

**A report on**

**Aberdare Community School**

**Ynys Road  
Aberdare  
Rhondda Cynon Taf  
CF44 7RP**

**Date of inspection: January 2026**

**by**

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

**This report is also available in Welsh**

## About Aberdare Community School

Name of provider	Aberdare Community School
Local authority	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	1227
Pupils of statutory school age	1109
Number in sixth form	118
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 20.3%)	29.9%
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 9.0%)	4.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.3%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	1.4%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	No
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2024
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	05/03/2018

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Start date of inspection	26/01/2026
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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](http://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

Pupils and staff are proud to belong to Aberdare Community School. The headteacher, has driven the committed focus on well-being, building positive relationships and a strong safeguarding culture. As a result, many pupils behave well and most feel safe and happy in school.

The school provides a generally broad and balanced curriculum for its pupils, including those in the sixth form and the local authority specialist classes. This curriculum is enriched through a wide range of worthwhile extra-curricular clubs and visits. There is a wide range of valuable opportunities for pupils, particularly for those in the sixth form, to contribute to the life of the school. This promotes a strong sense of community. However, the strategic leadership of, and planning for, the provision for the progressive development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills are underdeveloped.

In the majority of lessons, pupils demonstrate positive attitudes and make suitable progress. In these lessons teachers plan appropriate tasks to engage pupils and sustain their concentration. However, in a minority of cases pupils do not make enough progress. This is usually due to shortcomings in teaching, in particular teachers' expectations of what pupils can do being too low, not using questioning well enough to deepen pupils' thinking and their explanations often lacking clarity.

Leaders are committed to providing the best opportunities and experiences for pupils at Aberdare Community School. However, many lack strategic planning skills and do not hold staff, or one another, to account well enough. Although they undertake a suitable range of self-evaluation activities, leaders do not evaluate the impact of their work on pupils' progress with sufficient rigour or accuracy. As a result, they do not identify key areas for improvement clearly, and their improvement planning lacks precision.

Leaders have reorganised roles and introduced new strategies to strengthen its work on improving attendance. Despite these developments, pupils' attendance remains too low, especially that of pupils eligible for free school meals.

## Recommendations

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

- R1 Strengthen strategic leadership and accountability at all levels
- R2 Improve the quality and impact of teaching so that it supports all pupils to make strong progress
- R3 Improve the leadership of and provision for the progressive development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills
- R4 Strengthen the rigour and precision of self-evaluation and improvement processes
- R5 Improve attendance

## What happens next

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school is in need of significant improvement. The school will draw up an action plan which shows how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the school's progress about 12 months after the publication of this report.

## Main findings

### Teaching and learning

Most pupils, including those in 'Astra' and 'Sirius' (the local authority specialist classes located in the school), are proud to be pupils at Aberdare Community School. They are polite and courteous to their teachers, peers and visitors. Supported by beneficial relationships with their teachers, many pupils arrive promptly to lessons, behave well and demonstrate positive attitudes towards their learning.

In the majority of lessons, pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), make suitable progress. In these lessons, teachers plan appropriate tasks which build sequentially on each other. They use a range of helpful strategies to support pupils' learning, such as discussing examples of what pupils' finished work might look like or adapting resources sensibly for pupils with weaker skills. They deploy other adults well to assist pupils with additional learning needs.

In a very few lessons, teachers question skilfully, probing pupils' deeper knowledge and understanding. This prompts pupils to think carefully and explain their reasoning clearly, using accurate subject-specific terminology. In these lessons, challenging tasks made accessible by effective teaching, enable pupils to make strong progress.

In a minority of lessons, pupils make only limited progress. In these lessons, teachers:

- expectations of what pupils know and can do are too low
- do not provide clear explanations
- do not have a clear idea about what pupils understand or the progress they are making
- ask a narrow range of basic questions which elicit only short factual responses from pupils

As a result, these teachers plan basic or contrived tasks which do not help pupils learn. Often, pupils becoming passive or disengaged because the pace of the lesson does not match their learning well enough. In a few instances, teachers talk at pupils for lengthy periods or interrupt pupils' thinking.

The quality of written feedback is too variable and teachers' expectations of how pupils should improve their work are too low. In general, comments focus more on completion of tasks and pupils' effort rather than on the quality of their work and how it can be made better. Teachers do not monitor closely enough how pupils respond to improve their work.

