges in all areas of the curriculum, such as learning new words and phrases in Spanish. From a young age, they develop the confidence to communicate with adults and speak enthusiastically about their work and experiences in school.

Class Ministry groups and Senedd Santes Helen provide valuable opportunities for all pupils to be involved in decisions that affect them, and to raise their awareness of wider issues. Older pupils have focused on supporting the work of local foodbanks and homeless charities, whilst younger pupils have developed a video and led collective worship to raise awareness of the journey of a refugee.

Many pupils work well together in pairs and in groups. They develop the ability to work independently and show increasing concentration and perseverance as they progress through school. A good example of this is in Year 1, where pupils work to find a way to uncover fossils hidden within rocks, as part of their dinosaur topic. However, where the activity does not engage pupils well enough, they lose concentration and become fidgety.

Many pupils respond well to verbal feedback provided by teachers, and older pupils have a good understanding of the strategies in place to move their learning forward. Where these processes are most effective, pupils are able to improve their own work.

Pupils are attending school more regularly this year compared to last year, when the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact nationally on school attendance. There are no significant differences in the attendance of groups of pupils. Procedures put in place during the pandemic have had a positive impact on punctuality and very few pupils are late for school.

Teaching and learning experiences

Across the classes in both phases of the school, the positive professional relationships between staff and pupils are a strength of St Helen’s. Adults know their pupils well, as individuals. The interactions within classrooms support pupils’ positive attitudes to their work and enthusiasm for and enjoyment of their learning

There is generally strong and sustained classroom practice across the school, but there are also some inconsistencies in the quality of the practice between classes. The best lessons proceed at a good pace. In these classes, teachers have high expectations of what their pupils can achieve and as a result, pupils of all abilities make sound progress. However, teachers across both phases of the school do not

always provide tasks that challenge the more able pupils to achieve as well as they could. On occasions in a few lessons across the school, pupils sit for too long listening to their teachers and become restless. When this happens and pupils lose concentration, they do not behave or achieve as well as they could.

Skilled support staff generally work seamlessly alongside classroom practitioners. They provide well-tailored support and interventions for pupils who find the work difficult or have other additional needs. Generally, support staff in class ask well-chosen questions, for example to support younger pupils to think more deeply about what they are doing. However, on a very few occasions, where these staff are less familiar with the pupils' needs, they do not engage pupils' curiosity and enthusiasm well enough.

The school's curriculum provides a broad and exciting range of learning experiences that engage nearly all pupils. For example, immersion days and trips motivate pupils to learn. In addition, nearly all pupils have access to a broad range of afterschool clubs and activities. In the foundation phase building, staff make the best possible use of the very constrained outdoor space to provide an engaging, enticing learning environment, and the Key Stage 2 site provides worthwhile, regular opportunities for pupils to learn outdoors, for example through the valuable forest school provision.

Teachers plan worthwhile opportunities to develop pupils' skills in literacy, particularly oracy, and in IT across the school. Most pupils in the older classes use a systematic and progressive range of digital skills, for example graphs, database and publishing software across the curriculum. However, plans to develop pupils' numeracy skills progressively are not so well developed.

There are clear, suitable plans for pupil progression in Welsh throughout the school. These plans provide appropriate guidance for teachers, for instance to consolidate and extend sentence structures systematically. However, teachers do not always follow these plans closely enough. This means that there is too much repetition from year group to year group and many pupils do not make enough progress.

There are worthwhile systems to provide feedback to pupils to help them to improve their work, for example using 'green for growth' or target sheets. Where they are used well, pupils understand these systems and find them helpful. However, their use across the classes is inconsistent.

Teachers make regular, formal assessments of pupils' progress, using recently updated criteria to align with the new curriculum, and leaders have begun to quality assure teachers' work through the 'celebration of progress' meetings. Teachers consider the annual external assessment data to inform their provision. However, leaders' use of assessment information to track and evaluate groups of pupils' progress over time is less well developed.

Care, support and guidance

The school provides valuable care, support and guidance for pupils and their families. Staff and pupils care for and respect each other consistently. This supportive atmosphere helps pupils to settle in easily to school life. Since the lockdowns and school closures during the pandemic, the staff has worked to build further on the supportive, family relationships. As a result, most pupils have positive attitudes to school and are resilient in their learning.

The school's vision, ethos and curriculum is effective in supporting all pupils, especially those whose circumstances may make them vulnerable to underachievement, whatever their home language or family circumstances. Leaders support and respect the various pupil voice groups. They give them autonomy to lead their own chosen initiatives, such as collecting donated items for homeless people in Barry.

