A report on

Abertillery Learning Community

Alma Street
Abertillery
Blaenau Gwent
NP13 1YL

Date of inspection:  March 2025

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

## About Abertillery Learning Community

| | |
|---|---|
| Name of provider | Abertillery Learning Community |
| Local authority | Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council |
| Language of the provider | English |
| School category according to Welsh-medium provision | |
| Type of school | All age schools |
| Religious character | |
| Number of pupils on roll | 1666 |
| Pupils of statutory school age | 1440 |
| Number in nursery classes | 122 |
| Number in sixth form | 0 |
| 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 All age schools is 20.2%) | 28.7% |
| Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in All age schools is 8.6%) | 5.8% |
| Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home | * |
| Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language | 4.2% |
| Date of headteacher appointment | 17/04/2023 |
| Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable) | 05/02/2018 |
| Start date of inspection | 03/03/2025 |

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website: mylocalschool.gov.wales

    a.  The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

## Summary

Most teachers at Abertillery Learning Community develop positive working relationships with pupils and create calm and supportive classrooms. Many use positive approaches effectively, which helps pupils to behave well and engage purposefully with their learning. In many classes, including the Complex Needs Resource Bases (CNRBs), staff provide clear instructions and suitable support, which ensures that pupils know what is expected of them. Overall, the school provides a caring and inclusive environment. Staff prioritise pupils' well-being and offer helpful support through strong partnerships with external agencies.

In a majority of sessions, teachers plan activities that support and challenge pupils successfully. As a result, pupils often demonstrate positive attitudes, participate enthusiastically, and make appropriate progress. Many primary-aged pupils develop suitable literacy and numeracy skills, and a few make strong progress in reading and writing. However, the school provides too few opportunities for pupils of all ages to develop their literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum. The upper school's provision for the Welsh language is underdeveloped.

In a minority of sessions, teachers do not provide enough challenge or engaging activities. This limits pupils' opportunities to develop independence and thinking skills. In these cases, teachers overuse worksheets or talk for too long, meaning that pupils spend less time on meaningful tasks. As a result, pupils rely too much on teacher guidance and do not make sufficient progress, particularly in the upper school.

The school's curriculum reflects its community well and includes relevant themes such as local mining history. There is a clear vision for Curriculum for Wales, with a focus on developing pupils' life skills. Many pupils understand the importance of attending school, and attendance has improved notably. The pupil Senedd offers valuable leadership opportunities, although a minority of older pupils are less aware of its impact.

The headteacher provides strong leadership and has high expectations for herself and the entire school community. Leaders take clear responsibility for their areas, using data suitably to evaluate and improve performance. Senior leaders help others develop their evaluation skills. However, planning for improvement often lacks precision, limiting progress in teaching and skills development.

## Recommendations

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

R1.     Improve the quality of teaching so that pupils of all abilities make suitable progress, particularly in the secondary phase

R2.     Provide meaningful challenging opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy and numeracy skills

R3.     Ensure that leaders identify clear and specific actions when planning for improvement, particularly in relation to improving teaching

R4.     Ensure that the school meets the statutory requirement for pupils to study Welsh up to the age of 16

## 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 to show 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

In nearly all classes, teachers have positive working relationships with pupils and create calm, positive working environments. Many staff engage with pupils in a friendly and sensitive way. As a result, most pupils behave well in class and engage with their learning purposefully. In the very few cases where pupils engage in low-level disruption in the class, teachers generally deal with it effectively. However, a few do not apply behaviour management strategies consistently.

In the majority of instances, teachers have suitably high expectations of what pupils can achieve and plan learning that supports and challenges them successfully. Where this is the case, pupils demonstrate positive attitudes to learning, engage well with activities and make appropriate progress. However, in a minority of sessions, teachers' expectations of pupils are too low. They provide pupils with tasks that are unengaging and lack sufficient challenge. In these sessions, many make limited progress. In a few cases, classroom practices, such as having all pupils working at the same pace, further limit the progress that pupils make.