## Skills

The strategic planning and coordination of the provision for the progressive development of pupils' skills is limited. Strategies to develop literacy and numeracy skills are used inconsistently by teachers. As a result, pupils do not develop their skills sufficiently.

The majority of pupils offer only brief underdeveloped responses to teachers' questions. When given the opportunity and encouragement, a few pupils explain their thinking in appropriate detail and respond thoughtfully to the views of others. In general, the range and complexity of pupils' spoken language is underdeveloped. A minority of pupils are reluctant to contribute orally and lack confidence when discussing work with their peers.

Many pupils locate basic information suitably within texts. They use basic inference when considering what impressions are created by an image, for example that of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, New York. A few pupils develop advanced reading skills, such as summarising and synthesising, appropriately. However, opportunities for pupils to develop their reading skills across the curriculum are often limited to information retrieval. As a result, pupils do not develop or apply a sufficient range of reading skills well enough to support their learning.

In English lessons, the majority of pupils develop their writing to a reasonable length when writing analytically, creatively or discursively. These pupils generally write accurately and structure their writing suitably in paragraphs. Across the curriculum, the majority of pupils use a suitable range of vocabulary in their writing and generally spell subject-specific terminology accurately. However, overall, there are too few opportunities for pupils to write at length in relevant subjects or to edit and redraft their writing. Pupils are given too much structure and support by their teachers when writing. As a result, pupils' responses are often simple, short, and lack clarity and coherence. A minority of pupils make regular basic errors in their work, such as not always using capital letters appropriately, and teachers' marking for literacy is too inconsistent to be effective. A minority of pupils have weak handwriting skills which impact on their ability to communicate clearly.

A majority of pupils have sound basic number skills and work competently with the four rules of number. They find the area of simple shapes and multiply basic fractions suitably. Overall, pupils do not develop their understanding of mathematics and numeracy concepts well enough which limits their ability to recall and apply important concepts independently or in more challenging contexts.

Overall, pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to apply and develop their numeracy skills across the curriculum. In a very few relevant subjects, they draw a range of graphs accurately and work suitably with number. A minority of pupils make basic errors when drawing graphs and rarely analyse them. There are appropriate examples of pupils

working with number and algebra across the curriculum. However, they are often provided with too much support and rarely demonstrate an ability to rearrange equations independently.

Most pupils have a positive attitude towards Welsh language and are beginning to develop greater confidence when speaking it. Many pupils recall basic vocabulary suitably and pronounce Welsh words clearly and accurately. A minority of pupils lack confidence when speaking as they do not have enough opportunities to respond or converse in Welsh. A majority of pupils locate facts in Welsh language texts suitably to answer basic questions. They write short pieces of work and demonstrate a suitable standard of accuracy. However, too often, pupils rely heavily on structural patterns and scaffolds to support oral and written tasks. Overall, a majority of pupils make adequate progress in developing their Welsh skills.

Pupils benefit from a few suitable opportunities in different subjects to learn about Welsh heritage and culture. The 'Cryw Cymraeg' is an enthusiastic and active pupil group that promotes the Welsh language and culture throughout the school. For example, they promote Welsh music through initiatives such as 'Dydd Mercher Miwsig' and teaching a Welsh lesson during the Year 6 transition days. In addition to taking part in the school Eisteddfod, they value competing in Eisteddfod y Rhondda and Eisteddfod yr Urdd.

A few subjects provide helpful opportunities for pupils to develop their digital skills. This includes creating and editing digital content suitably. In their information communication technology lessons (ICT), pupils develop their coding skills suitably and make use of a range of software including databases and spreadsheets.

In general, pupils demonstrate suitable fine motor skills through stitching, painting and word processing. They have accurate hand-eye coordination skills when taking part in sporting activities such as basketball, badminton and lifesaving.

## **Curriculum**

Aberdare Community School's vision for Curriculum for Wales focuses on quality learning experiences and pupil progression. However, this does not always translate well enough into planning and provision.

Overall, leaders have adapted the school's broad and balanced curriculum suitably to meet the needs of pupils, for example, through the 'basic skills' curriculum in Year 7 and the 'Cyfle' provision for vulnerable and disengaged pupils in Years 10 and 11. However, there are insufficient opportunities for pupils to practice and apply their literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum. In general, pupils in Year 9 choose to study from a broadly appropriate range of general and vocational courses that reflect their interests and aspirations. They are provided with a helpful range of impartial information and

opportunities to inform their options and career choices. The school provides a vibrant and inclusive programme of extra-curricular opportunities which are well attended by pupils.

