

A report on

Cantonian High School

**Fairwater Road
Fairwater
CF5 3JR**

Date of inspection: October 2025

by

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

About Cantonian High School

Name of provider	Cantonian High School
Local authority	Cardiff Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	947
Pupils of statutory school age	861
Number in sixth form	86
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 21.1%)	42.7%
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 11.2%)	9.2%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.8%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	17.4%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	No
Date of headteacher appointment	01/10/2015
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	

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Start date of inspection	20/10/2025
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Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

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

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

Summary

Cantonian High School is a caring and inclusive community where most pupils feel safe and supported. Staff foster positive relationships and promote the school's values of 'Ready, Responsible and Respectful'. As a result, many pupils behave well and engage positively in lessons. However, attendance is too low, and the progressive development of pupils' literacy skills is a shortcoming.

In many lessons, pupils make secure progress in their learning. Teachers generally have sound subject knowledge and manage behaviour effectively. In the best practice, teaching is well planned and challenging, helping pupils to think deeply and develop their skills. However, in a few lessons, low expectations and weak teaching limit pupils' progress. Feedback is too variable and does not consistently help pupils improve their work.

Numeracy provision is strong with many pupils demonstrating secure skills and applying them across the curriculum. In addition, pupils develop appropriately their digital skills. However, provision for the progressive development of pupils' literacy skills across the curriculum in Years 7 to 9 is underdeveloped.

The curriculum is broad and includes a suitable range of enrichment activities. Pupils benefit from impartial careers guidance and transition support, including for those with additional learning needs. The Specialist Resource Base provides well-structured and personalised support.

Leaders have secured important improvements, including alleviating the impact of poverty on pupils' attainment, improvements in the provision for the development of pupils' numeracy skills and the promotion of the Welsh language. However, leaders' evaluations lack precision, and staff are not held to account well enough. Governors are committed to the school and provide effective challenge. The school has a significant deficit budget.

Recommendations

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

- R1. Address the safeguarding concern raised during the inspection
- R2. Ensure that leaders at all levels evaluate effectively the impact of provision on pupils' progress and skills and hold others to account fully
- R3. Improve provision for the progressive development of pupils' literacy skills
- R4. Improve attendance
- R5. Work with the local authority to reduce the school's deficit budget

What happens next

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

Main findings

Teaching and learning

Teaching and learning

Over time, many pupils make secure progress in their subject knowledge and understanding. They make strong progress in their numeracy skills but do not make as much progress in their literacy skills.

Most teachers have sound subject knowledge and foster positive working relationships with pupils. Many have established effective routines which ensure that most pupils arrive promptly to lessons and settle quickly to work. This helps to create a purposeful learning environment. These teachers manage behaviour and engagement effectively, which helps pupils sustain their concentration and focus on their learning. As a result, many pupils behave well in lessons and engage positively with the tasks set. Many teachers are good language models who focus well on developing pupils' subject vocabulary. A positive feature is the way these teachers use Welsh within their lessons to ensure that pupils see and hear the language being used outside of Welsh lessons.

In a few instances, pupils make strong progress. Where this is the case, teachers:

- are passionate about their subject and use their expert subject knowledge to consider how pupils will best grasp new learning
- plan a series of lessons which focus well on developing pupils' skills and their subject knowledge
- provide pupils with challenging activities, modelling what good work looks like
- ensure that pupils are constantly thinking and linking the new work with what they already know
- use a variety of assessment techniques to monitor pupils' progress closely and adapt their teaching responsively
- question pupils effectively to probe their ideas, developing both their thinking and oracy skills

In many lessons, teachers have suitably high expectations of pupils' engagement and what they can achieve. They plan their teaching by considering what they want pupils to learn and how best they can facilitate this. These teachers provide clear instructions and explain new learning effectively. They offer pupils a sequence of activities that build well on each other, challenge them appropriately and enable them to make secure progress. They ensure that the pace of teaching is guided by the pace of learning. They ensure that there is an appropriate balance between time when the teacher leads the learning and when pupils work independently or in small groups. These teachers often circulate the

classroom to monitor progress and provide helpful verbal feedback where necessary. They question pupils suitably to check their prior knowledge and ensure that they understand what is expected of them.

