



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

A report on

**Castell Alun High School
Hope
Flintshire
LL12 9PY**

Date of inspection: September 2017

by

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

About Castell Alun High School

Castell Alun High School is an English-medium, mixed 11 to 18 comprehensive school located in the village of Hope, Flintshire. There are 1,360 pupils on roll, including 300 in the sixth form. These figures are very similar to those at the time of the previous inspection in December 2013.

The school serves a wide area made up of mainly rural communities. Around 7% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is much lower than the national average of 16.5%. Less than 2% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales. Around 14% of pupils have an additional learning need, and just over 1% have a statement of special educational needs. Both of these figures are below the Welsh averages of, respectively, 22.7% and 2.2%. Most pupils are from a white, British background. There are very few pupils who are fluent in Welsh or have English as an additional language.

The headteacher has been in post since September 2013. The senior leadership consists of a deputy headteacher and four assistant headteachers. At the time of the inspection, the deputy headteacher had been in the role of acting headteacher for the previous three months.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website at the link below.
<http://mylocalschool.wales.gov.uk/Schools/SchoolSearch?lang=en>

Summary

Castell Alun High School provides an exceptionally positive, caring and supportive environment for its pupils. It is particularly effective in promoting pupils' wellbeing and personal development and developing mature, articulate and enthusiastic learners. Nearly all pupils behave very well and many make strong progress in their learning.

The school is led and managed effectively. Senior leaders and governors have been successful in ensuring that the school's values and priorities are well understood by staff and pupils. They know the school's strengths and areas for development well and have clear plans in place to make further improvements.

Inspection area	Judgement
Standards	Good
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	Excellent
Teaching and learning experiences	Good
Care, support and guidance	Excellent
Leadership and management	Good

Recommendations

- R1 Ensure that self-evaluation processes are consistently robust and rigorous
- R2 Further improve the planning for the development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology skills, especially their writing

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 the professional development of teaching staff for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Standards: Good

In lessons, many pupils make consistently strong progress in developing their knowledge, understanding and skills. Most recall their prior learning well and many apply this understanding successfully to new contexts and increasingly challenging tasks. For example, in mathematics, pupils demonstrate a sound grasp of the key properties of angles in triangles and on a straight line and then use this understanding effectively to investigate the properties of alternate, opposite and corresponding angles. A minority of pupils have a range of highly-developed skills which they use effectively to make rapid and sustained progress. In a very few instances, however, pupils do not maintain their concentration well enough and this limits the progress that they make.

Many pupils have well-developed communication skills. They make useful contributions to class and group discussions and demonstrate a sound grasp of subject terminology. For example, in history, pupils use confidently terms such as religious fundamentalism and the bible belt when discussing the significance of the 1925 'Monkey Trial'. A minority of pupils are able to express their ideas extremely maturely and articulately, such as when they compare religious and secular views regarding the sanctity of life when discussing the death penalty and abortion in religious education.

In most instances, pupils demonstrate secure reading skills. They are confident in skimming and scanning a range of written texts to locate and select relevant information such as when they identify the causes, effects and problems of ageing populations in geography. A minority of pupils have well-developed higher order reading skills. This enables them to, for example, synthesise information from a range of sources when analysing the opening scene of Macbeth.

Many pupils write with appropriate technical accuracy. They demonstrate a sound grasp of purpose and audience when, for example, writing persuasively to create a campaign leaflet or when analysing characters in *Of Mice And Men*. Many pupils structure extended writing appropriately and a minority write with highly-developed fluency and sophistication.

Many pupils have sound number skills and are confident in carrying out mental calculations. They use these skills appropriately in subjects other than mathematics, for example when analysing experimental data in science or forecasting demographical changes in geography. Many pupils have well-developed problem-solving skills which enable them to undertake challenging tasks confidently and successfully. For example, in mathematics, pupils show strong independence in their learning when investigating the properties of interior angles in polygons and reaching well-reasoned conclusions.