The school's personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural education programme provides generally appropriate learning experiences for pupils. It covers a range of suitable topics, such as emotional well-being, personal identity and respectful relationships. This provision is supported suitably through assemblies, the tutorial programme and worthwhile partnerships with external organisations. Pupils also develop their understanding of the history and the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and LGBTQ+ community, for example, when studying Dean Atta's poetry in English as part of a unit on identity.

### **Sixth form**

In the sixth form, many pupils engage purposefully in lessons and work well independently. They discuss topics thoughtfully with their peers and contribute suitably to wider conversations. Many pupils interact positively with visitors and speak enthusiastically about their experiences in school and their future ambitions.

The sixth form curriculum is broad and varied. It offers a wide range of general and vocational subjects to meet the needs of an increasing number of pupils. The school also provides a worthwhile programme of personal and social education through 'enrichment' sessions. Pupils benefit from valuable mentoring and impartial guidance focused on their individual needs. As a result, most feel well supported and informed about their future options. Sixth form pupils play an active role in the life of the school including leading the Senedd committees, mentoring younger pupils and contributing to whole school decision making.

### **Well-being, care, support and guidance**

Aberdare Community School is a caring and inclusive community where positive relationships between staff and pupils underpin all aspects of its work. The work of a dedicated pastoral team contributes to the calm and nurturing environment where most pupils say that they feel happy and safe at school. The school has a strong safeguarding culture. There are clear roles, robust procedures and well-coordinated systems that ensure safeguarding arrangements are understood and implemented consistently. The school works effectively with a range of external agencies, to support pupils' needs.

The school has effective processes for promoting good behaviour and for dealing with any incidents of poor behaviour. As a result, many pupils behave well in lessons or around the school. Most pupils know who to turn to if they have a problem and they are confident that

staff listen to them. Staff deal promptly with the very few incidents of alleged bullying and harassment, and restorative approaches are used well to support all pupils involved.

Whole school attendance has improved over the past two years. Recent strategies, particularly the redeployment of staff to strengthen the leadership of attendance, are beginning to bring about positive results. Despite this, attendance remains too low, is below that of similar schools and has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals and rates of persistent absence have improved gradually but continue to be well below those of similar schools.

Pupils value the wide range of extra-curricular opportunities, including musical ensembles, sports activities and chess club. They benefit from the opportunity to participate in a variety of enrichment trips and visits, for example trips to theatres, museums, the Senedd in Cardiff and Krakow. Enrichment trips such as skiing, visits to Paris, London and Llangrannog, provide memorable experiences.

Pupils benefit from well-structured and effective pastoral arrangements at all stages. These include a broad range of activities, including taster days in Years 5 and 6, which help them settle confidently and quickly into Year 7.

Pupils benefit from meaningful opportunities to lead and to contribute to the life of the school, including through a well-established 'School Senedd'. The mental health and well-being, and diversity committees lead successful initiatives, which include charity fundraising events like the 'Colour Run'. The school's 'International Committee' promotes inclusion and equity, leading worthwhile whole school events such as 'International Community Day' and the 'Race Against Hate'.

The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) team has an appropriate understanding of pupils' needs and has developed trusting relationships with these pupils in order to work together to support them. There are effective procedures for early identification through strong cluster transition arrangements. To support their transition, ALN pupils benefit from enhanced visits during the school holidays. The ALN team work effectively with external agencies to offer extra support when required. One-page profiles provide adequate information and are centrally accessible to all staff. However, teachers do not always use this information well enough when planning lessons.

The school provides a wide range of suitable interventions that support pupils' academic, social and behavioural needs, including in the 'Hafan', 'Noddfa' and 'Cyfle' provisions. These help pupils to develop their confidence, self-esteem and resilience and to reduce their barriers to learning.

## **Local Authority Specialist Classes**

The local authority specialist classes provide a highly valued, safe and nurturing environment which helps pupils manage their anxiety and maintain readiness to learn. Well-being support is strong and well-coordinated. The school benefits from well-trained and highly experienced staff. A range of screening and monitoring tools are used appropriately to inform support and track well-being.

Pupils in the 'Astra' and 'Sirius' classes generally make expected progress from their starting points. They have access to an appropriate curriculum that supports the development of their life skills well. This includes helpful practical learning opportunities, that help them to prepare for adulthood. Despite this, systems for evaluating the impact of teaching and pupil progress are not sufficiently robust.

