



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

A report on

**Castle School
Narberth
Pembrokeshire
SA67 8HB**

Date of inspection: April 2019

by

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

About Castle School

Castle School is a co-educational independent day school for boys and girls from 3 to 16 years of age. It is situated at Sodston Manor, a converted Grade II listed building just outside Narberth in Pembrokeshire. The school was founded in 2009 by its current proprietor.

There are currently 137 pupils in the school. There is little difference in the total number of boys and girls although the balance varies considerably in certain class groups across the school.

The school has a wide catchment area that includes Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion. Around 5% of pupils come from minority-ethnic groups. All pupils speak English fluently. A very few pupils speak Welsh as a first language at home. The school does not aim to make pupils bilingual in English and Welsh although a very few learn Welsh as a second language.

The school offers additional learning support to about 10% of its pupils. Most of these pupils have general learning difficulties. A very few pupils have a statement of special educational needs. The school's admissions policy is to accept pupils where it considers it can meet their educational needs appropriately.

The school has undergone considerable developments since the last inspection. In 2016, the school opened a preparatory school at Cresselly for pupils from the age of 3 to 11 years. The preparatory school was relocated in November 2017 from Cresselly to the main school site at Sodston Manor.

Access to five acres of mixed woodland, meadows and streams at the nearby outdoor school provides opportunities for pupils to learn in a natural setting with an emphasis on discovery and promoting teamwork, communication and responsibility.

Both the headteacher and the head of the preparatory school have been in post since September 2018. The school's proprietor is a director of the school with primary responsibility for the estates and recruitment. The leadership team also includes the bursar and the director of outdoor studies, who also has overall responsibility for pupils' pastoral care.

The school was last inspected in October 2014.

Summary

The school provides a high quality of care for its pupils in a supportive and nurturing learning environment where pupils are encouraged to develop as confident and resilient individuals. The mature approach and positive attitudes to learning that most pupils display contribute particularly well to the assured progress they make in deepening their knowledge and understanding and the high standards they achieve.

The curriculum meets pupils' needs and aspirations appropriately. The innovative, outdoor school provides a valuable and beneficial addition to the curriculum that supports the development of pupils' thinking and problem-solving skills particularly well. In many lessons across the school, learning experiences engage pupils effectively. However, in the senior school particularly, the quality of teaching is inconsistent and, in a few instances, this limits pupils' progress.

The proprietor and leadership team promote a clear vision for the school that is communicated successfully and valued highly by staff, pupils and parents. In recent years, there have been significant changes to strengthen the leadership structure and capacity, and to improve provision for pupils. In particular, the proprietor and leadership team have established a successful preparatory school. However, overall the school's quality assurance arrangements lack rigour and do not provide a suitable basis to support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning.

The school meets all of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

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

Compliance with the regulations for registration

Independent school inspections are governed by the Education Act 2002 and related regulations: the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. These regulations require an independent school to meet an appropriate standard in the following areas:

The quality of education provided by the school

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The suitability of proprietors and staff

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Premises of and boarding accommodation at schools

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The provision of information

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Recommendations

R1 Strengthen quality improvement arrangements

R2 Improve the quality of teaching and the consistency of assessment to match best practice

R3 Improve planning and provision for the development of pupils' skills

R4 Increase opportunities for pupils to influence the life and work of the school

What happens next

Estyn advises the proprietor to amend its current development plan to show what actions the school intends to take in response to the recommendations. It is also advisable to circulate this plan, or a summary of it, to all parents/carers at the school.

Main findings

Standards: Good

Most pupils, across the school, make assured progress in deepening their knowledge and understanding. This contributes well to the high standards pupils achieve in GCSE examinations.

Most pupils listen attentively and with respect to teachers' explanations and the views of others. Many speak clearly and express their ideas confidently. A few pupils are extremely articulate and present their opinions thoughtfully using sophisticated language. However, a few pupils are reluctant to speak at length. They offer only brief responses and do not explain their ideas fully.