At key stage 3, most pupils develop their information and communication technology (ICT) skills appropriately in their ICT lessons, for example when programming a computer to carry out simple operations. In a few subject areas, pupils use specialist software effectively, such as composition programmes in music or when carrying out computer-aided design in design technology. However, overall, pupils' ability to use ICT skills across the curriculum is underdeveloped.

Many pupils develop their creative skills well, for example when they explore themes of death and the afterlife when collaboratively constructing presentations in drama or when combining genres and techniques to produce their own pieces of art or musical compositions.

Between 2013 and 2016, performance in the level 2 threshold, including English and mathematics was largely in line with that of similar schools, although it was below in 2015. Performance in the capped points score was also generally in line with that in similar schools over this period. The proportion of pupils gaining five GCSE or equivalent grades at A*-A has improved steadily over the last few years and was in line with proportions in similar schools in 2016.

In 2014 and 2015, the performance of both boys and girls at key stage 4 compares well to that of both groups in similar schools. This continued to be the case with girls in 2016, but boys' performance was slightly below the averages for boys in similar schools in all indicators. The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals is generally in line with averages for this group of pupils in similar schools. At the end of Year 11, most pupils remain in full time education either in the school or a further education college.

Sixth form pupils generally demonstrate consistently high standards in their work. They show strong independence and maturity in their learning and have well-developed subject knowledge. Many are able to articulate their ideas clearly and with confidence, using a secure grasp of a wide range of subject terminology. Both the average wider points score and proportion of sixth form pupils achieving the level 3 threshold have been broadly in line with levels in similar schools in recent years. The proportion of pupils gaining three A*-C grades has been above the average for similar schools in five of the last six years. However, the proportion achieving three grades at A* or A has been below the average for similar schools over this period.

At key stage 4, the performance of pupils in Welsh second language is consistently well above national averages. In lessons, many pupils make sound progress in developing their Welsh language skills. They have accurate pronunciation and are confident speakers.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Excellent

The school is highly successful in promoting exceptionally strong levels of pupil wellbeing. This has a significant impact on pupils' personal development and the standards that they achieve.

Nearly all pupils feel safe in school and believe that the school deals promptly and effectively with any concerns that they have. They feel that the school provides an extensive range of staff to deal with any issues that arise and have a clear understanding of the range of support available to them.

Nearly all pupils show positive attitudes towards their learning and develop successfully as ethical, informed citizens. They demonstrate exemplary behaviour in lessons and around the school and are polite, courteous and respectful to adults and to their peers. They have well-developed social skills and interact confidently and maturely with staff and visitors to the school.

Most pupils engage very well in lessons, show great pride in their work and are curious, inquisitive and enthusiastic learners. They work well together in pairs and groups and support each other's learning effectively. Many pupils demonstrate high levels of resilience and independence when undertaking challenging tasks, which has a substantial positive impact on their progress.

Most pupils have a secure understanding of the importance of healthy living. Participation rates in the extensive extra-curricular programme, which includes a wide range of sporting, academic and cultural activities, are very high.

All pupils are able to influence important aspects of the life of the school through a wide variety of active groups, such as the school council, the school nutrition action group (SNAG) and the eco committee. These groups have played an important role in influencing many aspects of school life, such as extending the range of healthy food available in the canteen, promoting recycling across the school and refining assessment systems so that they celebrate high levels of effort as well as strong attainment.

Teaching and learning experiences: Good

Overall, the quality of teaching is good. Nearly all teachers have developed strong working relationships with their classes, and the quality of teaching makes a strong contribution to pupils' wellbeing and personal development as well as the standards that they achieve.

In many instances, teachers are effective in communicating their passion and enthusiasm for their subject, which has a positive impact on pupil engagement. These teachers plan carefully-structured lessons that utilise a wide range of approaches and prepare a variety of resources that engage pupils successfully.

