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Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

Ferndale Community School

Maerdy

Ferndale

Rhondda Cynon Taf

CF43 4AR

Date of inspection: November 2010

by

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



**INVESTORS | BUDDSODDWYR
IN PEOPLE | MEWN POBL**

During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the school's current performance and on its prospects for improvement.

In these evaluations, inspectors use a four-point scale:

Judgement	What the judgement means
Excellent	Many strengths, including significant examples of sector-leading practice
Good	Many strengths and no important areas requiring significant improvement
Adequate	Strengths outweigh areas for improvement
Unsatisfactory	Important areas for improvement outweigh strengths

The report was produced in accordance with Section 28 of the Education Act 2005.

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Context

Ferndale Community School is an 11-18 school of 674 pupils, of whom 114 are in the sixth form. It takes pupils predominantly from the Rhondda Fach valley, an area with a high percentage of unemployment. The percentage of pupils claiming free school meals is 36.4%, which is significantly higher than the Welsh average of 17.1% for secondary schools.

The school has 22% of pupils on the special educational needs register, which is higher than the Welsh average. About 40% of the pupils on the register have moderate learning difficulties, just over 30% have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and nearly 20% have specific learning difficulties. The school has a behaviour and inclusion resourced provision.

Almost all pupils (99%) are from a white British background, and a very small handful (less than 1%) can speak Welsh, either because they received some of their previous education in the language or because they speak Welsh at home.

At post-16 the school has an arrangement to share provision with neighbouring secondary schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf. About 60% of pupils return to the sixth form after Year 11, while most of the remainder go to further education college.

There have been significant changes in the senior management team since the previous headteacher left in December 2009. Two permanent members of the senior management team have been the acting headteacher and acting deputy headteacher, while the two assistant headteachers are temporary appointments. The acting headteacher had been appointed deputy head to the school in 2007.

The individual school budget per pupil is £4,590. This is the highest budget per pupil out of the 19 secondary schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf and compares with the smallest budget of £3,679 among the authority's secondary schools.

Summary

The school's current performance	Adequate
The school's prospects for improvement	Adequate

Current performance

The good features of the school's work include:

- the good examination and teacher assessment results in about half of subjects;
- the fact that very few pupils leave full-time education without a recognised qualification;
- the attitudes to school life shown by many pupils, and the progress they make in many lessons;
- the good quality teaching by a majority of the staff;
- the inclusive ethos, the range of extra-curricular opportunities, and the care, support and guidance of pupils;
- the procedures that provide the senior management team and governing body with an understanding of the school's performance;
- the range of effective partnerships; and
- the management of accommodation and resources.

However, current progress is judged as adequate because:

- there is inconsistent performance in public examinations and teacher assessments;
- pupils make only adequate progress in a minority of subjects and lessons;
- only a minority of pupils obtain qualifications in Welsh second language in key stage 4;
- the provision for skills across the curriculum is not yet developed enough; and
- the quality of teaching in a minority of lessons is at best adequate.

Prospects for improvement

The school's prospects for improvement are judged to be adequate because:

- the acting headteacher and management team have a good understanding of areas of weakness and the need to address them;
- the school's self-evaluation procedures are thorough;
- the school is managed efficiently;
- there is good practice in a majority of classrooms that can be used as a basis for improving practice across the school;
- there is uncertainty about the future composition of the senior management team;
- planning for improvement does not focus sharply enough on improving teaching and learning; and
- the low attendance of a minority of pupils continues to have a negative effect on their performance.

Recommendations

- R1 Raise standards by improving the quality of teaching in order to engage and challenge all pupils.
- R2 Further develop planning for improvement and monitoring in order to focus more on improving pupils' performance and outcomes.
- R3 Continue to develop strategies to improve attendance.
- R4 Improve the co-ordination and delivery of literacy and numeracy skills for all pupils across the curriculum.
- R5 Ensure that marking and assessment provide guidance and targets that help pupils to improve their work.

What happens next?

The school will produce an action plan that shows how it will address the recommendations. Progress in addressing the recommendations will be monitored by Estyn.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?