In the preparatory school, by the end of Year 6, most pupils become confident, fluent readers. They enjoy reading a wide range of texts and express thoughtful preferences for different types of books and favourite authors. Many use higher-order skills maturely, for example to explain why particular authors have used figurative language such as sarcasm and similes to add effect to their writing. Most pupils in the senior school read effectively using a variety of strategies such as skimming and highlighting to help them record and organise relevant information. Many read aloud clearly, varying the tone and expression effectively to reflect the nature and context of the text such as when they are interpreting a dramatic scene. The majority of pupils draw thoughtful and relevant inferences from text, for example when analysing Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' to identify specific poetic techniques used to portray the horror and futility of war.

In the preparatory school, many pupils develop their writing skills well. They acquire an extensive age-appropriate vocabulary and produce imaginative, engaging stories and poems, for example when composing a list poem of things you might find in a policeman's pocket. In most cases, these pupils present their written work neatly using accurate punctuation and correct spelling of common words. In the senior school, many pupils organise their writing well, using paragraphs appropriately when expressing their thoughts on a particular aspect. Many write effectively for a variety of purposes. For example, they write rational persuasive letters recommending holding a music festival in the local community or to highlight the positive contribution teenagers make to society. Many develop and refine their writing successfully, using language well to express emotion or to convey a particular atmosphere such as when replicating Gothic fiction. Year 9 pupils write informative reports on the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand as a catalyst for conflict leading to World War 1. A few more able pupils produce particularly powerful and evocative pieces using sophisticated vocabulary. However, across the school, a few pupils produce untidy work and do not take enough care with their presentation. This detracts from the quality of their work.

Most pupils in the preparatory school develop strong mathematical skills. Many pupils in Year 1 and Year 2 recognise lines of symmetry in nature, such as in flowers and butterflies, and fold rectangles accurately in half. Pupils in Year 4 calculate differences in temperature at various cities around the world using their knowledge of negative numbers accurately. They apply their numeracy skills suitably in topic work,

for example to calculate distances between places in Wales, converting metres to miles and using scale accurately. In the senior school, many pupils apply their numeracy skills well in mathematics and science. In these subjects, most pupils plot data accurately using line graphs. Nearly all Year 9 pupils solve relevant algebraic equations correctly in a scientific context to calculate body mass index or the speed of an object. However, in general pupils do not apply their numeracy skills regularly enough and at an appropriate level in other areas of the curriculum.

Across the school, many pupils develop their thinking and problem-solving skills well. For example, as part of their outdoor school activities, key stage 2 pupils refine their catapult designs to determine the appropriate trajectory to fire more accurately and adjust the construction of their bridges to carry more weight. Many Year 11 pupils offer thoughtful responses when considering the principle themes addressed in the story 'Blood Brothers'. These approaches encourage pupils to debate a range of social and cultural issues.

In each of the last three years, most pupils have achieved the level 2 threshold (equivalent to five GCSEs at grades A* to C) and many have achieved the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics. Over this period, more than 25% of all GCSE entries were at grades A*/A (or equivalent). In total, over the last three years, around a quarter of all pupils have achieved five or more passes at the highest A*/A grades although there has been a dip since 2016 in performance in this indicator. Overall, these outcomes have been consistently above national averages. Performance in the core subjects of English and mathematics has also exceeded national averages in each of the last three years.

Most pupils with additional learning needs make suitable progress in line with their abilities. For the last three years, no pupil has left the school without a recognised qualification. At the end of Year 11, nearly all pupils remain in full-time education.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Good

Pupils' high levels of wellbeing and positive attitudes to learning make a significant contribution to the mature approach they have to their work and the assured progress that most pupils make. Across the school, nearly all pupils feel safe and nurtured in the school's welcoming family environment.

Most pupils have a clear understanding of how to keep themselves healthy through eating a well-balanced diet and taking regular exercise. For example, they embrace the outdoor school programme and participate with considerable enthusiasm in a range of clubs and activities such as yoga, walking club and Tai Chi. This engagement helps foster extremely positive working relationships between pupils and staff across the school.

Pupils understand the importance of staying safe online and know who to talk to if they have a concern. They are confident that the school deals effectively with any concerns they might have. Nearly all pupils are polite, well-mannered and caring, and treat their peers and adults with respect. Most pupils are well behaved in lessons and move calmly and purposefully around the school. They are courteous and welcoming to visitors and many are keen to share their pride in their school.

