



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

A report on

ACT Schools

Date of inspection: March 2024

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

About ACT Schools

Name of provider	ACT Schools
Proprietor	Richard Spear
Local authority	Cardiff Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Independent school with additional learning provision
Residential provision?	No
Number of pupils on roll	57
Pupils of statutory school age	57
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	
Start date of inspection	18/03/2024

ACT Schools is an independent school with campuses in Cardiff and Caerphilly. It provides education for pupils aged 11 to 16 years who have additional learning needs, specifically social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The school is administered by ACT (Holdings) Ltd, a subsidiary of Cardiff and The Vale College.

There are currently 57 pupils at the school. A minority of the pupils have a statement of special educational needs. A very few pupils are looked after by local authorities in Wales.

The acting head of education has been in post for less than a year.

The school's last monitoring visit was in May 2022. This is the school's first core inspection.

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.

Overview

Most pupils at ACT schools have experienced significant periods of disruption to their education. They benefit from the nurturing and inclusive ethos at the school. Staff know their pupils well and generally adapt approaches to meet their emotional and well-being needs successfully. As a result, during their time at the school, the majority of pupils make suitable progress from their initial starting points in areas that support their personal development and learning. However, attendance issues impact on the rate of progress of a minority of pupils across the school.

Overall, many pupils behave suitably in lessons. However, on occasions, the behaviour of a few pupils disrupts the learning and well-being of other pupils.

Overall, the school provides a suitably broad curriculum, which supports pupils' well-being successfully. Curriculum plans demonstrate coverage of the areas of learning required in the Independent School Standards (Wales) regulations 2003. However, a few aspects of the curriculum, such as science, technology and humanities along with digital skills, lack rigour and regularity. Further, curriculum plans do not build systematically and coherently on pupils' knowledge and skills as they progress through the school. Furthermore, planning and assessment do not always link consistently well enough to pupils' additional learning needs. As a result, in the majority of lessons, activities do not provide sufficient challenge or opportunity to build on pupils' previous experiences and learning.

Teaching across the school is too variable. In a few lessons, where teaching is effective, teachers make their classes stimulating and engaging places. There are clear, relevant and challenging learning intentions where pupils can learn productively.

Senior leaders work cohesively and demonstrate a clear understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. They undertake a suitable range of quality assurance work. As a result, they have developed a manageable range of school improvement priorities and identified a few inconsistencies in practice accurately. However, leaders' quality assurance of lessons does not focus sharply enough on pupils' progress or consistently identify aspects of teaching that would benefit from improvement.

The school is not fully compliant with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

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 does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Although the school meets most of the regulatory requirements for this standard, in order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003 the school should:

- ensure that teaching involves well planned lessons, effective teaching methods, suitable activities and wise management of class time.
- provide effective education for all pupils within a class to make progress, including pupils with statements and those for whom Welsh or English is an additional language

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 Comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003
- R2 Improve the quality and consistency of teaching and assessment across the school
- R3 Strengthen planning to develop pupils' skills across the curriculum
- R4 Improve attendance
- R5 Improve quality assurance processes to evaluate the provision at the school

What happens next

Since the school does not meet the standards required for registration, the Welsh Parliament will require the proprietor to submit an action plan within a specified period of time. This plan will set out the steps that the school will take to meet the standards, and the timescale within which it will complete each step.

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

Learning

Most pupils at ACT schools have experienced significant periods of disruption to their education. During their time at the school, the majority of pupils make suitable progress from their initial starting points in areas that support their personal development and learning. These skills help pupils to make appropriate progress during their time at the school and in their future lives. However, attendance issues impact on the rate of progress of a minority of pupils across the school.

In lessons, many pupils develop their social skills suitably. They develop strong working relationships with staff and learn to work appropriately alongside their peers. The majority of pupils listen suitably to their teachers' presentations and instructions. Overall they listen respectfully to their peers' contributions to class discussions.

During class discussions and when questioned, the majority of pupils respond suitably, using short sentences and subject specific vocabulary, for example when presenting new knowledge and information about animal testing. They share their opinions assuredly and a few pupils support their opinions with well-considered reasons. In addition, many pupils respond politely in conversation with visitors at the school.

In lessons and intervention sessions, a majority of pupils develop their reading suitably. Pupils use their knowledge of letter sounds purposefully to read unfamiliar words. They skim and scan texts to locate and extract information from a range of sources. For example, pupils research the life of David Beckham, sensitively identifying the causes for his mental health difficulties. Many targeted pupils make suitable progress in improving their reading and comprehension skills as a result of focused support. Overall, due to a lack of opportunity, pupils do not read aloud frequently enough.

Overall pupils' writing skills are underdeveloped. The handwriting of a few pupils is poor, and they continue to make basic errors in punctuation and grammar. The majority of pupils write for a suitable range of purposes, such as writing formal letters and sharing information about Cardiff Museum. A very few pupils write independently and at length including redrafting and editing for improvement. For example, they write extended pieces of creative writing about haunted houses which are evocative and atmospheric.

Many pupils make secure development in their numeracy skills in mathematics lessons and in other relevant subjects within a range of meaningful contexts. For example, pupils use units of measurement effectively while following a cooking recipe. In addition, they calculate household budgets and interpret graphs accurately.

A few pupils use their digital skills enthusiastically and make appropriate use of information technology (ICT) to support their learning and understanding. For example, pupils practise their subject skills in online educational games and use applications on their mobile phones confidently to produce information leaflets about

mental health. However, generally, pupils across the school do not have sufficient opportunities to develop their ICT skills progressively over time.

Many pupils enjoy a range of beneficial and rewarding physical and outdoor activities as part of the school's enrichment offer. This includes using the school's gym, scuba diving and participating in a football scheme at Cardiff City football Club. As a result, pupils improve their fitness and well-being over time.