Adequate

Standards: Adequate

In key stage 3 and key stage 4 over the last three years, the school's performance has been well below the average for schools in Wales. Compared with similar schools it has been around the average. Low attendance has been a significant influence on the examination achievement of a minority of pupils.

In key stage 3, performance has improved steadily while remaining consistently below the Welsh average. In the last three years, the core subject indicator (the expected performance in English or Welsh, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum) has been about average when compared with schools with a similar proportion of pupils receiving free school meals. It has usually been just above predictions based on pupils' previous attainment, and the average for the family of similar schools. In the separate core subjects, performance at level 5 has varied from just below to much better than the family average. Achievement of level 6 and above has usually been better than that of the family in mathematics, close to the family average in English, and slightly below the family average in science.

In key stage 4, performance has fluctuated from year to year and has been well below the Welsh average. Compared with schools with a similar proportion of pupils receiving free school meals, performance in the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh first language and mathematics was in the second quarter in 2008, the first quarter in 2009 and the third quarter in 2010. Performance in other key indicators has also varied over the last three years. The school has generally performed better than the average for its family of schools. Results were generally above predictions based on previous attainment in 2008 and 2009, but below for most indicators in 2010. In the last two years, only a few pupils left full-time education without a recognised qualification.

At post-16, the percentage of students gaining the level 3 threshold has been slightly below the Welsh average. The average wider points score (comprising all externally approved qualifications at age 18) improved in 2009 but was well below the Welsh average. In 2010, a group of ten students achieved the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification for the first time at the school. This helped eight of them to gain the university place of their choice.

Girls usually perform far better than boys, except in 2009 when boys performed better than girls in key stage 4. Pupils with special educational needs achieve at or above expected levels of performance in external examinations. Pupils receiving free school meals perform less well than other pupils, and the gap between them has increased slightly in the last few years. Some pupils classed as more able and talented succeeded in GCSE mathematics and English a year early in 2009, and went on to achieve a level 3 qualification in application of number in 2010.

In the majority of lessons, pupils make good progress. They are enthusiastic and apply themselves well to appropriate tasks. They listen attentively and read with good understanding when given an opportunity. A majority are keen to contribute spoken answers and give their opinions, although few make extended spoken contributions. In their written work pupils make good progress in written tasks, particularly when these are formally assessed, but sometimes take less care with informal written work.

Pupils have good information and communications technology (ICT) skills. A few have weak basic number skills. Pupils work well in pairs or small groups in discussions, and occasionally problem-solving activities, if these are well structured. A minority work well independently, but a majority lack independence and tend to rely too heavily on the teacher's guidance. Pupils in special educational needs classes make good progress, but more able pupils are not always challenged enough by the work provided.

In a minority of lessons, pupils do not make enough progress. Many are too passive, do not participate in discussions or volunteer answers, and lack confidence or motivation. This is often the case when the work provided does not challenge abler pupils enough, or is not adapted to the needs of less able pupils. A small minority of pupils, and occasionally more than this, hinder their own and others' learning through low-level disruption or inattentiveness, especially if the teacher does not supervise them closely enough or provide suitable tasks.

Pupils generally make good progress in Welsh in key stage 3 and show enthusiasm for the subject. They read or answer questions with a good accent and a variety of expressions. In key stage 4, pupils in the GCSE option groups generally make good progress and achieve well. However pupils following the short course, usually between two-thirds and three-quarters of the year group, are not entered for formal qualifications in Welsh and lack an incentive to make progress. This situation is unsatisfactory. The use of incidental Welsh by pupils in other subjects and around the school is very limited.

Wellbeing: Good

Almost all pupils say that they feel safe in school. Most feel that the school deals well with bullying, and a similar proportion feel that the school encourages them to lead a healthy life. There is high participation in the large number of sports activities provided at the school.

Most pupils behave well both in class and around the school, but a few behave badly when teachers do not engage them enough in the tasks set. A small minority with specific behavioural or other problems benefit from the very good support provided in the school's behaviour and inclusion resourced provision. Despite considerable efforts by the school, attendance is too low and is in the third quarter when compared with similar schools.

