



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

A report on

Blackwood Comprehensive School

**Ty Isha Terrace
Cefn Fforest
Blackwood
NP12 1ER**

Date of inspection: May 2023

by

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

About Blackwood Comprehensive School

Name of provider	Blackwood Comprehensive School
Local authority	Caerphilly County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	986
Pupils of statutory school age	986
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 20.2%)	25.3%
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 17.8%)	20.9%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	*
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	2.4%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2018
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/11/2015
Start date of inspection	15/05/2023

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

Pupils at Blackwood Comprehensive School are friendly, courteous, well-rounded young people who convey strong pride in their school and their personal achievements. There is a highly inclusive ethos in the school and wide-ranging provision and support for pupils' well-being and their social and moral development. As a result, they develop successfully as responsible, well-informed citizens who know that their individuality will be celebrated and respected by the school community.

Effective teaching means that pupils make good progress in their knowledge, understanding and skills in many lessons. In a few cases, pupils make particularly strong progress. Their oracy skills are a notable strength, as is the pride with which they present their work in their books. Most display excellent attitudes to learning and behave very well. Their enthusiastic participation in extra-curricular activities and leadership opportunities is of particular note.

Leaders' belief that pupils' well-being is an important precursor to learning permeates all aspects of the school's work. All leaders take pupils' views into account on a regular basis and the school has developed a range of valuable provisions to meet the evolving needs of vulnerable pupils. There is a well-established culture of safeguarding pupils and most feel safe and secure in school. The school has robust procedures to monitor attendance and helpful processes to support pupils with low attendance. However, despite improvements in attendance from last year, it remains a cause for concern, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals.

The central importance of high-quality teaching is strongly emphasised and is at the heart of the school's approach to the curriculum. The school has a clear vision for Curriculum for Wales. Staff within the school and across partner primary schools have worked collaboratively to develop an authentic, purposeful curriculum and plan for appropriate progression. The programme of professional learning around teaching has been successful in promoting core principles that are evident in lessons. The programme also introduces staff to a menu of additional strategies, but they have the freedom to choose what is right for their pupils and subject. Teaching is of consistently good quality in many lessons. Many teachers use assessment information effectively to plan lessons and they provide helpful feedback to pupils.

Staff across the school work extremely effectively as a team. Their attitudes and their work reflect their commitment to the pupils and the school's values, as well as a clear sense of shared accountability.

The skilful way in which the headteacher balances caring, compassionate leadership with a highly reflective, strategic and evaluative approach has inspired and influenced the work of other leaders. The consistently strong leadership skills demonstrated by many leaders at all levels is a notable feature. There is a culture of regular, rigorous self-evaluation leading to effective action planning and supported by purposeful professional learning. Governors are supportive of the school and are beginning to improve their understanding of the school's work and their role. However, mainly because many of the governors are new, they lack a detailed knowledge of the school's strengths and weaknesses and therefore do not provide sufficient challenge.

Recommendations

R1 Improve attendance, especially that of pupils eligible for free school meals

R2 Strengthen the role of governors as critical friends of the school

What happens next

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

Estyn will invite the school to prepare a case study on its work in relation to self-evaluation and developing pupils' digital skills for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main evaluation

Learning

Many pupils make good progress in their learning and a few make particularly strong progress. In many lessons, effective teaching enables pupils of all abilities to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills well and to make positive progress. Many show secure recall of prior learning. For example, they recall how to calculate angles in different shapes and use this knowledge to work out bearings. A few pupils struggle to recall prior learning. In general, pupils make effective use of scaffolding and support to help them with their learning but at times they become over-reliant on this support and do not develop their independence well enough. In these instances, pupils do not always make as much progress as they could.

Most pupils listen well and with respect to their teachers and peers. Many pupils are eager contributors to class discussions and also discuss well in pairs and small groups. The majority explain their viewpoints clearly, supporting their responses with sensible reasons and using subject-specific vocabulary accurately. A few more able pupils provide detailed, mature responses and employ a broad vocabulary such as when analysing the relative strengths of castle types in Norman times in history lessons.