Most pupils are attentive and participate enthusiastically in class activities. As they progress through the school, the majority of pupils become confident, capable, independent learners, often concentrating well for extended periods. Many pupils demonstrate a high level of persistence and solve problems confidently. For example, in mathematics lessons, Year 4 and Year 5 pupils persevere effectively to understand and make use of Roman numerals.

Many pupils work successfully in small groups and cooperate maturely to undertake specific tasks, showing respect for the views and ideas of others. For example, during outdoor school sessions, pupils work well collaboratively and support their peers effectively showing resourcefulness when undertaking planned group challenges.

Pupils, across the school, respond eagerly and diligently to opportunities to undertake leadership roles, such as when organising specific community events or when managing warm-up activities in physical education. Year 6 pupils enjoy the responsibilities they carry out as team leaders for group tasks in the outdoor school. A few older pupils are developing valuable leadership skills, for example through their involvement as sports ambassadors, organising relevant activities for pupils in the preparatory school.

Most pupils develop a strong awareness of the needs of others, both within their own school community and further afield. For example, charity representatives help plan worthwhile fundraising activities to support local and international charities, including their current focus on raising money for a neighbouring children's hospice.

A very few pupils do not attend school regularly enough.

Teaching and learning experiences: Adequate and needs improvement

The school provides a curriculum that is broad and balanced and meets the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. The curriculum meets pupils' needs and aspirations appropriately.

In the senior school, there is a suitable range of learning experiences across key stage 3. All pupils study English, mathematics and separate sciences. At key stage 4, pupils choose from an appropriate selection of options, including Latin, Spanish, computer science, humanities, art and music. In addition, the school provides useful opportunities for key stage 4 pupils to study specific subjects such as GCSE French, Welsh and dance through out-of-hours learning. However, overall, curriculum provision for the creative arts and technological areas of learning is limited.

Provision in the preparatory school has developed and flourished as pupil numbers have increased rapidly. Across the preparatory school classes, the emphasis on pupils' English and mathematical skills is appropriate, as it ensures a firm foundation for the development of pupils' skills, for example in reading, writing and mathematics. This approach is particularly successful in developing pupils' self-confidence and problem-solving skills.

In the preparatory classes, teachers provide a bright and stimulating environment that engages pupils effectively. There is a worthwhile strategy to introduce Spanish to these pupils, to provide opportunities for them to develop as bilingual learners.

The outdoor school provides a valuable and beneficial addition to the curriculum for all pupils, up to and including Year 8. This innovative, carefully-planned provision targets pupils' thinking and problem-solving skills, and enhances many aspects of their wellbeing. For older pupils, the outdoor school provides useful learning experiences in aspects of biodiversity and ecology, as well as opportunities to gain accredited leadership competencies. There is increasing collaboration across the school to develop the cohesiveness of the outdoor school programme, to align the planned activities and the progression of skills with classroom studies and achievements.

There is a suitably broad range of extra-curricular activities for pupils of all ages. These include the Rock School musical group, the preparatory school choir, the school gazette and teambuilding weekends, as well residential trips for key stage 2 pupils to Llanion Cove.

Professional relationships between teachers and pupils are strong and mutually respectful. Well-qualified and skilled support staff make a valuable contribution to pupils' learning.

In many lessons, across the school, learning experiences engage pupils effectively. In these instances, teachers plan thoughtfully and consider carefully what their pupils need to learn next. The pace of learning is brisk. Teachers ensure that pupils understand what they need to do in order to complete their work successfully.

Across the school, the majority of teachers have high expectations for their pupils. These teachers generally match work appropriately to pupils' individual starting points, particularly for pupils who may struggle to access the work. Many teachers and teaching assistants ask skilful questions that probe pupils' understanding, and encourage them to think deeply. They direct well-chosen questions at individuals, because they know their pupils well. However, in the senior school particularly, the quality of teaching is inconsistent, and in a few instances, this limits pupils' progress.