A majority of sessions are too teacher led and provide pupils with limited opportunities to take the lead in their learning, make decisions and develop their thoughts and ideas. This limits opportunities for pupils to develop their independence and their thinking skills. As a result, a minority of pupils continue to rely heavily on teacher guidance to make progress and demonstrate a lack of engagement in sessions, particularly in the upper school. In a few cases, the overuse of worksheets limits pupils' ability to develop independent learning skills or to write at length. In the younger classes, teachers do not provide pupils with sufficient purposeful and challenging independent learning experiences, nor use the outdoors well enough to support pupils' learning.

In a majority of cases, teachers provide pupils with clear instructions that ensure they understand what is expected of them. However, in a few classes, teachers do not explain concepts well enough or help them to understand underlying ideas. In the lower school and the CNRBs, teachers and teaching assistants refine their language well to meet the needs and stage of development of the pupils that they work with.

Most teachers question pupils suitably to check whether they can recall basic information or to ensure that they understand tasks. In a minority of lessons, teachers' questioning helps them to assess pupils' learning so they can address misconceptions and move learning on in a timely manner. In a few cases, teachers ask highly effective questions that help pupils to think in more depth and that promote deeper understanding by requiring detailed explanations and justification. However, in many cases, teachers do not question

pupils thoughtfully or carefully enough to check whether they understand learning or to extend their thinking.

The impact of written feedback on pupil progress is too variable. It is often not clear or specific enough to help pupils understand where they may have made errors or where they could improve their work. In the few cases where written feedback is effective it informs pupils well and challenges them to develop or add to their work. Opportunities for pupils to respond to the written feedback and improve their work are too inconsistent.

Overall, many pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) make suitable progress against their targets or from their starting points. The majority of these pupils make strong progress in their social and emotional development.

The school is currently working to develop a coherent, whole-school approach to the progressive development of pupils' skills. However, currently it does not have a strategic enough approach to this aspect of its work across the full age range. In the lower school, appropriately planned provision helps many pupils to make at least suitable progress in their literacy skills. In the upper school, pupils have only a few meaningful opportunities to practise their literacy skills across the curriculum. This means that a minority of them do not develop these skills well enough.

Many primary aged pupils develop their reading skills appropriately and become confident readers. However, a minority do not always have a secure enough understanding of what they read. In general, secondary aged pupils extract relevant information to answer questions competently, but this is often at a relatively basic level. In English lessons, many use inference and deduction appropriately when examining texts, and a few demonstrate highly insightful thinking. Overall, however, pupils do not develop their advanced reading skills well enough across the curriculum. In addition, a minority of secondary aged pupils are over-reliant on their teachers when faced with unfamiliar words.

In the lower school, many pupils develop their writing skills appropriately and a minority make strong progress with their writing. However, by the end of Year 6, a minority do not spell or punctuate accurately enough and have weak handwriting. This remains the case as they move through upper school. In English lessons, many pupils write competently for a wide range of audiences and purposes and structure extended pieces appropriately. A few write engaging longer pieces of writing with maturity and sophistication. However, across the curriculum, a lack of meaningful opportunities to write at length hampers pupils' progress in this aspect.

Many primary aged pupils, and a majority of those in upper school, explain their ideas with suitable clarity and use an appropriate range of vocabulary in discussion tasks. A few pupils across the age range are particularly articulate, expressing themselves in a sophisticated, thoughtful manner supported by an extensive vocabulary. The majority listen carefully to teachers and other pupils, but a minority do not listen well enough. A minority of pupils are reluctant to engage in discussion work, and offer only brief, underdeveloped responses.

Generally, as pupils progress through the lower school, many make adequate progress in developing their number skills, and a few make strong progress. However, they have too few opportunities to develop their understanding in other areas of mathematics. From an early age, pupils recognise and name single-digit numbers and count small quantities accurately. Over time, they develop a suitable understanding of data. Many pupils interpret information from simple bar charts, construct them accurately and draw appropriate conclusions.

