



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

A report on

**Birchgrove Comprehensive School
Birchgrove Road
Birchgrove
Swansea
SA7 9NB**

Date of inspection: October 2019

by

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

About Birchgrove Comprehensive School

Birchgrove Comprehensive School is an 11 to 16 co-educational community school maintained by Swansea local authority. There are currently 428 pupils on roll, compared with 648 pupils at the time of the last inspection in 2013. The school serves a suburban area between Neath and Swansea on the eastern side of Swansea.

Around 29% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is much higher than the national average of 16.4% and around 40% live in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales. Nearly 33% have a special educational need, including close to 13% who have a statement for that need. Both figures are much higher than the national averages. The school has two specialist teaching facilities catering for pupils with both specific and moderate learning difficulties.

No pupils speak Welsh as a first language or to an equivalent standard.

The senior leadership team consists of the headteacher, who took up post in September 2016, a deputy headteacher, two assistant headteachers and a finance officer.

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

Birchgrove Comprehensive School provides outstanding care, support and guidance. As a result, pupils enjoy high levels of wellbeing and their positive attitudes make a significant contribution to the inclusive ethos of the school.

Teachers know their pupils well and develop positive working relationships with their classes. This creates a calm and purposeful learning environment that supports successfully the progress and wellbeing of pupils.

The headteacher provides calm and assured leadership. His vision of a fully inclusive school is shared successfully with staff, parents and pupils. The school's ethos, based on maximising every child's potential and preparing them well for their future lives, pervades all aspects of its work.

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

Recommendations

- R1 Strengthen the co-ordination of literacy to ensure a worthwhile range of activities across the curriculum to secure the progressive development of pupils' skills, in particular their reading
- R2 Improve the impact that teachers' feedback has on pupils' progress
- R3 Improve standards in Welsh, particularly at key stage 4

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will invite the school to prepare a case study on its work in relation to the support provided for the most vulnerable learners, for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Standards: Good

In lessons, many pupils make sound progress in the development of their knowledge, understanding and skills. They recall well prior learning such as the significance of charity and prayer in Islam. A minority use recall effectively to develop further their skills and understanding in new contexts. This includes applying their knowledge of adverbs and prepositions to craft more engaging writing, and using the cosine rule to find an unknown side of a triangle.

Many pupils listen to the teacher and to their peers with attention and respect. A majority are keen to respond to the teacher's questions and happy to share their opinions, though they often provide brief, underdeveloped verbal responses. A few pupils provide well-considered responses and use a suitably sophisticated vocabulary when, for example, discussing how the poets Gillian Clarke and Owen Sheers present their views on relationships.

A majority of pupils skim and scan suitably to locate information on topics such as Martin Luther King's contribution to the abolition of segregation. A minority use inference and deduction suitably when, for example, considering the language choices of poets such as Simon Armitage and Sheenagh Pugh, and when assessing Britain's policy of appeasement. However, overall, a minority of pupils do not use a sufficient range of reading strategies to support their learning.

A majority of pupils produce writing that is technically secure. They write in different formats such as reviews of poetry and evaluations of the effectiveness of social reforms by the post-war Labour government. Around half demonstrate an appropriate sense of audience when writing various letters, including to the Prime Minister to express their concerns about energy and climate change. A minority of pupils review and improve their writing suitably. However, around half continue to make too many basic errors and fail to take enough responsibility for proof-reading their work before they hand it in.

Many pupils have appropriate basic number skills. The majority use them effectively in various contexts such as calculating and comparing personal expenditure with charity donations, constructing a graph to represent data from a traffic survey and planning a dormitory extension for a school in Uganda.

Pupils develop their ICT skills appropriately across the curriculum. This includes using design software to plan and refine automata in design technology and developing their spreadsheet skills well when solving equations using trial and improvement.