Many teachers have consistently high expectations of their pupils. They plan demanding activities that promote strong progress as well as developing effectively pupils' independence in their learning. These teachers use skilfull questioning to challenge pupils' thinking, probe and develop their understanding and monitor their progress. In the majority of lessons, teachers are effective in developing a wide range of pupils' skills alongside improving their subject knowledge and understanding.

In a few instances, teachers do not plan lessons carefully enough. They do not ensure that activities are sufficiently well-matched to pupils' ability or build well enough on their prior learning. These lessons are often too teacher-led, which limits pupil engagement and does not develop pupils' independent learning skills well enough. In these lessons, teachers' questioning is not effective enough in developing pupils' understanding or engaging all pupils in class discussion.

Most teachers provide pupils with useful feedback on how to improve their work. In the majority of cases, pupils respond appropriately to this guidance and improve their work well as a result. However, in a minority of cases, teachers do not ensure consistently enough that pupils have made the necessary improvements.

The curriculum is effective in meeting the needs of individual pupils across all key stages. In particular, the diverse opportunities offered to pupils at key stage 4 ensures that they can choose from a wide range of academic and vocational qualifications. This enables pupils to develop important employability and life skills.

The school plans comprehensive and imaginative schemes of work. Innovative projects, such as working with an artist on an architectural project in mathematics, are effective in helping pupils to become creative and ambitious learners.

The school plans appropriately for the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum. In particular, its strong focus on developing pupils' oracy and reading skills has been highly successful in helping pupils to become confident learners who articulate their ideas clearly. However, there is too much variation in how effectively subjects across the curriculum develop pupils' ability to produce extended writing. Comprehensive provision for pupils who require extra support with their literacy and numeracy skills enables these pupils to make strong progress in developing these skills. However, in a few instances, subject teachers do not plan carefully enough to meet the needs of these pupils. Planning to develop pupils' ICT skills across the curriculum is at an early stage of development.

There is a well-coordinated and high-profile whole-school approach to developing pupils' knowledge and understanding of Welsh language and culture. Provision for Welsh second language is strong at key stage 3 and key stage 4, and uptake of the subject in the sixth form is high.

Extensive enrichment opportunities make a significant impact on pupil engagement. High levels of participation in a variety of subject clubs and local and foreign visits show the extent to which many pupils are proud to represent their school. These activities play an important role in pupils' personal development. For example, the physical education department has established a number of valuable links with local clubs, which help pupils to develop their leadership skills.

Care, support and guidance: Excellent

The school has been highly successful in creating a positive, caring and inclusive ethos and provides outstanding care, support and guidance for all pupils. A culture of high expectation and respect for others permeates all of its work. This has a significant impact on pupils' wellbeing and the progress they make in their learning and personal development.

The school has comprehensive systems to monitor pupils' academic progress and their wellbeing. It uses this system extremely well to celebrate achievement as well as to identify any underperformance or barriers to learning. This enables the school to intervene promptly to meet the needs of individual pupils. A notable feature of the school's provision is the 'conduct log', which is used consistently and effectively to identify swiftly any issues concerning pupil behaviour. Parents are well informed regarding all aspects of their children's progress.

The school provides high quality advice and guidance which provides invaluable support for pupils making important decisions at the end of each key stage. For example, all key stage 4 pupils and their parents have the opportunity to meet with a

specialist careers adviser. The learning coach support provided for vulnerable pupils is a particularly outstanding feature of the school's work. This support is extremely effective in raising the aspirations and self-esteem of these pupils and preparing them for further education, employment or training. The school, in partnership with a wide range of external agencies, also provides highly effective support for pupils with social or emotional needs and their families. For example, the Year 7 nurture class ensures that vulnerable learners are supported well to settle into secondary school life.

Pupils with additional learning needs receive effective support. The school reviews these pupils' progress carefully and involves parents appropriately in these reviews. Individual plans provide beneficial targets for these pupils and give subject teachers useful advice on how to meet their needs.