In the upper school, a majority of pupils develop an adequate grasp of the four rules of number and perform basic calculations confidently. They develop a sound understanding of geometry and statistical skills adequately in their mathematics lessons. However, pupils often construct graphs with errors or do not select an appropriate graph to represent the data. This is not always corrected by teachers. Overall, secondary aged pupils have limited opportunities to use and apply their numeracy skills across the curriculum and this limits their progress.

In the lower school, many pupils develop their digital skills suitably. By Year 6, they are confident in, for example, creating presentations and coding simple games. However, they do not develop their understanding of spreadsheets and databases well enough. In the upper school, many pupils in their digital technology and computing lessons develop their digital skills appropriately. However, opportunities to develop these skills outside of these lessons are limited and not planned purposefully enough.

The school has a clear vision for developing Curriculum for Wales. There is a keen focus on developing academic and life skills through relevant experiences to enrich learning. Staff, pupils and parents contributed to its creation, and it reflects the community it serves. The school's curriculum pays suitable attention to providing pupils with opportunities to develop their historical and cultural knowledge and understanding of their community. For example, pupils learn about coal mining and its impact on their community through their work on 'The Guardian' memorial. Older pupils have opportunities to extend this further through their learning about neighbouring mining communities.

Overall, the curriculum is suitably balanced and meets the needs of most pupils. The school provides an appropriate range of general and vocational courses in Key Stage 4. Where appropriate, it adapts its curriculum by providing alternative pathways that enable pupils to gain worthwhile qualifications.

The school provides suitable opportunities for pupils to develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding, for example by considering the increasingly diverse community of Abertillery. In the lower school, there are suitable opportunities for pupils to develop their Welsh language skills. The 'Criw Cymraeg' helps to support the use of incidental Welsh. However, beyond Year 9, there are insufficient opportunities to study Welsh. Overall, provision for developing Welsh language skills and the promotion of the advantages of learning Welsh are underdeveloped in the upper school.

The school prioritises the promotion of equality and diversity suitably and works with external agencies to raise pupils' awareness of these issues. The comprehensive personal and social education (PSE) programme in the lower school and Key Stage 3 helps develop pupils' understanding of, for example, the importance of safe relationships. However, PSE provision for pupils in Key Stage 4 is less well developed.

In the lower school the curriculum is enriched well through various activities including circus skills, visiting speakers and the use of local facilities. In addition, staff provide a range of after school activities, such as chess and performing arts. In the upper school, there is a suitable range of educational visits and enrichment activities, for example residential visits to Llangrannog, digital language competitions and a range of cooking workshops. The school works closely with local businesses and the police to improve pupils' knowledge about career opportunities and raise their aspirations.

## Well-being, care, support and guidance

Supporting and promoting pupils' well-being is a key priority for Abertillery Learning Community. Leaders work collaboratively with a wide range of external agencies to support and promote pupils' well-being. These include school counsellors, youth workers, children's services, the youth offending team, the youth service and the police. These strong and established partnerships contribute to the provision of valuable and personalised support for pupils and their families. The school has developed a well-being section on its website, which all pupils, families and staff can access that provides helpful support and guidance across a range of areas.

The school is committed to reducing the impact of poverty on pupils' well-being and progress. As part of this work, the Family Engagement Officer (FEO) works closely with the local youth service to ensure that vulnerable pupils can access support services or safe places if they become homeless.

**Spotlight - Attendance – impact of processes to improve whole school attendance**.

The school has a successful approach to promoting good attendance. Leaders ensure that attendance has a high profile, and most pupils understand the importance of attending regularly. Processes to monitor attendance are robust, and the pastoral staff are supported well by a beneficial range of outside agencies such as the education welfare service. Most pupils attend school regularly and the attendance rates of all groups of pupils have improved substantially over time at a rate greater than the Welsh average and that of similar schools. The school's approach to addressing persistent absenteeism is strong. Leaders and staff work closely with relevant external partners through a targeted and graduated approach to respond to low attendance rates of identified pupils. The strength of the school's relationships with its families and the rigour of its work have led to a substantial reduction in the number of pupils who are regularly absent from school in recent years. This is a noteworthy feature.