When reading, many pupils locate information efficiently and deal competently with a variety of texts. For example, in French, most pupils read short texts and locate information successfully, and a few deal with more complex texts well. When reading aloud, pupils generally do so confidently and with expression. With support, many pupils synthesise information from a range of texts well. A similar proportion make basic inferences from written and visual texts. They successfully apply strategies that help them to analyse texts in English lessons, with a majority also analysing writing techniques and language choices, using terminology to do so. They are less confident when analysing texts independently. A few pupils make sophisticated inferences, such as when exploring the class divide in 1980s Britain when studying 'Blood Brothers'. A few pupils lack basic reading strategies to help them to decode words and understand texts.

Across the curriculum and especially in English lessons, many pupils write appropriately at length, for example when writing an explanation of 'How and why do Venus flytraps digest flies?' in science. Many develop their vocabulary well and make accurate use of new and subject specific vocabulary that is introduced to them. Many pupils structure their work effectively. They use paragraphs to organise their writing and apply techniques to provide a logical order to their written work. Many write in a range of forms and a majority show an awareness of audience. Pupils make effective use of scaffolds and models to structure their writing, but can become overly-dependent on these. In addition, this can limit their creativity and result in an overly-formulaic approach. Many pupils' writing is generally accurate but a small minority of pupils make frequent spelling, punctuation and grammar errors, have only a basic vocabulary and struggle to write with control.

The majority of pupils are fluent with number. They calculate with percentages, fractions, negative numbers and ratios confidently. They apply their understanding to

solve problems, such as when they calculate the quantities of ingredients when adapting recipes and then calculate the cost of preparing the dishes. The majority of pupils have a sound understanding of shapes and measures. They convert between metric and imperial units, and calculate perimeters and areas of a variety of shapes. The majority of pupils analyse data well. They calculate averages and plot graphs accurately, using their graphs to draw sensible conclusions. For example, pupils draw graphs to determine the solubility of a solid at a given temperature in science. A few pupils have strong numeracy skills. For example, they apply their understanding of Pythagoras' Theorem to find the lengths of missing sides in 3D shapes. A minority of pupils have weak numeracy skills. For example, they struggle to calculate fractions of numbers, solve equations or do not understand how to calculate areas of basic shapes.

Many pupils are able to use information and communication technology (ICT) effectively across the curriculum. Nearly all use basic functions of a spreadsheet confidently and many use spreadsheets and formulae competently to analyse data and produce bar graphs. A few use more complex functions such as step values and absolute cell referencing confidently. Pupils use coding well to create websites in skills challenge lessons as part of their enterprise challenge. In design technology, they use software to design sustainable glamping pods.

Many pupils make sound progress in their Welsh language skills. Most recall prior vocabulary well in Welsh lessons but a few have weak recall of prior learning. Most can say simple phrases when expressing their opinions and give simple reasons to support their answers, using scaffolding. The majority of pupils pronounce Welsh words correctly. Many can read and understand basic Welsh texts and accurately identify relevant information. Many pupils can write simple sentences in Welsh using suitable verb tenses, vocabulary and accurate spelling. A few can write extended written work, using sophisticated vocabulary and idioms independently to make their work more interesting.

Most pupils engage positively with opportunities to develop their physical skills, for example when learning about sprint box starts in physical education lessons or when participating enthusiastically in the broad range of sporting opportunities available to them. When given the opportunities, pupils generally develop their thinking skills well. For example, they respond sensitively to important questions such as 'can money bring happiness?' and 'will discrimination always exist?' through discussion and writing. Similarly, pupils engage well with the opportunities they have to develop their creative skills such as when composing hip hop in music lessons or researching, designing and making a personalised recycled carrier bag in design technology lessons.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Blackwood Comprehensive School pupils convey evident pride in their school community. Most are friendly, polite pupils who are warm and welcoming to visitors and have positive and respectful relationships with staff. They engage readily in conversations with adults, speaking maturely about their views and their learning. Many pupils feel respected and treated fairly by the school staff. They feel valued and supported to achieve.

Most pupils feel safe and secure at school. These pupils report that they are not bullied and feel that the school deals effectively with any incidents that occur.

Most pupils behave very well in lessons, contributing to a calm and focused learning environment. They arrive promptly to lessons and settle to work quickly. Many pupils demonstrate appropriate respect for the contributions of others in class, for example when discussing the impact of verbal abuse with their peers in well-being lessons. In recent years, a very few pupils have exhibited particularly challenging behaviour, resulting in an increase in exclusions.