Pupils take part in or support a wide variety of activities outside their lessons and in the local community, such as play schemes, volunteering and helping with tea dances for elderly people. The School Council is very active and makes effective

suggestions about improving facilities. Two representatives speak each term at the governors' meeting.

Pupils are notably polite, friendly and welcoming to visitors. Without prompting, many offer to help visitors find their way around the school. Nearly all show respect for the school environment and for each other.

Key Question 2: How good is provision?	Adequate
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Learning experiences: Adequate

The school provides a good range of curriculum opportunities. In key stage 3, the curriculum meets National Curriculum requirements. The 'Learning Skills' course helps groups of pupils to make very good progress. In key stage 4 and post-16, the school meets the requirements of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure with a broad range of vocational and academic courses and good progression routes from level 1 to level 3. There is well-structured provision for work-related education and for the advanced level Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification.

The quality and range of sporting, cultural and vocational activities, supported by the extensive 'E3' extra-curricular programme, is a notable strength. Pupils have opportunities to gain appropriate qualifications and awards through a few of these activities.

Intervention programmes for literacy and numeracy offer good support in improving the skills of lower ability pupils. However, literacy and numeracy skills are not co-ordinated or developed well enough across the curriculum to provide appropriate progression or to challenge more able pupils. Although pupils develop ICT skills well in ICT lessons, there are not enough opportunities for pupils to use these skills in many subjects.

Provision for Welsh is good in key stage 3. In key stage 4, all pupils have timetabled lessons but not enough of them are expected to enter for a qualification. The Welsh dimension is addressed appropriately in a few subjects and within the Welsh Baccalaureate, but the development of incidental Welsh across the curriculum and in the everyday life of the school is not planned well enough and is very limited.

A few subjects promote education for sustainable development and global citizenship well. For example, pupils have made useful community links by planting trees as part of the Maerdy Woodlands scheme.

Teaching: Adequate

Strong working relationships, based on teachers' good knowledge of their pupils, foster learning and are a strength of the school. In a majority of lessons, teachers set clear learning objectives, use a variety of effective teaching strategies and demonstrate good subject knowledge. In the few excellent lessons they promote pupils' progress effectively, for example by asking a wide range of challenging questions. Teachers use learning support staff well. In a minority of lessons, however, teachers do not engage and challenge pupils enough, and do not adapt

work to meet the needs of pupils of different abilities. They allow pupils to be too passive or inattentive, and sometimes allow low-level disruption to hinder the progress of the class.

Most teachers mark pupils' work regularly but do not always give them clear guidance on how to improve its quality. In a few subjects, detailed comments provide pupils with opportunities to reflect on their own learning and to improve their work. In nearly all subjects, teachers provide accurate assessments of the level of pupils' work in formally assessed tasks. Procedures for recording information on pupils' achievements are good. The information is used comprehensively to track progress and to identify any underachievement.

There is a well-planned system for regularly reporting pupils' progress to their parents. In a few subjects, reports provide detailed and helpful information on progress and on how to improve. However, there is inconsistency in the quality of written comments and targets for improvement.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The school has very effective arrangements to develop pupils' health and wellbeing. Large numbers of pupils are involved in sporting, cultural and many other enrichment activities. There are also many opportunities for pupils to contribute to the life of the school and the community, and to demonstrate their care for others. A well-planned and taught personal and social education programme makes a valuable contribution to pupils' knowledge, understanding, and positive attitudes. All of these experiences successfully promote pupils' personal, social, moral and cultural development.

Very strong collaborative arrangements with many key agencies provide vulnerable pupils with carefully targeted support. The learning support staff who work with the nurture groups in key stage 3 give very good practical day-to-day care. The behaviour and inclusion resourced provision provides very good targeted support for pupils who have attendance, behaviour or personal problems.

Transition arrangements with partner primary schools are good and the school has wide knowledge of pupils' circumstances, individual learning needs and prior attainment. This helps the pupils to settle well when they start at the school in Year 7. Pupils receive appropriate advice and guidance when making choices at the end of key stages.