The school has revised its approach to supporting pupils' leadership skills through the development of its pupil Senedd, which has strengthened pupil voice. Leaders have ensured representation from all groups of pupils. There are valuable links with the Abertillery Community Council, who facilitate the meetings at the local council chambers. Senedd members take their roles seriously and are proud of the part they play in enhancing school life, such as developing recreational zones for break times. However, a minority of older pupils are unaware of the work of the Senedd and of its impact on the wider school community.

There is an extensive range of after school clubs across the primary phase such as line dancing, netball and basketball clubs. This helps pupils gain new experiences and socialise and learn with a range of pupils outside of their friendship groups. Pupils in the upper school benefit from participation in theatre productions such as 'Matilda' and a few sports clubs. They also develop valuable personal and social skills through the 'Chillax' room, the board games club and the 'Cwtch club'.

The school has suitable arrangements to prepare pupils for upper school. This work is underpinned by a useful transition plan to support pupils' academic and well-being development. There is a range of activities for pupils to help prepare them for the next stage and relevant information is provided to all prospective parents and pupils.

The school provides well-structured careers guidance to older pupils which ensures that they receive impartial advice to support their next steps. Pupils from Year 9 onwards benefit from well-coordinated activities, comprehensive guidance for subject choices, and initiatives like 'Career of the Week' to help raise their aspirations. However, a few pupils

feel that they are not suitably informed about all options available to them beyond following general courses at college.

The school works proactively to minimise the likelihood of pupils not progressing to further education, employment or training by early identification of those at risk and providing them with targeted support. For example, the school collaborates with the youth service to provide taster activities at the local college. In partnership with a local university, the school provides enhanced support for young carers or care-experienced learners to raise their awareness of higher education. As a result of the school's strong provision, nearly all pupils move on to further education, employment or training.

The school's arrangements for child protection and safeguarding are suitable. The process for recording concerns is school-wide and staff use this system well to report any concerns. Staff receive relevant and regular training in safeguarding matters. Safe recruitment practices are appropriate and comply with statutory requirements. Leaders regularly gather data on reported concerns, bullying and racist incidences and conduct an analysis of these areas in order to identify trends. This analysis is used for self-evaluation purposes but is at an early stage of development.

Recently, the school has made substantial changes to its behaviour, bullying and anti-racism policies and guidance. Leaders have collaborated with staff, pupils and parents to develop a whole-school Relationships Policy. This includes well-considered, age-appropriate behaviour management strategies for both lower and upper school. Since their introduction, there has been a substantial improvement in pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning.

The provision for supporting pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) is suitable across the school and strong in the lower school. Leaders have made good progress in addressing the ALNET (Wales) Act 2018. Individual development plans are comprehensive and useful documents that contain relevant information on the needs of the pupils and valuable contributions from pupils, parents or carers and specialist agencies. One-page profiles comply with statutory requirements but there is too much variability between those for lower and upper schools in terms of guidance for staff. Targets are broadly sensible and relevant.

The school has two alternative curriculum centres to support vulnerable pupils with behavioural needs including those at risk of exclusion. Pupils attend 'Hafan' or 'Engage' on a full or part-time basis and follow a bespoke curriculum. Arrangements for planning, documenting and reviewing the provision for individual pupils are insufficient. Staff at the Nest provision successfully cater for the needs of a few pupils with specific needs and provide a calm, safe and nurturing environment.

In the lower school, leaders manage and lead ALN provision well. They provide helpful guidance to staff and work collaboratively to ensure consistency in provision and support across the three sites. Currently, planning and monitoring of support for pupils with ALN in the upper school are at an early stage of development.

The two Complex Needs Resource Bases provide a calm and caring environment. Staff place a strong focus on developing pupils' social and emotional well-being and, as a result, nearly all pupils display positive behaviour and attitudes. Staff plan beneficial opportunities for pupils to join mainstream activities where appropriate, for example by participating in pupil voice groups and socialising with their peers at playtimes. Pupils in the CNRB benefit from enrichment activities in the local community such as visits to nursing homes and the town's play group.