Most pupils engage well with their learning and show interest in their work. Many sustain their concentration and persevere with tasks, even when they find learning to be more of a challenge. The high standard of presentation of pupils' work is a notable feature, reflecting their sense of pride in their work and achievements. Many work constructively in pairs and groups, and the majority are enthusiastic and curious learners. The majority of pupils respond well to feedback that is provided by their teachers, although a minority only offer superficial responses to written feedback and improvement tasks.

Pupils' attendance has improved well compared to last year, when the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact nationally on school attendance. However, attendance remains a cause for concern, in particular that of pupils eligible for free school meals.

Most pupils are aware of how to make healthy choices and benefit from the personal, social and health education (PSHE) and physical education (PE) lessons that support them to lead a healthy and active lifestyle. Many pupils take an active part in a comprehensive range of extra-curricular activities, such as chess club, music ensembles and sporting activities that include trampolining and javelin.

Pupils develop well as ethical citizens who stress the importance of celebrating diversity and promoting equality and inclusion. For example, they are well-informed about children's rights and co-constructed the school's vision statement to focus on all members of the school community being valued equally.

Many pupils feel that the school listens to their views and takes them into account. The School Council plays an active part in the life of the school. For example, they decided the new layout of the canteen facilities and chose the reward trip at the end of the year. Pupils also participate in an impressive range of additional opportunities to develop their leadership, for example as Form Captains, Year Council members, Rights of the Child Ambassadors, Anti-Bullying Ambassadors, Pride Buddies, Eco Group members and Well-being Ambassadors.

Teaching and learning experiences

The school's strong focus on improving teaching and learning has led to teaching of consistently good quality in many lessons. Teachers are committed to the core principles of teaching that the school promotes, and make good use of the flexibility that they have to select and adapt strategies to suit their subject and pupils. They are eager to improve and develop their practice and benefit from the effective professional learning programme.

Nearly all teachers nurture strong and positive working relationships with their classes which stem from mutual respect. Most are knowledgeable and passionate about their subjects, and use specialist terminology well. Overall, they are good language models for the pupils. Most teachers create a calm, purposeful learning environment that supports pupil progress well. They have high expectations of pupils' conduct and engagement alike.

In many lessons, teachers have useful routines and provide engaging starters and helpful resources which motivate pupils and help them to sustain their concentration. These teachers give careful consideration to the learning when planning their lessons. They provide a series of well-sequenced activities that build effectively on each other to ensure progress and challenge. These teachers provide clear instructions and explanations to help pupils understand tasks, and they model what success looks like effectively. They circulate the classroom, offering valuable and constructive verbal feedback in a timely manner to help pupils complete their work to the best of their ability. These teachers ensure that the pace of teaching closely matches the pace of learning. They regularly check pupils' understanding, adapting their lessons accordingly and addressing any misconceptions promptly. Pupils make good progress in these lessons but at times teachers give too much guidance and over-scaffold the learning, which can hinder the pupils from developing their independent learning skills sufficiently. In a few lessons, teachers do not check pupils' understanding thoroughly enough. As a result, they do not tailor their lessons to the needs of the pupils sufficiently or ensure suitable challenge.

Where lessons are particularly effective, teachers have very high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They use their subject knowledge expertly to build pupils' understanding and fire their imaginations. They enable pupils to develop as confident, independent learners.

Many teachers use questioning well to check for knowledge and understanding. A majority ask more probing questions to deepen pupils' thinking and ensure that they provide extended verbal responses. However, a few teachers' questions do not always probe pupils' understanding well enough or they rely too heavily on the same pupils to respond.

Many teachers provide useful and constructive written feedback to pupils. This helps them to understand what they have done well and how they need to improve. A majority of teachers provide valuable opportunities for pupils to respond to their feedback and improve their work. However, in a minority of instances, the quality of written feedback and teachers' expectations of pupils' responses are too inconsistent.

The school has appropriate systems for tracking and monitoring pupil progress and identifying those who are underachieving. Reports to parents include valuable information on their child's progress and their attitudes to learning. They also contain helpful personalised comments and targets for improvement.

The curriculum is broad and balanced and has been planned carefully to meet the needs of nearly all pupils successfully. The Key Stage 4 curriculum is comprehensive and prepares pupils well for their next stage of life. The wide range of courses means that most pupils are able to pursue their individual interests and aspirations

beneficially. For example, there are appropriate pathways for more able pupils through enrichment activities and courses such as additional mathematics. Pupils can also study a suitably broad range of vocational subjects such as construction and courses in finance and hospitality. The school provides helpful information and guidance during the options process and most pupils are able to follow their chosen subjects.

