



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

A report on

**Ferndale Community School
Ferndale
CF43 4AR**

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by

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

About Ferndale Community School

Ferndale Community School is a mixed English-medium 11-16 school maintained by Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority. There are currently 579 pupils on roll, which represents a decrease of nearly 100 pupils since the last inspection in November 2010. The school's sixth form closed at the end of the 2016-2017 academic year.

Most pupils come from the Rhondda Fach valley. Around 35% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is significantly higher than the national average of 17%. Over 60% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas in Wales. Nearly all pupils speak English as their first language and come from a white, British background. Only a very few pupils are fluent in Welsh.

The school takes pupils from the full ability range. Around a third of pupils have a special educational need, which is higher than the national average of 21.5%. Just over 2% of pupils have a statement of special educational needs, slightly above the Welsh average of 2%. The school hosts a special needs unit which supports key stage 3 and key stage 4 pupils from across the local authority with complex needs.

The school is currently a pioneer school and is working with Welsh Government and other schools to take forward developments relating to professional learning. The headteacher has been in post since February 2017. The senior leadership team consists of a deputy headteacher and two assistant headteachers. They are currently supported by a third assistant headteacher, acting in a temporary capacity to facilitate the school's work as a pioneer school, and three temporary associate assistant headteachers.

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

At Ferndale Community School, strong leadership, effective teaching and a positive and caring ethos have combined successfully to secure consistently outstanding outcomes for pupils. All groups of pupils make very strong progress during their time at the school, including those pupils who enter the school with low levels of literacy and numeracy. At key stage 4, the school's performance compares very well with that of similar schools.

The school prepares pupils very well for life after Year 11. In addition to helping them to achieve valuable qualifications, the school contributes well to pupils' personal and social development. This gives them a strong platform from which to move on to further education, training or employment.

The school's curriculum, in many aspects, meets the needs of pupils very well, and this has a positive impact on their engagement in their learning and the standards that they achieve. Senior leaders and governors have a secure understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development, and have a strong track record of putting effective improvement strategies into place.

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

Recommendations

- R1 Ensure that self-evaluation arrangements across the school are consistently robust and rigorous
- R2 Ensure that all middle leaders are consistently effective in their role
- R3 Improve the consistency and effectiveness of cross-curricular provision to develop pupils' literacy, numeracy, ICT and Welsh language skills

What happens next

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

Main findings

Standards: Excellent

The outstanding progress that pupils make is an exceptional strength of the school. Many pupils have low levels of literacy and numeracy on entry, but make strong and sustained progress throughout their time at the school and achieve excellent outcomes at the end of key stage 4.

In lessons, many pupils make very strong progress in their knowledge, understanding and skills. They demonstrate a secure recall of their prior learning and are successful in consolidating their understanding of new concepts by applying them to different contexts. For example, in mathematics, pupils deepen their understanding of algebra by applying this new learning to problems involving area and perimeter.

Many pupils make appropriate contributions to class discussion, using subject terminology with accuracy and confidence. They also collaborate in useful peer discussions as part of pair or group activities. This helps them to share and develop their ideas and to support each other's learning effectively. In physical education, groups of pupils evaluate each other's performance and use their conclusions to provide useful advice to other groups. A minority of pupils make thoughtful, perceptive and articulate contributions to discussion activities, such as when they explore issues regarding the importance of respect in their tutor sessions.

Most pupils are able to locate relevant information confidently from a variety of sources. In design technology, pupils correctly identify the key features that make a formula one car successful. Many read aloud with confidence and have a wide range of reading strategies that help them to understand unfamiliar words. They are able to make suitable inferences and deductions when analysing texts. A minority of pupils have well-developed higher-order reading skills. They are able to synthesise and summarise information well, for example when identifying the key features of religious teachings regarding diet.