Pupils make sound use of their creativity when, for example, offering different interpretations of poetry, and in their use of physical theatre in drama. In addition, pupils from the specialist teaching facility use their creativity to benefit others by designing the school garden as part of a community project.

A minority of pupils achieve a level 2 pass in Welsh. Overall, pupils' ability to speak and write in Welsh is underdeveloped.

The school's performance at key stage 4 fluctuated over the period 2016-2018. In 2016 and 2017, pupils overall made a little less progress than expected, but there was a clear improvement in 2018 when performance was mostly above expectation.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Excellent

Pupils enjoy high levels of wellbeing and their positive attitudes make a significant contribution to the inclusive ethos of the school.

Nearly all pupils feel safe and secure in school. They are polite and courteous to visitors, and most show respect to staff and other pupils. They believe that the school deals well with any issues that arise.

Many pupils are confident, independent and resilient learners. They concentrate well and make valuable contributions to pair and group work. Only a few pupils lack independence and are over-reliant on their teachers.

Most pupils understand well how to stay safe online and have a clear understanding of how to live healthy lives. There are high levels of participation in the wide array of extra-curricular activities, for example dance club, self-defence sessions, photography and gardening.

A high proportion of pupils take on leadership roles, including being pupil ambassadors for sport, restorative practice mentors and 'Rights Respecting School' advocates. Pupils with special educational needs are involved fully in the life of the school as members of the school council and mentors to younger pupils. Their involvement contributes well to improving facilities in school, including those in the specialist teaching facilities. Key stage 4 pupils develop their leadership skills well through coaching younger pupils as part of the skills challenge certificate.

Pupils make a range of valuable contributions to the school community. For example, pupils in Year 9 undertake a sustainability project including the design and construction of bird boxes to encourage wildlife back to the school community. High levels of involvement in charity work help pupils to develop successfully as ethical and informed citizens.

Pupils' attendance over the last few years has consistently been above expectations. This has a positive impact on the standards they achieve.

Teaching and learning experiences: Good

In most cases, teachers develop positive working relationships with their classes, know their pupils well and establish clear boundaries and routines. This creates a calm and purposeful learning environment that supports successfully the progress and wellbeing of pupils.

In many instances, teachers demonstrate enthusiasm for their subject and provide a range of engaging activities that build well on pupils' prior learning. They plan carefully lessons that are based on pupils' needs and prior attainment, and provide a

suitable level of challenge. These teachers provide clear explanations and carefully designed resources that engage pupils well and help them to make sound progress in their knowledge, understanding and skills.

The majority of teachers use questioning suitably to help pupils recall their prior learning and to monitor their progress. In a few cases, teachers use questioning skilfully to explore and develop pupils' thinking.

In a few cases, teachers do not have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve. As a result, they plan tasks that occupy pupils but which do not challenge or develop pupils' independence in their learning well enough. This makes the pace of learning too slow and limits the progress that pupils make.

The majority of teachers provide useful written and verbal feedback that gives pupils clear guidance as to how they can improve their work. In a minority of cases, they check that pupils have responded suitably to written feedback. However, the majority of teachers do not monitor pupils' response to their feedback closely enough. Consequently, too many pupils either do not respond to teachers' comments or provide only superficial responses that have a limited impact on their progress. In a few instances, teachers accept readily or even praise poor quality work.

The school offers a wide range of academic and vocational qualifications at key stage 4. It adapts its curriculum effectively to meet the needs of individual and groups of pupils. This includes courses to enhance and extend the learning experiences of more able pupils, and also those to support the progress and wellbeing of vulnerable pupils. The school's provision for the skills challenge certificate makes a positive contribution to developing pupils' wider skills.

A wide range of extra-curricular activities extends pupils' learning experiences well. For example, in geography, pupils carry out an enquiry about the River Ilston, and a visit to St Fagans helps them to understand the impact of feudalism on life in the middle ages. Useful links with the local university help to raise the aspirations of more able pupils.