The school has a clear vision for Curriculum for Wales. High quality teaching and learning opportunities are at the heart of its approach. Staff collaborate successfully with primary colleagues to plan for appropriate progression of learning. Subject leaders collaborate purposefully and have thought carefully about what pupils need to know, do and understand across each Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE) and how to make authentic links across the curriculum. Skills co-ordinators are working beneficially with subject leaders and teachers to plan coherently for the development of pupils' skills within the new curriculum.

The literacy, numeracy and digital skills coordinators provide valuable guidance on skills development and there are many purposeful opportunities for pupils to practise these skills across the curriculum. For example, pupils in Years 7 and 8 track their use of technology through a digital skills passport and benefit from valuable opportunities to develop these skills in authentic and creative contexts, such as when they create and edit videos in drama. Teachers have been provided with useful professional learning and resources to support the development of pupils' skills. Skills leaders have recognised the need to further strengthen the progressive development of pupils' skills. Leaders make effective use of data from a range of baseline tests to target pupils who need support to develop their basic literacy and numeracy skills. The school has a successful programme of interventions, which is helping many of them to make good progress in improving these skills.

The PSE curriculum prepares pupils well for life in modern Wales, as they learn about relevant topics such as online safety, healthy relationships and diversity. This is particularly the case at Key Stage 3. There are many opportunities for pupils to debate and discuss complex issues and the school draws on the expertise of external agencies to support the programme when appropriate. For example, staff and pupils have worked closely with Victim Support Wales to develop pupils' understanding of hate crime. This reflects the inclusive ethos of the school.

Most pupils are entered for a qualification in Welsh at the end of Key Stage 4. There are suitable opportunities for pupils to develop their appreciation of Welsh heritage and culture through whole-school events such as 'Diwrnod Shwmae? Su'mae?' and 'Dydd Miwsig Cymru'. The school has recently launched its Criw Cymraeg, a pupil group who promote Welsh culture and encourage the use of the Welsh language in lessons and around the school.

Pupils benefit from a wide variety of enrichment and extra-curricular opportunities. These include many sporting, arts and cultural activities that develop pupils' skills. Many pupils embrace these opportunities and value how they enrich the taught curriculum.

Care, support and guidance

Supporting pupil well-being and promoting inclusion is at the heart of every aspect of Blackwood Comprehensive School. Staff have a detailed knowledge of pupils' learning and well-being needs. Information about pupils' well-being is monitored and analysed carefully by senior leaders, pastoral leaders and support staff. They use their analysis to effectively plan tailored support and interventions for pupils, working closely with their families and relevant external agencies.

The school has repurposed its form time at the start of the day into a 'lesson 1' that focuses specifically on supporting pupils' well-being. Through this lesson, assemblies and its work with specialist organisations, the school is highly effective in supporting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. This work successfully promotes equality, diversity and inclusion, enabling pupils to develop shared values such as respect, empathy and compassion. The school highly values the voice of pupils in informing, influencing and evaluating the school's work to promote well-being, safety and freedom from bullying and harassment.

The school provides strong support to alleviate the impact of poverty on educational attainment. Staff monitor carefully the progress in learning and well-being for pupils eligible for free school meals. The school's helpful support for these pupils includes free music lessons, access to a store of well-maintained PE kit and ingredients for food technology lessons and subsidised trips.

The school has a beneficial range of provisions to support learners with different needs. This includes the 'Llwyddo' nurture provision for younger pupils, 'Cwtch' for learning and well-being interventions and 'The Hwb', which provides support for pupils who struggle with mainstream classes, including those at risk of permanent exclusion or disengagement from school.

The school's approach to promoting positive behaviour is effective in creating a calm and orderly learning environment. There is suitable provision for those very few pupils who struggle to follow school rules, but the purpose of this provision is not fully understood by all pupils and parents.

The school has robust procedures to monitor attendance and uses helpful interventions to support pupils with low attendance. Although attendance has improved considerably this year compared to last year, it remains a cause for concern, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals.