The technical accuracy of many pupils' writing is sound. They write effectively at length for a range of purpose and audiences. These pupils structure their extended writing well and use a wide range of vocabulary and sentence structures to enhance their work. For example, in English, pupils use a wide range of engaging vocabulary and techniques to analyse critically the way in which women are objectified in video games and the impact this has on youth culture. A minority of pupils produce written work of an exceptionally high quality. These pupils write with fluency and sophistication to explain and develop their thinking. For example, in religious education, pupils use strong subject knowledge to write thoughtfully and empathetically about how pupils from different religious backgrounds can be successfully integrated into school life. A few pupils, however, make repeated errors in their spelling, punctuation and grammar and do not structure their extended writing effectively enough. These pupils do not form their handwriting sufficiently well.

Most pupils have sound number skills and are confident in carrying out mental calculations. They apply their numeracy skills well across the curriculum, such as when they use their measuring skills to understand the legal requirements regarding

tyre tread depth in vehicle maintenance, or when they plot and interpret graphs to investigate how the length of a pendulum affects its swing in science. A few more able pupils have highly-developed problem solving skills. In the Welsh Baccalaureate, for example, they sequence a range of actions to evaluate the most effective way of managing a community project. However, pupils' ability to develop and apply their ICT skills across the curriculum is underdeveloped.

Pupils develop their creativity well. For example, pupils in the complex needs unit participate imaginatively in role play activities to investigate a fictional robbery. More able pupils develop their creativity well in the school's 'Mini Mat' project through a range of activities including the development of magic skills.

The very few pupils who take the full course GCSE in Welsh second language achieve well. However, the majority of pupils lack confidence in speaking or writing Welsh.

The school has been highly successful in securing consistently strong outcomes for pupils at the end of key stage 4. Between 2013 and 2016, there has been a strong trend of improvement in all indicators. Performance in both the level 2 threshold, including English and mathematics and the capped points score has been well above that of similar schools over this period. The proportion of pupils gaining five GCSE or equivalent grades at A*-A has varied over the last few years, but generally compares well to similar schools. Provisional data for 2017 indicates that performance at key stage 4 has generally declined, but the school's performance continues to compare well to similar schools.

In all indicators, all groups of pupils make exceptionally strong progress from previous key stages. The performance of both boys and girls at key stage 4 has been well above the average for boys and girls in similar schools over the last four years in nearly all indicators. The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has been consistently well above national averages for this group of pupils in nearly all indicators.

At the end of Year 11, most pupils continue their education in another school or college.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Good

The school has been successful in establishing a positive ethos based on mutual respect. As a result, nearly all pupils feel safe and secure in school. Most believe that the school deals well with any issues that arise and feel that they have a wide range of staff that they can turn to for support.

Most pupils demonstrate very good behaviour in lessons and around the school. They are polite, courteous and show respect to staff, other pupils and visitors to the school. Most pupils have a positive attitude to their learning. They engage quickly and enthusiastically in their lessons and listen attentively to their teachers and their peers. Many participate effectively in group or pair activities and support each other's learning well. Most pupils maintain their concentration well throughout their lessons, and many demonstrate strong levels of resilience and independence in their learning, even when faced with challenging tasks.

Most pupils have a positive attitude to maintaining a healthy lifestyle and understand the importance of a balanced diet and regular exercise. There are high levels of participation in the school's extra-curricular programme, and pupils develop a wide range of social and life skills well through these activities.

The school council makes an appropriate contribution to the life of the school, for example through its involvement in the planning of refurbishments to school facilities. A few pupils act as prefects or mentors to younger pupils, which contributes well to their personal development and leadership skills.

Rates of attendance show a strong trend of improvement over recent years, and compare very well to those in similar schools. This has a positive impact on the progress that pupils make. The school has been successful in significantly reducing the level of fixed-term exclusions.

Teaching and learning experiences: Good

The quality of teaching overall is good. Teaching is effective in developing pupils' confidence, engaging them in their learning and promoting strong progress. Nearly all teachers have developed strong working relationships with their classes. This helps to create a supportive and positive learning environment.

