



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

A report on

Willows High School

**Willows Avenue
Tremorfa
CF24 2YE**

Date of inspection: November 2024

by

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

About Willows High School

Name of provider	Willows High School
Local authority	Cardiff Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	808
Pupils of statutory school age	808
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 21.1%)	54.8%
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 11.2%)	8.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.0%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	14.7%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2015
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	09/04/2018
Start date of inspection	11/11/2024

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.

Summary

Willows High School is a welcoming community where diversity is celebrated. Leaders have secured a clear and well understood vision that all pupils should 'belong, believe and achieve'. The positive relationships between pupils and staff are a notable feature of the school. Through well-established routines, staff share high expectations for pupils' engagement and behaviour and this positive ethos permeates every aspect of school life.

Staff, pupils, parents and visitors feel welcome at Willows. There is a positive safeguarding culture where most pupils feel safe. Clear processes for monitoring and supporting pupils' attendance have helped to improve rates of attendance faster than they did nationally last year and these rates, particularly for pupils who are eligible for free school meals, continue to improve well.

A notable feature of the school's broad and balanced curriculum is the way in which they develop pupils' understanding of diversity and other cultures. There is a positive focus on improving pupils' reading and generally pupils develop these skills well across the curriculum. In many lessons, teachers help pupils to make sound progress in their knowledge understanding and skills. In a few lessons, highly effective teaching enables pupils to make rapid progress in their learning and skills. In a minority of lessons, whilst pupils engage in learning and often acquire new knowledge, teachers do not ensure that all pupils are challenged to develop their understanding and skills, including their ability to work independently. In addition, pupils do not develop their Welsh speaking skill sufficiently.

Leaders at all levels use their evaluation and improvement processes appropriately to establish an understanding of the school's broad strengths and areas for improvement. However, leaders do not focus precisely enough on the impact that provision has on pupil progress and well-being.

Recommendations

We have made three recommendations to help the school continue to improve:

- R1 Ensure that teaching consistently challenges pupils to make strong progress and develop their skills well.
- R2 Ensure that self-evaluation processes are precise and focus on impact and that all leaders use these processes effectively to plan for and secure improvement.
- R3 Increase the number of pupils who complete a Welsh language GCSE qualification and improve pupils' Welsh language speaking skills

What happens next

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

Main findings

Teaching and learning

Clear classroom routines, highly effective relationships between pupils and staff and high expectations of pupils' behaviour and engagement in lessons are notable strengths of Willows High school. Most pupils behave exceptionally well in lessons and around the school and have positive attitudes towards learning. They settle quickly to their work and maintain their concentration. This helps many pupils, including those with additional learning needs and those eligible for free school meals, to make secure progress in their learning.

In many lessons, pupils recall their prior learning appropriately and apply this competently in new contexts. In these lessons, teachers have sound subject knowledge and plan engaging activities that build suitably on pupils' learning. They provide useful models to support pupils' learning and give verbal feedback that helps pupils to improve their work. A few teachers ensure that pupils make particularly strong progress. They:

- have an infectious enthusiasm for their subject
- have notably high expectations of pupils' progress and plan effectively for their learning
- identify and address pupils' misconceptions clearly
- adapt teaching skilfully in light of their close monitoring of pupil progress

In these lessons, pupils confidently recall prior learning and develop their knowledge, understanding and skills rapidly, whilst also developing independence and resilience.

Many teachers ask a range of suitable questions to check pupils' recall and to support them to develop their responses. A minority use questioning effectively to challenge and develop pupils' thinking skills.

In a minority of lessons, shortcomings in teaching mean that whilst pupils remain engaged in their learning and generally acquire new knowledge, they do not make as much progress as they could, particularly in their understanding and skills. Common shortcomings include teachers:

- not establishing an appropriate balance between scaffolding work and developing pupils' independence
- not ensuring that they support and challenge all pupils sufficiently

- not developing pupils' skills, such as their writing and numeracy skills, at a suitable level

Spotlight – Developing reading

A high proportion of pupils enter Willows with reading skills well below what would be expected for their age. As a result, the school has made a determined effort to establish a strong reading culture and exploit all opportunities to develop pupils' reading skills. Staff model positive reading habits effectively and make regular use of helpful reading sessions to enhance pupils' skills.

Many pupils listen respectfully during lessons, responding promptly to teachers' instructions and offering considered responses to questions, using a suitable range of interesting vocabulary. A minority, however, offer only limited responses and struggle to express their thoughts coherently.