A few pupils make only limited progress. This is usually due to shortcomings in the quality of teaching. These shortcomings include teachers:

- not having high enough expectations of what pupils can do and providing pupils with activities that do not offer a sufficiently high level of challenge
- not providing pupils with sufficient opportunities to work independently or in small groups to consolidate their learning
- not ensuring that the pace of learning is appropriate
- not focusing well enough on developing pupils' literacy skills and their vocabulary

A few pupils cause low-level disruption during lessons. Where this is the case, teachers do not always deal well enough with these instances.

Overall, the quality of feedback to pupils is too variable. In the best examples, teachers provide precise feedback in a variety of forms on what pupils have been successful with, and what they need to do to improve. However, too often, feedback is not impactful enough. This is usually due to teachers providing comments that lack precision or not ensuring that pupils act purposefully on their advice. This is particularly the case for feedback on pupils' literacy skills. In addition, teachers do not always use questioning techniques effectively enough to probe pupils' thinking and develop their oracy skills.

Skills

A majority of pupils listen carefully to their teachers. In Spanish lessons, for example, they listen carefully to the pronunciation of different tenses and imitate this accurately when practising their own Spanish. The minority who do not listen well enough often miss information that would support their learning. A minority provide suitably developed verbal responses and use an appropriate vocabulary confidently when, for example, offering their views on a four-day school week. They are also able to use a range of appropriate subject specific terminology such as 'interglacial periods' accurately. The school has provided staff with helpful strategies to develop pupils' oracy skills, but they are used in only a limited number of lessons. In a few instances, when teachers' questioning is strongest, it probes pupils' understanding and challenges them to develop their verbal responses. Overall, however, teachers do not develop pupils' spoken vocabulary well enough.

Staff recognise the importance of developing reading. However, appropriately challenging opportunities for pupils to develop advanced reading skills across the curriculum are too

limited. In general, pupils are only required to use reading skills for information retrieval and basic inference and deduction.

In a few cases, mostly in Years 10 and 11, pupils produce writing that is structured well and engages the readers' interest successfully. In Years 7, 8 and 9 in particular, the writing of around half of pupils lacks technical accuracy and uses a limited vocabulary. Teachers' inconsistent assessment and feedback for literacy contributes to pupils continuing to make basic errors in sentence construction, spelling and in the structure of their work. Opportunities for pupils to develop their extended writing in different subjects are too limited overall. In a few cases, younger pupils are encouraged to produce brief examination style answers rather than developing their writing skills or are required to complete worksheets that do not allow them to extend their responses.

Overall, leaders do not evaluate the impact of strategies to develop pupils' literacy skills well enough. They do not plan strategically for the progression of oracy, writing and reading across the curriculum, which hinders the progress pupils make over time. The school provides useful support for pupils with weaker literacy skills through a purposeful intervention programme.

Within mathematics lessons and in relevant subject areas across the curriculum, there are worthwhile opportunities for pupils to develop their numeracy skills which also enrich the learning experiences within these subjects. A strong feature of this is that teachers plan for the progressive development of pupils' numeracy skills to provide pupils of different abilities with an appropriate level of challenge.

A majority of pupils have good basic number skills. They calculate swiftly and accurately with decimals, percentages, fractions and ratios, such as when they carry out body mass index calculations successfully to evaluate the effect of lifestyles on people's health. A similar proportion of pupils have a firm grasp of concepts related to shapes and measures. For example, they convert between different units of area and volume and choose the most appropriate trigonometric skill to use in different problems.