In many lessons, teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve and they set demanding tasks which promote strong progress well. In addition, they encourage pupils to be as self-reliant as possible in their learning, and this is effective in developing their self-confidence and independence. In these lessons, teachers are effective in modelling good use of language to pupils, which has a positive impact on the quality of pupils' verbal and written responses.

In many cases, teachers plan carefully-sequenced series of activities that enable pupils to build and consolidate their knowledge and understanding well. They set specific learning objectives and success criteria that help pupils to understand the progress that they are making. They provide pupils with clear explanations and prepare resources that engage pupils successfully. In the majority of lessons, teachers use skilful questioning techniques to probe and develop pupils' understanding.

In a few instances, teaching is not consistently effective enough. In these lessons, teachers do not take sufficient account of pupils' differing needs and abilities. Consequently, pupils are either insufficiently stretched or find tasks too difficult. These lessons are often too teacher led, which hampers the pace of learning and pupil engagement and does not develop pupils' independence well enough. In a few lessons, teachers do not give pupils sufficient opportunities to develop their skills alongside their subject knowledge or to consolidate their understanding before moving onto the next stage of their learning. In these lessons, teachers do not use questioning well enough to develop pupils' thinking.

In most lessons, teachers provide pupils with useful verbal feedback and monitor their progress carefully. In many instances, teachers' written feedback provides pupils with beneficial advice on how they can improve their work. The majority of pupils respond positively to this feedback, and use it to improve their work well. However, a minority of pupils do not make good enough use of their teachers' advice.

The school plans its curriculum carefully to provide pupils with a wide range of learning experiences that are well matched to their interests, ambitions and abilities. Pupils are able to choose from a wide range of academic and vocational courses at key stage 4. Partnerships with other providers are used effectively to provide pupils with beneficial opportunities to progress into appropriate further education or training at the end of Year 11. The school also makes good use of partnership working to help adapt its curriculum to meet the individual needs of vulnerable pupils, and this has a strong impact on these pupils' outcomes.

The school provides a valuable extra-curricular programme. This includes a wide range of sporting, cultural and academic activities as well as clubs devoted to a range of interests such as cooking, hairdressing, creative writing and engineering. High levels of participation in these activities make a strong contribution to many pupils' personal development.

Well-established, carefully-planned transition arrangements enable pupils to settle quickly into Year 7. A notable feature of this aspect of the school's work is the fact that Year 6 pupils spend two weeks at the school during the summer term. This is effective in building the confidence of these pupils. During the transition process, the school works closely with local primary schools to identify more able and talented pupils. It provides a beneficial 'Mini Mat' enrichment programme for these pupils, which includes a range of academic and team-building activities.

The school plans appropriately for the development of pupils' literacy skills. There is a useful range of opportunities across the curriculum for pupils to develop these skills in a variety of contexts. However, in a few cases, teachers do not plan effectively enough for the progressive development of pupils' literacy. The school has identified relevant opportunities for pupils to develop their numeracy skills in lessons other than mathematics. Overall, activities to develop pupils' numeracy skills are not delivered consistently enough. The school has effective systems in place to identify those pupils with weak skills and to monitor their progress. The school uses this information well to plan beneficial interventions for these pupils, which help them to make strong progress in improving their skills.

The school has recently increased the number of pupils who are entered for GCSE Welsh second language. However, pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to gain a qualification at this level, and plans to strengthen pupils' understanding of Welsh language and culture are at an early stage of development. Plans to develop pupils' ICT skills across the curriculum are at a similarly early stage.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The school has effective arrangements for the care, support and guidance of pupils. This has secured strong levels of wellbeing, high levels of attendance and an ethos of mutual respect and support.

The school monitors carefully the academic progress of both individual and groups of pupils across both key stages. It uses this information well to identify any underperformance and to plan effective interventions for those pupils in need of additional support. Regular reports to parents are informative and provide clear targets for improvement for individual subjects.