The school has an appropriate policy and suitable procedures for safeguarding.

Pupils with additional learning needs receive very good support. Regular reviews involving parents, external support agencies and staff provide good guidance. The school's work with 'On Track', a local authority initiative to provide links between schools, families and other services, is an outstanding feature in providing support for these pupils and their families. However, the provision for more able and talented pupils is limited.

Learning environment: Good

The school is very successful in ensuring equality of opportunity for its pupils. It has a particularly effective approach towards the elimination of oppressive behaviour, much to the appreciation of pupils and their parents.

Racial and gender stereotyping are challenged well. The school makes particular efforts to raise pupils' aspirations in terms of lifelong learning and career pathways.

Overall, the well-maintained accommodation is in good condition. Most classrooms and public areas provide a stimulating environment with a high standard of decoration and wall displays. The toilet and changing facilities are generally good apart from a few areas, for example the boys' changing rooms. Poor drainage of the outdoor sporting surfaces makes them unusable in very wet weather. Learning resources are sufficient to meet pupils' needs and are generally of good quality.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?	Adequate
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Leadership: Adequate

The acting headteacher has led the school well through a period of change and uncertainty. Most senior leaders are in temporary posts but work together effectively. However, a few have too many responsibilities in relation to the time available to carry out their roles. Leaders at all levels have well-defined areas of responsibility that are linked to the school's strategic aims.

A clear vision and strategic direction are focused on pupils' needs. Leaders have had a positive impact in some important areas, for example in improving pupils' wellbeing and in developing a broader and more relevant curriculum. However there is not a strong enough focus on improving teaching and learning.

Teams meet regularly at all levels, and generally focus on improving performance. Systems to communicate key issues are good. However senior leaders do not always ensure that all staff or departments pursue the school's strategic objectives rigorously enough, or work effectively to improve pupils' outcomes.

The school has a systematic approach to performance management. Teachers' targets are linked appropriately to the school's priorities and senior leaders have begun to address underperformance directly.

The governing body is actively involved in setting the school's strategic direction. It has a good understanding of the school's performance and priorities, and makes good use of a range of information and data to challenge and support the school.

The school takes good account of many national and local priorities, including Learning Pathways 14-19, tackling poverty and community-focused schooling.

Improving quality: Adequate

Senior leaders know the school well and make an accurate assessment of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Comprehensive self-evaluation procedures include good systems to gather the views of pupils and parents. The school has worked with the local authority to evaluate the school as a community resource and this has had a positive impact on the support provided for pupils.

Leaders and managers obtain first-hand evidence of teaching and learning from their own observations and those by outside agencies. This evidence has been used effectively to support and improve a few departments. However, the targets that are set for teachers as a result of lesson observations are not always sufficiently specific and measurable, and are not monitored rigorously enough to bring about improvement in standards.

The school development plan is closely linked to strategic goals. However it does not always have clear and measurable criteria for success and is not focused enough on raising standards to secure improvements in pupils' performance. Senior leaders do not always ensure that actions and outcomes from previous plans are followed through with enough rigour to promote sustained improvement.

The systems for middle leaders to review their areas of responsibility are good, though practice is variable. A few heads of department analyse data effectively and use peer observation and support well to promote improvement. The few very good departmental development plans identify clear actions and goals, but other plans do not often enough identify measurable outcomes and clear evaluation criteria, or focus sufficiently on raising standards. Plans are reviewed by senior leaders but not always rigorously enough. The subsequent monitoring of departments' progress is too infrequent and does not focus enough on strategic priorities or raising standards.

The school has a well-established school improvement group. This group provides teachers with good opportunities to develop and share their professional knowledge, and has had a very positive impact on the practice of a few departments. However, it has not yet fulfilled its potential to improve whole school practice in teaching and learning. The school provides good opportunities for teachers to develop their leadership skills through secondments to the senior leadership team.

The school has addressed recommendations from the last inspection report but has not brought about enough improvement in some areas. For example, attendance has not improved significantly; the number of pupils gaining a qualification in Welsh second language is still far too low; and marking still does not help pupils enough to improve the standard of their work.