The school has recently introduced a framework to support teachers to develop pupils' literacy, numeracy, and information and communications technology (ICT) skills progressively across the curriculum. However, only a minority of teachers ensure that pupils acquire and practise their skills systematically, and to the same level as in English and mathematics lessons. As a result, the provision to develop pupils' skills is inconsistent. Where teachers do not use the school's framework well enough, they too often accept work that demonstrates weak literacy and numeracy skills, from pupils who could do better.

Many teachers provide pupils with clear verbal feedback about their learning and how they should improve their work. Teachers make worthwhile use of occasional peer and self-assessment, which provides helpful, timely feedback to pupils. The majority of teachers mark pupils' work appropriately and provide supportive positive comments. A minority identify clearly the next steps in pupils' learning, or provide further practice to help the pupil to consolidate a particular concept. However, across the school, the quality and impact of teachers' written feedback varies too much and pupils do not respond effectively to teachers' written feedback often enough.

Teachers make regular, useful assessments of the standards that pupils achieve. In the preparatory school, teachers engage in worthwhile moderation of pupils' work, for example in writing. This helps ensure that their evaluations are accurate and consistent. However, not all teachers and leaders work collaboratively to ensure that their assessments of pupils' work are suitably robust.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The school provides a high level of care for all of its pupils. Staff know the pupils well and deal with any specific concerns or behavioural issues that may arise in a consistent and supportive manner. These approaches contribute particularly well to pupils' wellbeing and developing self-confidence.

Across the school, staff monitor pupils' progress regularly. There are useful opportunities for pupils to reflect upon and evaluate their own progress. However, there is inconsistency in how well staff involve pupils in agreeing their own personal targets. Whilst senior leaders are beginning to collect a range of useful data to monitor pupils' progress, the school does not use this data well enough to inform planning and to track pupils' progress robustly.

Arrangements for meeting the additional learning needs of pupils are well designed and enhance the standards achieved by these pupils. Across the school, staff identify pupils with additional learning needs promptly. The school's additional learning needs co-ordinators produce high-quality, individual education plans that include relevant targets to ensure that these pupils receive appropriate targeted support. Where relevant, this support includes discrete one-to-one teaching. This approach helps staff to monitor their progress closely and assists most of these pupils to make at least suitable progress in line with their abilities.

The school provides helpful information to parents about their child's progress. Reports to parents highlight pupils' attainment, attitude and effort well. However, in the senior school, teachers do not always provide parents with enough detail about how their child can make further improvements in their learning.

Throughout the school, staff provide valuable opportunities for pupils to understand the benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle through taking regular exercise and having an appropriate diet. For example, Year 6 pupils created a fitness video to encourage other pupils in the preparatory school to exercise regularly, while staff consulted with pupils to help promote healthy food choices at lunchtimes. The school provides pupils with an appropriate range of extra-curricular fitness activities including football and walking clubs.

Staff deliver a highly-effective personal and social education programme that supports the development of pupils' spiritual, social and emotional skills successfully. For example, in the preparatory school, pupils consider and learn about important virtues that they need to sustain a well-rounded life. Through regular religious education lessons, cross-curricular themes and specific events, the school assists pupils particularly well to explore and develop their understanding of aspects and issues related to diversity, tolerance, and respect for others. Learning experiences across the curriculum help pupils to develop their cultural and social awareness, and to appreciate their personal responsibilities towards others. For example, in Latin lessons, Year 8 pupils have opportunities to compare the structure and functions of local government in Pembrokeshire with that of Ancient Pompeii.

The school organises a range of beneficial events to assist pupils to become active members of their local community. During a recent community day, pupils undertook a range of valuable activities including cleaning a local beach and staging a public performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. Many pupils have useful opportunities to take part in regular fund raising events. Through this work, pupils gain a sound awareness of people less fortunate than themselves which contributes well to their development as ethical and informed citizens.

Older pupils receive a wide range of helpful careers advice and support, including opportunities to attend local careers fayres and to practise and improve their personal interview techniques. There are suitable opportunities for pupils to take on additional responsibilities, such as sports' ambassadors, and to contribute to producing the school's gazette. However, pupil voice is at an early stage of development and, as a result, pupils do not have a sufficiently prominent role in influencing the school's strategic direction or improving aspects of teaching and learning.