Many pupils identify basic implied meanings in texts and locate relevant information competently. In English lessons, the majority of pupils make more sophisticated inferences. The majority of pupils use helpful strategies to read and pronounce unfamiliar or challenging words, for example through sounding them out and chanting routines. Across the curriculum, a minority of pupils use advanced reading skills successfully, such as when they summarise information from a range of sources in history. However, in a few subjects, there are insufficient opportunities for pupils to develop these advanced skills.

There is a range of valuable opportunities for pupils to write at length across the curriculum. Many pupils organise their writing coherently, using paragraphs effectively. They use a suitable range of vocabulary and express their views clearly. In a few subjects, pupils produce only short pieces of writing and around half of pupils make basic errors in their spelling punctuation and grammar.

The majority of pupils have a suitable grasp of number skills. They calculate using the four rules of number competently such as when they work with ratio. A minority have strong numeracy skills and solve complex problems, for example when they combine different elements of trigonometry. Although pupils have opportunities to practice their numeracy skills across the curriculum, they do not always have sufficient opportunities to develop or apply their skills in challenging enough contexts, particularly in Key Stage 3.

The school celebrates Welsh heritage and culture appropriately. As a result, most pupils have a positive attitude towards learning Welsh and speak using simple sentences confidently. Many make sound progress in their reading and writing skills, and a minority of pupils use extended sentences and a variety of tenses to write fluently. Overall, pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to develop their Welsh speaking skills. In addition, only around half of pupils are entered for a GCSE Welsh qualification.

The school has a clear vision for its curriculum based on ensuring that pupils acquire the knowledge, character and skills that lead to lifelong success and happiness. The school's curriculum is suitably broad and builds appropriately on pupils' prior learning. Leaders ensure that pupils' opinions are considered carefully in deciding

which subjects are offered and at Key Stage 4, there is a wide range of vocational and GCSE courses.

Spotlight – Promoting Diversity

A notable strength of the school is the provision to develop pupils' respect, tolerance and appreciation of different cultures and beliefs. This is at the heart of the school's work to develop pupils' character. There is a wide variety of activities that celebrate diversity and the multicultural nature of the school, for example, they hold a range of events that celebrate the culture and heritage of all pupils at Willows, including assemblies led by Roma children, and mothers and daughters attending the school in the evening to celebrate Eid.

Pupils benefit from a comprehensive offer of extracurricular activities. This includes after school clubs such as the chess, LGBTQ+, debating and sports clubs. All pupils are involved in the fortnightly enrichment lessons, where they choose an activity of interest to them such as street art, musical theatre, Korean and crochet workshops. This helps them to learn and engage in activities they may not otherwise have the chance to and to develop an understanding of different cultures and views.

Pupils in the SRB benefit from an appropriate curriculum, supported by strong teaching that is relevant to their needs and interests. This encourages engagement, particularly when they contribute to what they would like to learn. As a result, most pupils make good progress from their starting points.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

The strong ethos of mutual respect and community permeates Willows High School. Leaders have established a nurturing environment for pupils to learn and thrive. As a result, the school is a safe and supportive place where pupils flourish, whilst embracing each other's individuality.

Pupils are supported to grow and mature, developing a strong sense of community and personal identity. A passionate and determined Welfare Team work closely with external agencies, families and staff to provide personalised support for pupils. School leaders and the Welfare Team adapt provision effectively to meet pupils' needs, for example, they use specialists to provide emotional support and to develop positive behaviour. The school promotes pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development well through personal and social education lessons and themed reflections during morning welcome sessions and assemblies.

The school has effective pastoral transition arrangements including for refugees and other pupils who transfer into the community. There are suitable arrangements in place for transition to post-sixteen education including strong links with Careers Wales, local employers and colleges. This helps pupils to have a clear understanding of the options available to them and to raise their aspirations.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding and an ethos of mutual support at Willows. Arrangements to keep pupils safe, including suitability of staff, are effective. The school responds to safeguarding concerns promptly and is diligent in making necessary referrals to outside agencies. Staff and governors receive regular training

on child protection and are clear about their responsibilities for safeguarding. These arrangements create a firm foundation for pupils to feel safe and supported within their school community.

There are beneficial opportunities for pupils to take on leadership roles and help to make improvements to the school. The school council has introduced exercise equipment into the school yard and have worked closely with staff to reduce litter. The Equality, Inclusion and Diversity group, lead the Cultural Heritage Week; an event which is appreciated and celebrated by the whole school community. A committed, enthusiastic and active Criw Cymraeg supports the promotion of the Welsh language through the coordination of activities such as assemblies, annual Eisteddfod and leading on the school's work towards achieving the Siarter Iaith Award.

The ALN team provide a well thought out programme of support, including a number of specialists delivering speech and language, and reading interventions. The ALN team is making good progress towards meeting the requirements of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act. The school's Individual Development Plans are useful documents and provide helpful information on how to support pupils' learning.