## Leading and improving

The headteacher provides strong, determined and resilient leadership. She has high expectations of herself and all members of the school community. Her vision for the school based on the motto 'raising aspirations, realising potential, securing futures' is understood well by staff and pupils. Since her appointment the headteacher has introduced changes that have had a positive impact on aspects such as pupil well-being and attendance and has created a sound culture of safeguarding. This has had a positive impact on pupils' readiness to learn. However, impact on the quality of teaching, especially in the secondary phase, has been limited.

Leaders have clear roles and responsibilities, in the main linked to specific campus sites or departments. There is a clear calendar of suitable evaluation and improvement activities. Leaders make good use of data in their self-evaluation and improvement processes to identify lines of inquiry. Senior leaders' evaluations of learning, teaching and other aspects of the school's provision are generally accurate. A few senior leaders, including the headteacher, are highly perceptive when evaluating provision. They make accurate judgments about the quality of teaching by considering carefully its impact on learning. Where appropriate they work alongside other leaders beneficially to model effective practice and quality assure their work. This is beginning to improve other leaders' evaluation skills and their contributions to the improvement process.

There is a clear link between findings of self-evaluation, improvement planning and professional development reviews. This forms part of a continuous cycle of evaluation and refinement. However, while findings from self-evaluation are generally accurate leaders do not always plan the actions that they will take to address the areas that need improvement precisely enough. In addition, curriculum middle leaders do not always prioritise the most important aspects that would have the greatest impact on pupils' learning. As a result, improvement processes have not had sufficient impact on important

aspects of the school's work, such as the quality of teaching and the provision to develop pupils' skills.

Since her appointment, the headteacher has strengthened line-management processes substantially. These ensure that leaders at all levels focus professional discussions on the school's current priorities and emerging issues. They revisit improvement targets regularly to gauge progress. As a result, leaders are beginning to have a positive influence on a few aspects such as pupils' behaviour in lessons.

Leaders arrange beneficial professional learning opportunities for staff, for example to develop supportive working relationships with pupils and promote positive attitudes to learning. Leaders provide additional support for staff where appropriate and are beginning to tackle underperformance robustly. Leaders place a strong focus on staff well-being, for example by arranging specialist input on health and well-being.

Overall, governors know and support the school well. More experienced governors provide effective challenge and take part in a wide range of evaluation activities. These include observing leadership meetings, taking part in learning walks and scrutinising pupils' work. As a result, they develop a thorough understanding of the school's current improvement priorities. Leaders prioritise expenditure appropriately. This includes making suitable use of grant funding. However, the school's current budget is subject to a deficit reduction plan approved by the local authority.

Leaders place a suitable emphasis on addressing most national priorities. For example, they work diligently to improve pupils' attendance and alleviate the impact of poverty. They have introduced worthwhile initiatives to raise aspirations, such as 'Proud Calls' to alert parents to pupils' successes. However, the school does not currently meet its statutory obligations regarding pupils studying Welsh up to the age of 16 or have a suitable approach to the development of pupils' skills.

Leaders arrange a few opportunities for pupils to benefit from the all-age school context. For example, older pupils present information about healthy living to younger peers, and a few benefit from work experience sessions in the lower school. However, leaders recognise that the all-age status of the school presents opportunities that at this stage remain unfulfilled.

Leaders maintain positive working relationships with parents. The school has suitable digital communication tools and publishes the informative 'Good News Weekly' newsletter that celebrates pupils' successes. There are suitable opportunities for parents to discuss pupil progress during the school year, and parents are beginning to offer valuable feedback on aspects of the school's work, such as the changes to end of year reports.

Leaders deploy staff appropriately in the CNRBs, taking into account their skills and experience. The middle leaders in these bases have a sound understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement, identifying specific actions and suitable targets.

## 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

Leaders and governors manage the school's finances appropriately, including the use of the pupil development grant. However, the school's current budget is subject to a deficit reduction plan approved by the local authority.

## 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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**This document has been translated by Trosol (English to Welsh).**