Partnership working: Good

Leaders and managers have developed a range of effective partnerships.

The school works well with partner primary schools to provide an effective range of link projects to support pupils when they move from primary to secondary school.

Partnerships with parents are well developed. The school has developed a range of strategies to help parents to improve pupils' standards and wellbeing. Parents are actively involved with staff through coffee mornings, tutor evenings, option evenings and a range of community activities.

Managers have developed strong partnerships with four secondary schools in Rhondda Fach and Rhondda Fawr. The five schools work well together to widen provision for learners at post-16 and have begun to rationalise vocational and academic courses in order to provide value for money and improve quality.

Very good links with multi-disciplinary agencies help learners and their families throughout their time at school. These include social services, the youth service, the Rhondda Fach Partnership, the police and Treatment and Education Drug Services (TEDS).

The school has good links with initial teacher training institutions.

Resource management: Adequate

Managers have robust procedures to monitor and prioritise expenditure and keep it within agreed limits.

The school provides a suitable curriculum. It is collaborating with other schools to widen the choice of options for learners in key stage 4 and post-16. The school deploys teaching staff sensibly and makes effective use of in-class support staff.

Managers use available funding well to maintain learning and social areas in a good state of repair and ensure that teachers have enough appropriate learning resources and equipment. Managers allocate agreed budgets to departments appropriately.

The school is reviewing staffing and curriculum priorities in order to meet future budget constraints at a time when funding is decreasing.

Overall, the school manages its resources well. However outcomes in terms of pupils' standards are adequate and have not shown enough continuous improvement over recent years. Therefore the school gives adequate value for money.

Appendix 1

Stakeholder satisfaction report

Responses to parent questionnaires

Estyn received 129 completed questionnaires from parents or carers. Most parents are satisfied with the school.

Most parents feel that their children receive good guidance and support. They state that pupils are happy at the school, although a few disagree. Most agree, but a few disagree, that the school successfully encourages pupils to be healthy, that the staff treat pupils fairly and with respect, and that the school is well run. Most feel that the school is welcoming to parents, but a few parents do not think that they are kept well enough informed about their children's progress. Just under one third of questionnaires state that pupils do not behave well in school.

Responses to learner questionnaires

Estyn received responses from 153 pupils, selected at random across all year groups.

Almost all pupils feel safe in school. Many pupils say that the school deals well with bullying and that they have someone to talk to if they are worried. Most say that the school gives them good advice about their education, encourages them to take on responsibility and helps them to understand and respect people from other backgrounds. Many feel that the school teaches them how to keep healthy and most feel that there are good opportunities for regular exercise.

Most pupils say that they have enough learning resources, and that they are doing well at school. However, half of them say that behaviour is not good enough and that they cannot get their work done. A few state that some of the staff do not treat them with respect, and a minority feel that the school does not listen to their views or make changes that they suggest.

Appendix 2

The inspection team

Steffan James HMI	Reporting Inspector
Sarah Lewis HMI	Team Inspector
Sue Halliwell HMI	Team Inspector
Jackie Gapper HMI	Team Inspector
Huw Collins HMI	Team Inspector
Edward Tipper	Lay Inspector
Maria Edwards	Peer Inspector
Carolyn Jones	School Nominee

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Year groups and key stages

Schools use a common system of numbering year groups from the start of compulsory schooling to 18 years of age. This system emphasises the importance of continuity and eases communication among schools, governing bodies, parents and LEAs.

The term 'Reception' (R) refers to the year group of pupils in a primary school who reach the age of five during the academic year. Year 1 refers to the year group of pupils who reach the age of six during the academic year and so on. Year 13 is the year group of students who reach the age of 18 during the academic year.

Primary phase:

Year	R	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Ages	4-5	5-6	6-7	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11

Secondary phase:

Year	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Y12	Y13
Ages	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18

The four key stages cover the following year groups:

Key stage 1	Year 1 and Year 2
Key stage 2	Year 3 to Year 6
Key stage 3	Year 7 to Year 9
Key stage 4	Year 10 and Year 11