The key stage 3 curriculum builds appropriately on pupils' learning from previous key stages. A few subject areas are developing useful joint projects with local primary schools to strengthen progression from key stage 2 to key stage 3. There are appropriate opportunities across the curriculum for pupils to learn about Welsh heritage and culture, for example when they study the growth of the coal and iron industries in Merthyr Tydfil and their effect on life during the industrial revolution. However, pupils do not benefit from sufficient opportunities to develop and practise their Welsh language skills outside of Welsh lessons.

There is a beneficial range of worthwhile opportunities for pupils to develop their numeracy skills across the curriculum. However, the progressive development of their literacy skills is less well established and co-ordinated. There are insufficient opportunities for pupils to develop their higher-order reading skills such as inference, deduction and synthesis, and too few relevant opportunities for them to produce extended writing for different purposes and audiences. The school uses a suitable range of information to identify pupils with weaker literacy and numeracy skills and provides appropriate interventions to support them. There are suitable opportunities for pupils to develop their ICT skills across the curriculum.

Care, support and guidance: Excellent

Birchgrove Comprehensive School provides pupils with outstanding care, support and guidance. At the heart of the school's mission is an inclusive ethos with the clear purpose of maximising every child's potential. This work contributes highly effectively to pupils' wellbeing, their engagement in learning and to the sound progress that many make.

Staff know their pupils very well and the purposeful and productive relationships between them are a particular strength of the school. Coupled with the school's systematic tracking of pupils' progress in learning and wellbeing, this enables them to identify and respond promptly and effectively to any underperformance.

The school has effective procedures for promoting and rewarding good attendance. Its valuable systems for developing positive behaviours and engagement in learning are highly effective. This allows pupils to reflect meaningfully on their actions and the impact on others, and to develop effective approaches to building constructive relationships. This contributes positively to the calm and purposeful atmosphere that pervades the school.

There are highly effective arrangements to support the needs of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and those who are vulnerable to disaffection. The school has developed clear systems for referring pupils to learning support. It uses a range of information to identify pupils' needs and implement relevant and worthwhile support. Comprehensive independent development plans set out clearly these pupils' strengths and areas for development, and include beneficial strategies to help staff support their progress in lessons. Annual reviews follow a person-centred approach that draws effectively on the views of the pupil, their teachers, parents and professionals to celebrate successes and identify important next steps.

The school provides a wide range of effective interventions internally and in partnership with specialist services. This develops pupils' basic and life skills, builds their confidence and resilience, and addresses any specific social or emotional needs effectively. The needs of pupils with autism spectrum disorder or moderate learning difficulties are met exceptionally well in the school's specialist teaching facilities. These pupils follow a worthwhile bespoke curriculum that combines support and mainstream lessons. This contributes effectively to their enthusiasm for learning.

The school plans carefully its transition arrangements for pupils. In particular, it provides outstanding support for the most vulnerable. These arrangements ensure that pupils, including those with SEN, transferring to Birchgrove from primary or from other secondary schools settle very well. This has a notably positive impact on the emotional wellbeing and progress of these pupils.

Pupils receive comprehensive guidance and support to enable them to make well-informed decisions about their learning pathways. This helps vulnerable pupils to select the most appropriate courses. The school also provides ongoing support to those at risk of not being in education, employment or training after they have left the school. This helps them to adjust their plans if necessary. As a result, nearly all pupils progress successfully to worthwhile education, employment or training.

The school has strong relationships with parents and makes very effective use of apps and social media to keep them informed of successes or areas for concern regarding their child's attendance, wellbeing or progress.

The personal and social education programme is comprehensive, well-planned and supported effectively by external agencies. The pupil-led 'Rights Respecting' committee also makes a highly beneficial contribution to this programme for younger pupils. This provision is supported well by worthwhile opportunities to challenge and reflect on spiritual, social and moral issues and values. These include well-planned morning assemblies, the 'Thought for the Day' programme and beneficial experiences across subject areas. For example, in history, pupils explore racial prejudice and in religious education through debating issues such as euthanasia and abortion.