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

Leadership and management: Adequate and needs improvement

The proprietor and leadership team promote a clear vision for the school that is communicated successfully and valued highly by staff, pupils and parents. The leadership team is effective in fostering a supportive, caring learning environment where pupils feel safe, nurtured and encouraged to develop as confident and resilient individuals.

In recent years, there have been significant changes to strengthen the leadership structure and capacity, and to improve provision for pupils. In particular, the proprietor and leadership team have established a successful preparatory school that has recently located to the same site as the senior school.

Leadership roles and responsibilities have been revised and delegated suitably. The proprietor has overall responsibility for strategic planning while the headteacher, supported by the bursar and head of preparatory school is responsible for the day-to-day leadership and management. The senior team meet regularly and focus well on delivering the priorities in the school improvement plan.

The headteacher has been successful in establishing effective communication across the school, and in ensuring the school is well organised and operates efficiently. Staff feel well supported by senior leaders. This approach is contributing to greater staff involvement in decision making and is helping to ensure that staff share a strong commitment to the school's aims.

The head of the preparatory school provides robust leadership. Through regular weekly meetings she supports and holds staff to account well. These meetings focus appropriately on pupils' achievement as well as progress with current initiatives and the identification of future priorities. As a result, the preparatory school staff share a strong sense of collegiality. Their close working relationships, joint planning and careful monitoring of pupils' progress have a positive impact on their learning and personal development.

In order to develop leadership capacity and increase levels of accountability, subject leaders have been identified in the senior school. These subject leaders have specific responsibility to support the refined departmental review process. This is a useful process, which requires each of these leaders to provide a half-termly reflection on outcomes, as well as the progress of individual pupils and progress in implementing their subject improvement plans. However, the quality and value of these reviews are inconsistent and are undermined significantly by shortcomings in the quality assurance process. The headteacher and subject leaders do not meet formally to evaluate rigorously the work of their areas of responsibility. This makes it difficult to hold these staff appropriately to account or to ensure they receive any necessary support.

The evaluation of provision in the preparatory school draws on a wide range of useful evidence, including lesson observations, learning walks and scrutiny of pupils' work. These quality assurance processes help identify areas of strength as well as relevant aspects requiring improvement. In the senior school, quality assurance arrangements lack rigour. They do not consider a sufficiently wide evidence base. For example, leaders do not monitor pupils' attendance robustly or analyse the impact of poor attendance on pupil progress well enough. As a result, leaders do not identify precisely relevant areas for improvement in learning and teaching. This limits the value of these processes in promoting improvements in learning and supporting staff professional development.

The school's arrangements to promote professional learning are underdeveloped. The school provides beneficial in-house training events to support particular agreed priorities, such as developing pupils' thinking skills. An appraisal system for teachers and support staff focuses appropriately on the core aspects of the specific roles of each member of staff. While this approach is used purposefully to help identify underperformance, it is less successful in determining clear personal objectives and relevant professional learning opportunities for all staff.

The school manages its resources effectively. Teachers are deployed efficiently and highly-effective use is made of a team of teaching assistants to enhance curriculum provision and support pupils' learning. Overall, the school makes beneficial use of its buildings, the outdoor area and other nearby facilities to support pupils' learning. The school is a pleasant and generally orderly learning environment for staff and pupils. However, in the lower preparatory area, for example, a few pupils lose concentration and their focus on the teacher's instructions due to the close proximity of other classes and background noise and movement.

Monitoring of the budget is robust. Spending decisions reflect school priorities, including pupils' educational needs and specific strategic developments. Leaders have been proactive in seeking efficiencies. For example, the school has worked in partnership with a local further education college to enhance curriculum opportunities in the performing arts and sports leadership.

The school meets all of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

Copies of the report

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

Under the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, the school must provide copies of the report to all parents of the school. Where a pupil is subject to placement by a local authority, a copy of the report should be sent by the school to each relevant authority.

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

Excellent	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 163 of the Education Act 2002. The main purpose of inspection under this section is to report on compliance with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003. In schools that provide non-maintained nursery education, this report also satisfies the requirements of Schedule 26 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

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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Publication date: 04/07/2019