The school's behaviour policy is clearly understood by staff and pupils, and most teachers apply it consistently and effectively. The school has been successful in implementing remedial approaches to behaviour issues which promote positive relationships between pupils, staff and parents well. Senior and middle leaders gather a range of useful information about pupils' behaviour and attendance. They use this information suitably to identify and support individual pupils at risk of underachievement. However, in a few cases, leaders do not analyse this data thoroughly enough.

The importance of good attendance is promoted well by the school, for example by a rewards system which includes congratulatory letters to parents, prizes and trips. This has been successful in securing high rates of attendance.

Pupils with additional learning needs are supported well, both through individual and small group interventions and beneficial in-lesson support by learning support assistants. Individual education plans set these pupils clear targets and give teachers useful advice on how to help them to meet these goals. However, these plans are not used consistently well enough by a few teachers. The on-site special needs unit provides exceptionally high quality support for pupils with a range of complex needs.

The school works well with a range of specialist services and external agencies to support individual pupils' wellbeing. Parents and pupils are provided with useful advice and support when making subject choices for key stage 4 and for choosing courses and careers at the end of Year 11. The school provides appropriate provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through assemblies, visiting speakers and a suitable personal and social education programme. It makes appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking.

The school council makes a suitable contribution to the life of the school, for example through taking part in consultations regarding changes to uniform and the school day. However, its work does not have a high enough profile with the whole pupil body.

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

Leadership and management: Good

Despite a period of considerable change and financial constraints, strong leadership has been successful in securing high levels of wellbeing, effective teaching and consistently outstanding outcomes for pupils.

In a short space of time, the new headteacher has established a clear and well-understood vision based on a thorough and accurate evaluation of the school's strengths and areas for development. Roles at senior and middle leadership level have been restructured to match closely the needs of the school, the skills of the post holders and national priorities. Senior leaders have implemented useful systems to help middle leaders to drive forward improvement in their areas. As a result, many middle leaders are effective in identifying and addressing areas for development. However, in a few cases, they do not carry out their roles with consistent enough rigour.

There are clear lines of accountability. Line management meetings focus well on improving standards and the quality of teaching and many leaders follow up action points suitably. Performance management arrangements are sound. They have been recently strengthened to align them closely to the school's strategic priorities and to identify staff development needs clearly. The school has an appropriate range of professional development opportunities for staff to develop their expertise and skills that are closely linked to performance management objectives. This includes collaboration in professional learning networks and joint working with other schools, which help staff to develop and share good practice. These activities have been successful in addressing many of the school's identified areas for improvement.

Senior leaders have a secure understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. The self-evaluation report is a concise and evaluative analysis of the school's work which draws on a wide range of first-hand evidence, including a thorough analysis of performance data. Senior leaders have established generally rigorous systems for evaluating the school's performance. This enables them to identify clearly areas for improvement in standards, the quality of teaching and the impact of leadership. However, the evaluation of a very few aspects of provision is not sufficiently robust. The whole-school improvement plan links closely to self-evaluation findings and sets out clearly the school's priorities. It contains suitably ambitious targets and identifies clearly how improvements are to be monitored and evaluated.

In many instances, middle leadership is effective in supporting school improvement. Most middle leaders have developed their expertise in analysing pupil performance data well. Many use these analyses, as well as a range of other first-hand evidence, to identify clearly areas for improvement and amend aspects of their provision appropriately. However, in a few cases, the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning at middle leadership level is not effective enough. In these instances, middle leaders do not evaluate the available evidence robustly enough to, for example, identify specific areas for improvement in the quality of teaching.

The governing body has a clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement, and governors provide the school with appropriate challenge and support. In particular, the school benefits greatly from the governing body's work with the Fern Partnership. This provides valuable additional resources for the school, as well as a wealth of training and employment opportunities for pupils and members of the community.

The school manages its resources effectively. The governing body, headteacher and business manager monitor the school's budget carefully and ensure spending decisions are aligned closely to development priorities. All expenditure is evaluated thoroughly. The school makes good use of grant funding to support the wellbeing and progress 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.

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