Many pupils analyse data suitably. They plot data in different types of graphs accurately, such as when plotting the amount of electricity produced in an experiment. They read and interpret numerical and graphical information to come to sensible conclusions. A minority of pupils have strong numeracy skills. They apply their well-developed understanding of mathematical concepts to solve problems such as those involving complex multi-step speed, distance and time calculations. They have strong algebra skills and apply these to, for example, factorise quadratic expressions, rearrange formulae in science or solve simultaneous equations. A few pupils have weak numeracy skills. Their basic number skills are underdeveloped and as a result they struggle with concepts such as place value, negative numbers and multiplicative relationships.

The school provides suitable opportunities for many pupils to develop their digital skills across the curriculum. Leaders have mapped the provision across the curriculum, supporting pupils to develop their digital skills progressively. Pupils benefit from opportunities to learn about staying safe online, including the risks associated with digital footprints and how this can impact upon future employment. In science lessons, many pupils use spreadsheets and formulae effectively, to create scatter graphs whilst investigating the pH of a solution.

The school has focused well on promoting the Welsh language and has successfully incorporated the use of incidental Welsh into daily classroom routines. This gives pupils meaningful opportunities to engage with the language outside of Welsh lessons. The language and culture of Wales is further celebrated through the work of the 'Cryw Cymraeg' during Dydd Gwyl Dewi, Santes Dwynwen and Dydd Miwsig Cymru celebrations. As a result, many pupils have positive attitudes towards learning Welsh.

Many pupils develop their speaking and translation skills well and are able to pronounce Welsh words accurately. A few are able to hold short conversations independently with a degree of fluency in pairs or groups, for example when talking about themselves and the advantages of learning Welsh in school. When provided with support, many pupils write short paragraphs accurately. A few write with a high level of accuracy including correct use of tenses and mutations, for example when writing to the council with suggestions to improve their local area. However, in general, pupils are over-reliant on structure patterns given to them by their teachers to answer aloud or in written form.

In general, pupils develop their creative, physical and thinking skills well. For example, pupils demonstrate sound creative skills when producing accurate portrait drawings with clear development in observational drawing skills in art lessons. Pupils use hand dexterity in cutting shapes which are then sewn together to create a key ring in design and technology. Pupils apply their thinking skills well, such as when explaining when it would be important to select items with lower power ratings in science.

In general, sixth form pupils have positive attitudes to learning. They work well independently and persevere with challenging work. They have good listening skills and grasp new concepts quickly. They contribute willingly to classroom discussions, and they show curiosity in their learning and ask pertinent questions to further their understanding. In addition, they recall prior learning well and apply new knowledge to different contexts. When answering teachers' questions, they explain their reasoning clearly, making good use of subject specific terminology.

Curriculum

The school has established an appropriate vision for its curriculum, underpinned by its approach to teaching, the 'Cantonian Craft'. Staff have worked collectively alongside local primary schools to develop a curriculum that generally meets the needs of their pupils. This includes planning a range of suitable opportunities for pupils to develop their appreciation of Welsh heritage and culture. For example, they study the history of Cantonian school and coal mining in Wales and its impact on the valleys of South Wales. Subject leaders have trialled and refined aspects of their approach and, where relevant, have adapted their curriculum sensibly. However, leaders have not always identified important shortcomings in their provision. For example, although the school provides a generally broad and balanced curriculum, the provision for religion, values and ethics (RVE) is too limited. Pupils do not have enough time to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills of the broad range of religions, values and ethics, including developing an understanding of non-religious views.

The provision for personal and social education (PSE) is co-ordinated suitably and promotes pupils' personal development and their understanding of the importance of healthy choices and relationships in school. Leaders adapt this programme appropriately in response to data and pupils' needs. Where relevant, the school works appropriately with external agencies to enhance this provision. The school has introduced well-being lessons to support pupils' social and emotional skills further. In assemblies and 'PSE days', pupils benefit from a suitable range of opportunities to develop their understanding of diversity and equality, for example by learning about gender and the LGBTQ+ community. In lessons, there are appropriate opportunities for pupils to learn about people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. For example, in history pupils learn about Wales' first black headteacher, Betty Campbell, from a local Cardiff school. However, opportunities for them to study other diverse groups in lessons across the curriculum are not planned or co-ordinated effectively enough.