There is extensive and effective provision for supporting and developing pupils' emotional health and well-being. Staff pay close attention to pupils' feelings, for example using 'I wish my teacher knew' boxes and worry monsters to check-in with each individual regularly. Staff provide comprehensive support wherever it is needed to support pupils and their families. For example, the school's mental health first aiders lend self-help books from the school's well-being library and identify other agencies and organisations that families could approach for support. In addition, the staff are a cohesive, tight knit, professional community who actively support each other.

There are worthwhile systems in place to assess and support pupils with additional learning needs (ALN). Staff work well with a range of outside agencies and partners. Regular child-centred review meetings focus effectively on reviewing and refreshing plans to support the individual child. Skilled support staff deliver a useful range of support programmes. As a result, these pupils that receive additional help make steady progress from their starting points.

The school's systems are highly effective in circumstances where pupils are particularly vulnerable and there is a strong and well-established culture of safeguarding. Across the school, leaders have ensured that all adults recognise the importance of keeping children safe, and their role in ensuring that this happens. Staff know the correct procedures to follow if or when they had concerns about a child's welfare. Leaders carefully track vulnerable pupils' attendance and behaviour and are beginning to include this information in their wider record keeping and evaluations. The school's safeguarding procedures are robust and thorough.

Leaders and teachers actively promote pupils' spiritual, moral, and social development. For example, they provide well-chosen opportunities for pupils to explore issues related to diversity, tolerance, knowing right from wrong, and respect. There are strong relationships with the local church. Acts of worship within school day provide worthwhile opportunities for pupils to reflect on important issues and values.

Leadership and management

The school has developed a clear vision for its work and for the new curriculum, which involves all stakeholders. Leaders place the well-being of pupils and members of the school community at the heart of the school's work and their decision-making processes. They have a strong understanding of the needs of most pupils and work hard to reduce the impact of poverty on their pupils' educational attainment. For example, teachers plan a wide range of experiences that pupils might not otherwise take part in.

Leaders and staff work productively together to create a positive working environment. The school is a vibrant and busy community. However, leaders

sometimes find it difficult to focus their attention on a strategic approach and its impact on pupils' outcomes.

The school communicates well with parents using a broad range of media. Parents are invited into the school to learn about how to support their children at home and provided with links to support materials online, and most find this helpful.

Leaders and governors manage the school's finances effectively. Spending decisions focus well on the needs of the pupils and enable staff to make improvements to provision. For example, substantial spending on the learning environment, especially for younger pupils, has improved pupil engagement in learning experiences. The school uses the pupil development grant appropriately to train and deploy experienced and skilled staff to support the literacy, numeracy, and emotional skills of vulnerable pupils. This is having a positive impact on the educational outcomes of pupils that receive additional support. However, leaders do not ensure that the grant is used to support those potentially vulnerable pupils who are identified as being more able.

Governors play an important part in the life of the school. They are supportive and involved in the life of the school, but this has been challenging since COVID. They ensure that the school has appropriate arrangement for healthy eating and drinking, such as freely available chilled drinking water. The acting headteacher provides members of the governing body with regular detailed reports that help them to be well-informed about the work of the school. Governors' challenge to leaders tends to focus on operational matters, such as spending and admissions. However, partly due to limitations imposed by COVID restrictions, governors' challenge in relation to standards and progress towards school improvement priorities is limited.

The school carries out a broad range of activities to monitor and evaluate its work across many areas, involving teachers, support staff and pupils. For example, the monitoring timetable for the coming year includes a challenging series of evaluations, including pupil assessments, learning walks, listening to learners and scrutiny of pupils' work. However, these monitoring activities are so extensive that it is difficult for leaders to synthesise and use all the information they gather. Furthermore, these activities do not focus closely enough on evaluating the effectiveness of planned improvements but instead, cover a far wider range of work. This means that it is difficult for leaders to know whether the improvements made have made the difference that they intended.

Leaders and staff have identified five appropriate priorities in the current school improvement plan. However, these do not include improving pupils' Welsh language skills. The improvement plan priorities are supported by further useful, detailed action plans in some areas. In many cases, the success criteria or intended impacts are not specific enough to enable leaders to evaluate success in a meaningful way, especially in relation to outcomes for pupils.

Leaders encourage all staff to engage in professional learning that relates to the school's improvement priorities and the needs of individuals. Staff performance targets link clearly to important elements of the school improvement plan, for example well-being, curriculum and research, but are tailored to staff's responsibilities and interests. A valuable culture of professional learning is developing. For example, adults learn Spanish alongside the pupils, and teachers

observe high quality second language learning that has an impact on pupil enthusiasm and engagement in particular.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carer 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/carers 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, to listen to them read 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 classes, 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 (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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