Leaders have effective oversight of the provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN). Most of the school's wide range of support for pupils with ALN is provided by an internal team of skilled and caring staff. They use a variety of helpful approaches that are matched well to the identified needs of pupils. Their choice of approach takes good account of the views of pupils, parents and external agencies. Teachers and support staff throughout the school are provided with useful, timely information about these pupils and suggested strategies to use when working with them. Despite this, the impact of learning support assistants in mainstream classrooms is too variable. These pupils' progress is tracked and analysed thoroughly and the school frequently refines their provision following the success of an intervention, changes in pupils' circumstances, or in response to a particular

approach not having the desired impact. In many cases, the school's support and intervention services enable pupils with ALN to make good progress, for example in their reading skills or their ability to manage their behaviour.

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

Leadership and management

The headteacher is an inspiring leader, who successfully balances compassionate and reflective leadership with strategic thinking and rigorous evaluation. She is strongly supported by the senior leadership team. Together, they have created a vision based on providing a nurturing and aspirational learning environment in which pupils and staff feel safe, supported and they 'strive to succeed'. The vision has been co-constructed and is well understood by the school community. Senior leaders model positive behaviours effectively and have high expectations of leaders, staff and pupils. Staff appreciate the high levels of support and challenge. This has led to them working effectively as a team and has created a strong culture of continuous professional development and shared accountability.

Senior leaders' roles and responsibilities are distributed equitably and are well understood by all. Leaders focus clearly on national and school priorities such as improving outcomes for pupils disadvantaged by poverty, developing Curriculum for Wales and cross-curricular skills. They ensure that securing equity for all pupils is at the heart of the school's work.

Communication with parents is generally good. Leaders and staff keep parents well informed about different aspects of school life.

Senior leaders have a detailed and accurate understanding of strengths and areas for development in learning, teaching and provision based on a wide range of valuable self-evaluation activities. They have been successful in bringing about important improvements. For example, pupil behaviour has improved through a consistent focus on well-being and implementing a range of provisions to support vulnerable pupils.

In many cases, line management between senior and middle leaders is rigorous. Discussions focus well on pupils' standards and aspects of teaching and provision. There is a good balance between support and challenge. Middle leaders respond positively to these processes, which contribute substantially to their development as leaders. As a result, there is a consistent approach to leadership across the school.

Most middle leaders are effective in their roles and a minority demonstrate particularly strong leadership. Most curriculum middle leaders have a secure understanding of the general strengths and areas for improvement within their subjects. While the majority explain in detail the standards pupils achieve in their areas from first-hand evidence, a minority rely too heavily on data and summative outcomes in their analysis of learning. Senior leaders ensure that pupil well-being is an important part of the self-evaluation undertaken by subject leaders because they

believe that pupils feeling safe and comfortable is an important precursor to learning. Pastoral leaders undertake helpful self-evaluation based on a wide range of first-hand evidence. This enables them to plan improvements that are tailored to the needs of their year groups, such as the provision for specific vulnerable pupils. Nearly all middle leaders make effective use of feedback from pupils as part of the self-evaluation and improvement process. Self-evaluation and improvement planning processes are notable strengths of the school. They have enabled staff to ensure that, in general, pupils make good progress from their starting points, have positive attitudes to learning and feel safe in school.

Arrangements for performance management are rigorous and closely aligned with the school's priorities for improvement and its professional learning offer. Teachers' objectives are measurable and the process is carried out in a supportive manner. Any underperformance is challenged sensitively and robustly. Leaders ensure that they understand the reasons behind this, such as whether it is the result of a lack of understanding, skills or motivation, and tailor their response accordingly.

Professional learning is a notable strength. Leaders plan professional learning strategically to drive improvements in important aspects of provision they have prioritised, particularly the quality of teaching and support for pupils' well-being. Leaders evaluate professional learning thoroughly by its impact on pupils' progress and well-being. A particular strength of the programme is the use of evidence-based strategies, which teachers can select and adapt to suit the needs of their subjects and pupils. This has had a significant impact on the quality and consistency of teaching. Staff share good practice regularly both within and outside the school. Where areas for development persist, such as the need to ensure appropriate challenge for all pupils and improve questioning, senior leaders provide further professional learning for all teachers and then focus more specifically on individuals who need support.

Governors are supportive of the school and are beginning to carry out their role of ensuring that the school promotes healthy eating and drinking. They are well informed through the detailed information provided by the headteacher and other leaders. In a few areas, such as safeguarding, finance and attendance, they provide appropriate scrutiny. However, governors have gaps in their knowledge regarding the details around the school's strengths and areas for development. This is primarily because many of them are new to their role. Overall, governors do not provide sufficient challenge for leaders and do not carry out their role as a critical friend well enough.

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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