The school provides a wide range of extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities for pupils. These include sporting, cultural and creative clubs such as rock choir, Welsh club and art club. There are valuable opportunities for pupils to support the wider community such as taking care of the local Fairwater Community Gardens and the Birdie's Lane Community Project. In addition, the school have incorporated suitable opportunities to visit to the Senedd, London and Italy to support and develop pupils' experiences.

In Years 10 and 11, the school offers a suitable range of option choices that consider pupils' needs. Pupils benefit from helpful options and transition processes, supported by external providers, option booklets and individual meetings with pupils and parents. This provision is strengthened by fortnightly careers lessons in Years 10 and 11. This range of

impartial advice enables pupils to make informed decisions about future learning and employment.

Specialist Resource Base

The Specialist Resource Base (SRB) provides a well-structured and highly personalised provision for pupils, combining interventions with opportunities to access mainstream lessons. There are detailed Individual Development Plans (IDPs) which clearly outline person-centred outcomes and strategies for support. These documents are shared with all staff, and decisions about the level of support in mainstream lessons are made collaboratively with pupils, parents, and teachers.

Pupils benefit from a wide range of learning experiences, including life skills, vocational courses, and travel training, and progress is monitored through regular assessments, observations, and daily base meetings. Transitions are carefully managed, with all Year 11 leavers moving on to sixth form or college, and Careers Wales attending Person-Centred Reviews from Year 9 to support planning.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Care, support and guidance

Cantonian High School fosters a culture of care and mutual respect. Pupils say their teachers are supportive and approachable, and they value the reward system that reinforces the school's core values of being 'Ready, Responsible and Respectful'. Strong relationships between staff and pupils are central to the school's positive atmosphere.

Most pupils say they feel safe in school and know how to seek support should they have a concern. They say any incidents of bullying are dealt with promptly. The school uses data helpfully to provide targeted support on issues such as online safety. Pupils are encouraged to make healthy choices through dedicated well-being lessons and enrichment days. Pupils and parents say transition arrangements are strong and helpful.

Staff work suitably with a range of external agencies, such as the school-based counselling service, to meet pupils' needs. The school offers a wide range of extra-curricular clubs and activities such as a book club, art club and several sports clubs.

There is an appropriate whole school focus on celebrating and promoting positive behaviour. Leaders use a graduated response to improve pupil behaviour and engagement including helpful restorative approaches and appropriate collaboration with external agencies, such as youth services. The school has introduced several alternative provisions to support pupils who are at risk of exclusion. However, despite the work of the school, fixed term exclusions have remained high. In addition, leaders do not evaluate precisely enough the wide range of support provisions. The school's current practice of placing

pupils in an internal exclusion provision for short sessions and sending them home without recording this as a formal exclusion, does not comply with Welsh Government guidance.

Staff in the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) team are dedicated and knowledgeable. They are committed to improving the development and experiences of those pupils in their care. They provide a range of tailored support to meet the individual needs of pupils, accessing both internal and external provisions. They track and monitor the progress of these pupils appropriately.

Pupils with ALN are encouraged to participate in all aspects of school life, promoting social inclusion well. They are representatives on the school council and participate in school shows. Transition arrangements for pupils with ALN are thoughtfully considered and support pupils' needs well. This includes an enhanced transition 'pathfinders' programme for those pupils moving into secondary school as well as effective transition for their next steps beyond school.