The school has appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking. A wide range of approaches, including an extensive range of sporting activities and the work of SNAG, ensures that the importance of healthy living is a high priority within the school.

The school is highly effective in helping pupils to become ethical, informed and active citizens. Pupils play a significant role in whole-school decision-making through the active school council and other pupil groups. Activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and community and charity events contribute well to the personal development of many pupils.

The school has appropriate plans in place for the delivery of the daily act of collective worship. These plans are complemented well by a wide range of valuable resources to support its 'thought for the day' programme. However, a few staff do not have a sufficiently clear understanding of the requirements of this programme. As a result, the school does not meet this statutory requirement. Nonetheless, overall, the school makes a strong contribution to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The religious education curriculum, a comprehensive PSE programme and the weekly whole-school assembly provide pupils with a sound understanding of these issues. The school is highly effective in promoting diversity and inclusivity.

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Leadership and management: Good

Strong and effective leadership has been successful in establishing a positive, supportive and purposeful ethos across the school. The development of mature, independent learners who are well prepared for life after school is at the heart of the school's work. This vision is communicated clearly by leaders at all levels and is clearly understood by all staff. This has played an important role in securing high standards, effective teaching and exceptional attitudes to learning.

All leaders have a clear understanding of their role, and a carefully-structured programme of leadership activities supports them well in discharging their responsibilities. Leaders set ambitious targets for the school and robust line management arrangements enable them to monitor progress against these targets regularly and rigorously. Senior leaders identify and challenge underperformance suitably.

There are clear lines of communication across the school and senior leaders carry out extensive consultation with staff. This ensures that all staff have a clear understanding of the school's policies and priorities and it also contributes effectively to staff wellbeing. This has resulted in good staff morale and the establishment of a strong sense of common purpose across the school.

The school has developed a clear, well-understood cycle of self-evaluation and improvement planning activities. It draws suitably on a wide range of evidence, including performance data, lesson observations, scrutiny of pupils' work and the views of pupils, parents and staff. This enables leaders, in many cases, to identify accurately strengths and areas for development and to put in place useful plans to bring about improvements. However, in a few areas, evaluations are not sufficiently precise to identify clearly enough important aspects that require improvement, for example in the few areas where teaching is not consistently effective or in the delivery of the daily act of collective worship. Furthermore, while leaders generally focus well on pupil standards in these activities, their evaluation of pupils' skills development does not draw consistently well enough on the evaluation of first hand evidence about the quality of the work that pupils produce in lessons.

Whole-school and departmental improvement plans are closely aligned to the school's identified priorities and address suitably the areas for development identified through self-evaluation processes. They contain an appropriate range of actions to address these areas for improvement. However, in a few cases, success criteria are not sufficiently explicit or focused well enough on the intended impact on pupil outcomes.

Performance management arrangements are, in general, suitably rigorous. Targets link closely with whole-school and departmental priorities and in many instances focus well on raising pupil standards. However, in a few cases, success criteria are not measurable or sharp enough.

A notable strength of the school is the way in which leaders plan for and support the professional learning of teaching staff. Many teachers are involved in valuable team research activities, which are well matched to their professional development needs. These 'enquiry teams' are effective in developing and sharing good practice and are well supported by partnerships with other providers. This has played an important role in developing effective teaching across many areas of the school.

Governors have a sound understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. They play an important role in setting the school's strategic direction and provide robust challenge, particularly on financial matters. They use their experience and expertise well to make a valuable contribution to the school's improvement planning, for example in how the school develops pupils' employability skills.

The school deploys its resources efficiently. Spending is linked closely to whole-school priorities and is monitored carefully. The school makes effective use of the available accommodation and has been successful in creating a positive learning environment. It makes good use of grant funding. For example, the pupil development grant is used to fund the work of the learning coach, which makes a valuable contribution to the progress and wellbeing of vulnerable pupils.

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Estyn evaluates a provider's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

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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