The provision is well integrated within the wider school community. It is well resourced and organised, with clear visual timetables, access to ICT and flexible spaces that support pupils' engagement suitably.

## **Leading and improving**

The headteacher provides assured and measured leadership. Since his appointment in September 2024, he has focused well on developing a strong culture of safeguarding and nurturing purposeful relationships with staff, pupils and the wider school community. This has started to secure the trust necessary to underpin his vision for pupils to 'strive, achieve, believe'. He has developed a broad understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement, including the need to develop leadership at all levels.

Effective leadership has established a strong culture of safeguarding and secured improvements in well-being and attendance. Leaders have expanded the sixth form provision which has enhanced pupils' opportunities post-16. However, currently, the quality of leadership across the school is too variable. As a result, it has not led to sufficient improvements in important aspects of the school's work such as teaching, the provision for skills, and precise self-evaluation and improvement planning.

Senior leaders' roles and responsibilities are clear, equitable and generally understood. Although, many are too operational in their roles and lack strategic awareness. This shortcoming is reflected in their own line-management of middle leaders. As a result, they do not provide a strong enough level of challenge and support to help those middle leaders develop their leadership skills or strengthen their evaluation of teaching and learning. This hinders their ability to lead and improve their areas of responsibility.

Many middle leaders are positive about the changes made by the headteacher since his appointment and demonstrate clearly their commitment to improving pupils' learning and

well-being. Most can detail end of Year 11 outcomes but their evaluations of this data and of standards are not always incisive enough. Alongside their infrequent involvement in quality assurance processes, this makes it difficult for them to identify precisely and plan to improve the aspects within their areas of responsibility that are most in need of improvement.

The school has recently changed its approach to evaluation and improvement, including introducing new processes and systems. Although leaders gather a suitable range of first-hand evidence about the school's work, they do not focus well enough on the impact that provision has on pupils' progress or well-being. Too often they focus only on compliance with school policies which limits their ability to identify specific strengths and areas for improvement in important aspects of their work. This is particularly the case when considering the quality of teaching and learning, where leaders often have too positive a view of the provision and its impact on pupil progress. As a result, leaders at all levels do not plan for improvement precisely enough. They generally set broad improvement priorities and do not consider carefully enough how or when they will monitor the impact of their work. In addition, the school has not made sufficient progress against the recommendations from the last core inspection.

Processes to monitor and evaluate the performance of staff are suitable and understood. Generally, staff view them as supportive as they link to a range of broadly relevant professional learning opportunities. However, these opportunities are not always aligned closely enough to the aspects of their work most in need of improvement. As a result, the school's professional learning offer has not led to sufficient improvements in the quality of teaching or leadership. The school's own evaluation of this professional learning is not secure as it is not linked precisely to its impact on learning.

The governors bring broad and relevant experience to their role and provide staunch support for the school. They are suitably informed about finance and are aware of end of Year 11 outcomes. However, their awareness of areas needing improvement in teaching and leadership is limited, which allows them to offer only modest levels of challenge regarding the school's performance.

Governors, senior leaders and the business manager monitor the school's budget diligently. There are appropriate processes in place to provide secure financial management though currently, the school is operating on a deficit budget with an agreed recovery plan in place.

The school has a suitable approach to alleviating the effects of poverty on educational attainment. There is a clear emphasis on this being everyone's responsibility and is an integral part of the whole-school culture of supporting all pupils. The school supports the well-being and attainment of pupils from low-income households through a wide range of

strategies, including curriculum design, practical support with the cost of school life, and equitable access to digital resources.

The school has focussed well on a few national priorities, such as improving attendance, supporting pupils with ALN, and reducing the effects of poverty on pupils' well-being and engagement in learning. Pastoral leaders know pupils and their families well which helps the school to ensure timely support where necessary. This includes increasing the cultural capital of these pupils and raising their aspirations. However, over the past three years, the performance in their Year 11 examinations of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is slightly below that of their counterparts in similar schools and their attendance remains too low. In addition, the school has not had enough impact on other national priorities such as improving the strategic planning for the progressive development of pupils' skills.

### **Additional information**

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

The school's arrangements for site management do not give any cause for concern.

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

In general, leaders and governors manage the school's finances appropriately, although there is currently an in-year deficit, with a recovery plan agreed with the local authority. While leaders, and governors, plan and monitor the use of the pupil development grant suitably, this spending is not having a significant impact on outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals, particularly in improving their attendance.

## 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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