The school's council, 'Senedd Cantonian' is well-established. Members are elected appropriately, and they meet Governors and leaders to share their views. There is an active Eco-group who raise awareness of important environmental issues, for example, through the introduction of a whiteboard pen recycling scheme. There is a vibrant 'Cryw Cymraeg' who meet regularly and actively promote and encourage the use of Welsh across the school.

The school provides helpful information and guidance for older pupils making choices about their next steps. There are suitable opportunities to support pupils' understanding and exploration of potential careers with external partners, such as the NHS and Careers Wales, on enrichment days. The school has recently introduced dedicated lessons for careers education and work-related education for older pupils.

The school has recently reviewed and strengthened its work on attendance. The school promotes good attendance appropriately and works closely with parents, pupils and relevant agencies to encourage good attendance. However, despite this work, the school's rate of attendance remains too low. In addition, the percentage of pupils who are persistently absent is higher than that in similar schools. Improving attendance remains an important school priority.

The safeguarding team are a committed and passionate team who work closely with staff, pupils and families to support their needs. Staff and governors complete the relevant safeguarding training and work with outside agencies such as 'Invisible Walls', 'Minus Violence' and the Youth Justice service. Records of safeguarding concerns are appropriately maintained. Pastoral staff record and deal appropriately with any alleged

incidents of bullying, providing support for both parties through restorative approaches. The school site is positively managed by staff. As a result, most pupils are aware of how to report safeguarding concerns and feel safe in school. A safeguarding matter was brought to the attention of the school during the inspection.

Leading and improving

Leading and improving

The acting headteacher promotes thoughtfully the vision of the school, 'a brighter future for all' pupils irrespective of their starting points. Generally, he is supported appropriately by the senior leadership team who understand the school's current priorities and different aspects of their role.

Over recent years, the school has experienced significant challenges in terms of the construction of new school buildings and an extended period of instability in the leadership of the school. Despite these difficulties, senior leaders have managed the school well during these demanding periods.

Leaders have impacted positively on a range of national priorities including alleviating the impact of poverty on educational attainment, supporting the development of pupils' numeracy skills, ensuring that pupils with ALN make progress and promoting the Welsh language. However, leaders have not had enough impact on a few important areas of the school's work including pupils' attendance and the progressive development of their literacy skills.

Leaders use appropriate processes to evaluate the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Leaders use data well to evaluate the school's work. However, they do not always focus closely enough on the impact of the teaching on pupils' progress in lessons well enough. Overall, leaders identify suitable improvement priorities but are not always precise enough about which aspects it is aiming to improve or what success might look like.

Middle leaders are enthusiastic about their roles, and many lead their areas of responsibility well. They are involved suitably in self-evaluation activities, including lesson observations, scrutiny of pupils' work and listening to pupils' views. As a result, many know the strengths and areas for improvement of their departments well and make suitable improvements to provision within their departments.

There are regular meetings between middle leaders and senior leaders. While line managers offer suitable levels of support, they do not always challenge middle leaders well enough.

The school provides staff with a broadly appropriate range of professional learning opportunities such as training on behaviour support, Curriculum for Wales and new qualifications. However, the school does not evaluate the impact of professional learning well enough.

The governors bring a broad and relevant expertise to their role. They are committed and enthusiastic supporters of the school, have a secure understanding of its work and provide leaders with a good level of challenge.

Governors, senior leaders and the business manager, supported by the local authority, oversee suitable processes to monitor expenditure as they manage a substantial deficit budget. Grant funding is allocated appropriately to support pupils' well-being and learning, including those eligible for free school meals or from low-income households. Leaders' support for these pupils includes helping to provide resources and access to wider experiences, where appropriate. It has also contributed to improving the outcomes for many of them. During the academic years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the performance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals in their Year 11 qualifications is well above that of their counterparts in similar schools. However, their attendance has not improved sufficiently and remains too low.

Additional information

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils give 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 oversee suitable processes to monitor expenditure, but the school has a substantial deficit budget.

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.

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Publication date: 19/12/2025