Pupils in the SRB respect adults and their peers, demonstrating politeness and kindness to others. They are supported well to understand their feelings and emotions and modify their behaviour as required. Staff make good use of resources, including working with external agencies, to meet pupils' needs. There is an inclusive approach to learning and where appropriate there are opportunities for pupils to work alongside peers in mainstream lessons.

High standards of behaviour and attendance are promoted and encouraged throughout the school. The dedicated attendance team works proactively with pupils and their families to encourage regular attendance. They offer a wide range of interventions, such as coffee mornings and use a cluster community attendance officer to support pupils whose attendance is a concern. As a result, last year, attendance improved at a faster rate than nationally and unverified data for this year shows that it continues to improve well.

Staff are relentless in their expectation of pupils' behaviour and kindness which they model effectively. Pupils appreciate the rewards given for high levels of attendance, as well as positive engagement and good behaviour. The school deals swiftly and effectively to address the very few cases of bullying that occur. These approaches have a positive impact on pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school. Most pupils are courteous, polite and respectful of their teachers, peers and visitors. Pupils are proud to belong to their school.

Leading and improving

The headteacher, governing body and the senior team have a sharply focused, highly ambitious and well communicated vision for the school, 'The Willows Way'. Leaders are strong role models and embody well their firmly held commitment for all pupils and staff to 'Belong, Believe and Achieve' in a positive learning environment. As a result of leaders' drive for consistency and respect, there has been a

remarkable change in the ethos and culture of the school since the time of the last inspection. There is a positive and proactive culture of safeguarding across the school, and consequently, Willows is a safe and highly inclusive school community where staff and pupils feel valued and supported.

Senior leaders are a highly cohesive team with equitable roles and responsibilities matched suitably to the skills of individuals and the school's improvement priorities. Leaders at all levels base their decision-making on a detailed understanding of the needs of their pupils and the community they serve and endeavour to ensure that the school is at the heart of the community.

The governing body is very supportive of the school and provides valuable challenge to leaders about aspects of the school's work such as outcomes from external examinations and use of the pupil development grant. They make a positive contribution to the strategic direction of the school including ensuring that the school has suitable arrangements for healthy eating and drinking. Leaders work alongside the governing body to monitor spending carefully.

The school has established a suitable programme of evaluation and improvement activity, such as lesson observations and work scrutiny, along with guidelines for improvement planning. Senior leaders and curriculum middle leaders carry out a suitable range of relevant activities to gather evidence and identify strengths and areas for development across many aspects of the school's work. In addition, there are beneficial opportunities to consult pupils and staff along with parents and other stakeholders. Notwithstanding these helpful approaches, leaders focus too heavily on compliance with school policies and do not identify strengths or areas for improvement with sufficient precision or accuracy. They place too great an emphasis on end of key stage outcomes and other data, rather than sharply evaluating provision in respect to its impact on learning. As a result, the school's view of aspects of its work is too positive, particularly regarding the quality of teaching.

The school communicates its whole-school priorities well. Those priorities reflect appropriate areas of focus, including many national priorities, such as mitigating the impact of poverty on pupil outcomes. This has had a positive impact on for example, attendance, including that of eFSM pupils. In recent years, leaders have demonstrated improvement in a number of important areas of the school's work, notably building and sustaining strong and trusting relationships across the whole school community. In addition, they have made beneficial improvements in attendance, behaviour and aspects of reading. The school has made good progress against many of the recommendations from the last inspection. However, leaders have not had a consistent impact in other areas of the school's work, such as the development of numeracy across the curriculum or skills in spoken Welsh.

Line management processes are clear and supportive, and provide beneficial opportunities for leaders to discuss important areas of work with staff at all levels. Middle leaders, including those from the SRB, carry out their roles diligently and many have a suitable understanding of the general strengths and improvement priorities in their areas of responsibility. They make appropriate use of a suitable range of data which gives them a helpful overview of pupil outcomes, including those at risk of underachieving. Leaders in the SRB identify clear improvement priorities, such as the need to refine assessment and tracking. However, overall, skills and

pastoral leaders have a limited role in the evaluation and improvement processes, and this hinders their ability to drive improvement within their areas of responsibility.

Staff value the whole-school approach to professional learning and benefit from the strong links with Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers. There is a suitable focus on supporting staff to develop resources to support Curriculum for Wales and when introducing new approaches to support wellbeing. It has also enabled staff to learn about relevant teaching strategies.

Additional information

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils do not give any cause for concern.

The school has appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking.

Leaders and governors manage the school's finances appropriately, including the use of the pupil development grant.

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

Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. '*most pupils...*' or '*very few pupils...*'. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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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