There is effective provision to promote healthy eating and drinking and to develop pupils' understanding of how lifestyle choices impact on physical and mental health. This includes the police liaison programme, a designated nurse service and the pupils' Healthy Schools Committee. Many pupils enhance their physical health by participating in the many extra-curricular sporting activities provided. The extensive enrichment programme and extra-curricular activities provide valuable opportunities for pupils to develop team-building and problem-solving skills. These include the eco-committee's environmental projects, the gardening club and the internet safety team. The expressive arts clubs, music groups, theatre visits, the annual 'Show-stoppers' concert and Shakespeare Festival contribute well to the development of pupils' creative skills.

All pupils are encouraged to participate in school and community life. There are extensive opportunities for them to develop leadership skills and to contribute to decision-making processes. These include the Year and Student Councils, sports coaching roles and the Rotary Interact Club. Pupils engage well with community projects, for example the Birchgrove Special Unit gardening project and Clydach Youth Council.

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

Leadership and management: Good

The headteacher provides calm and assured leadership. His clear vision of a fully inclusive school, which prepares pupils well for their future lives, is shared successfully with staff, parents and pupils. Over the last few years, leadership has secured improvements in pupils' outcomes and in particular contributed to exceptional standards of wellbeing and care, support and guidance.

In general, senior leaders hold middle leaders to account well through effective line management arrangements. They monitor progress against improvement priorities and focus suitably on pupils' progress and standards. In most instances, leaders follow up diligently on action points generated in these meetings. Recently, the school has revised senior leadership roles with a clear focus on national and school priorities. However, the current allocation of responsibilities does not allow all senior leaders to carry out their roles effectively. Many middle leaders provide effective leadership that has secured improvements in standards and in the quality of teaching. However, in a few instances, middle leadership is not effective enough.

The school has sound arrangements for managing the performance of staff. They include robust targets that link directly to the school's priorities, such as improving teaching and outcomes at key stage 4. The school identifies professional learning opportunities suitably and monitors progress against the targets effectively at key points during the year.

Governors know the school well. Most are experienced and provide useful challenge to the school through a variety of committees, in particular the standards committee. In addition, link governors have a thorough understanding of performance in departments and provide suitable challenge when required.

The headteacher promotes successfully a culture of self-reflection and collaboration. Leaders make effective use of data to identify specific areas for development. They plan well to address them and provide a higher level of support and challenge to any areas of particular concern.

The school carries out an appropriate range of self-evaluation activities. Leaders use the evidence from these activities to identify broad areas for improvement. However, they do not always focus precisely enough on the impact that teaching and assessment has on pupil progress and skills. In particular, when evaluating teachers' feedback, they focus too much on the comments themselves rather than on how well pupils improve their work as a result.

The school canvasses the opinions of pupils and parents well and acts appropriately upon their views, such as when making changes to the personal and social education programme.

The school has established a positive culture of professional learning. There is a wide range of opportunities for staff to share good practice both within and across subject areas, for example through whole-school 'Improving Quality' sessions. In addition, the school works well with other providers to share good practice and develop its own provision. Professional learning activities link appropriately to whole-school and departmental priorities, and to performance management objectives. However, the school does not have a sufficiently strategic and evaluative overview of these activities. Consequently, they have not had as much impact as they might.

The headteacher, governors and business manager monitor the budget robustly and, through careful management, have eliminated the school's deficit budget. They ensure that spending decisions link well to the school's priorities and that there is a suitable programme for maintaining the school site.

Leaders make good use of grants available to them. The pupil development grant is used effectively and has had a positive impact on the outcomes and wellbeing of pupils eligible for free school meals.

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, to listen to them read 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
- visit a broad sample of classes, 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' wellbeing, 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

Copies of the report

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

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

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

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

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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