The majority of pupils develop their creative skills successfully. For example, they use Pop art as a vehicle to explore and experiment with a range of colours and textures and create Welsh love spoons as part of the wood work enrichment activities. They experiment enthusiastically with clay to make models of favourite characters and animals, showing resilience and determination.

Many pupils achieve a narrow range of accreditation in subject areas that reflect their abilities and interests well. This includes accreditation at a range of levels and in subjects such as English language, mathematics and numeracy, hair and beauty and construction.

Over the last three academic years, many pupils leaving the school progressed into education, training or employment.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Most pupils feel safe at school. They develop trusting relationships with staff and know who to talk to if they have concerns.

In lessons and around the school the majority of pupils demonstrate positive attitudes to their peers and to staff. The majority of pupils arrive to lessons on time, settle well and have positive attitudes towards their learning. Overall, many pupils engage well. A few display enthusiasm in their learning and are eager to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. The majority of pupils respond positively to beneficial well-being check-ins and interventions to support their emotional health.

Over time, the majority of pupils develop their knowledge and understanding of healthy lifestyles suitably. For example they understand the importance of developing healthy relationships and looking after their mental health.

Across the school, many pupils are polite and courteous. A few pupils are keen to talk to visitors about their positive experiences at ACT Schools. Overall, pupils listen well to staff and to each other.

Overall, many pupils behave suitably in lessons. A few use inappropriate or abusive language. This is rarely directed towards other pupils, staff or visitors. However, on occasions, the behaviour of a few pupils disrupts the learning and well-being of other pupils. During break times and lunchtimes, many pupils enjoy spending time with peers, for example playing a range of games inside school and socialising with their friends. Very few pupils participate in physical activities on site, due the limited outdoor space and resources at the school.

Many pupils participate in a range of beneficial enrichment activities outside school, which contributes effectively to their engagement and well-being. For example, pupils

enjoy gardening, scuba diving and skiing. They visit a local farm and a social enterprise scheme that specialises in construction from sustainable materials. In particular, they enjoy participating in the 'Young Drivers' scheme.

A few pupils benefit from developing leadership opportunities. For example, they represent their peers on the school council. With support, they are beginning to suggest areas for improvement at the school. For example, they have identified improving the enrichment offer at the school to include preparing and cooking meals and increasing the opportunities to volunteer in the local community.

Many pupils improve their attendance during their time at the school. However, the attendance rates of around half of pupils remains too low. This negatively impacts their ability to develop working relationships with staff and peers. Further, this limits the progress that these pupils make in their learning.

Teaching and learning experiences

Curriculum development and planning has been a whole-school focus, this is supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work. A teacher led group has developed a whole-school curriculum model that focuses on academic and enrichment opportunities. However, this is at an early stage of implementation, and it is too soon to evaluate the impact.

The curriculum provides valuable learning experiences through the school's enrichment program, which encourages pupils. In addition, it raises their aspirations around future careers and the world of work, helping them to make informed choices. For example, learners have the option to enrol in courses covering construction, mechanics and animal care.

Overall, the school provides a suitably broad curriculum, which supports pupils' well-being successfully. Curriculum plans demonstrate coverage of the areas of learning required in the Independent School Standards (Wales) regulations 2003. However, a few aspects of the curriculum, such as science, technology and humanities along with digital skills, lack rigour and regularity. Further, the number of hours pupils spend in lessons is low, in some cases below the guidelines for qualifications.

The curriculum provides pupils with opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills in listening and reading, speaking, writing and numeracy to support their work. However, curriculum plans are not currently well sequenced to build systematically and coherently on pupils' knowledge and skills as they progress through the school. Furthermore, planning and assessment do not always link consistently well enough to the pupils' additional learning needs. As a result, in the majority of lessons, activities do not provide sufficient challenge or opportunity to build on pupils' previous experiences and learning.

The curriculum offer is enhanced with a range of engaging activities and opportunities outside the classroom. For example, staff and pupils organised a successful skiing trip where pupils developed a range of important skills including self-regulation, responsibility and resilience. Pupils acquired funding from local businesses and co-ordinated fundraising events, for example selling products made during their enrichment activities.

Teaching across the school is too variable. In a few lessons, where teaching is effective, teachers make their lessons stimulating and engaging. There are clear, relevant and challenging learning intentions where pupils can learn productively. For example, during a mathematics session pupils are encouraged to draw on the table and link the learning in the classroom with authentic contexts in the real world.

In the most successful lessons, teachers provide clear instructions to introduce learning and ensure that pupils remain on task. They use questioning effectively to support pupils to recall prior learning, determine their understanding of the task and apply this to wider contexts. For example, in an English GCSE lesson pupils confidently answered questions about persuasive writing and used this skill to create a passage of their own. However, overall, staff do not develop the use of questioning enough to probe pupils' deeper understanding of topics.

In a minority of lessons, verbal feedback is positive and encourages pupils to engage in their learning. In these lessons, pupils are confident to learn from their mistakes and to continue with their efforts and achievements. However, feedback across the school does not consistently identify what pupils need to do to improve their learning and make progress.

Staff collect a suitable range of data and pupil assessment information to inform them about the progress of pupils. This includes, health and well-being, reading interventions and progress towards targets on pupils' individual development plans (IDPs) and learning plans. They also collect data about pupils' progress towards the progression steps in the literacy and numeracy areas of the curriculum. However, the school does not assess and plan pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills well enough. The school's systems to evaluate the progress of pupils across the range of areas of learning lacks rigour.

Care, support and guidance

ACT is a nurturing school with an inclusive ethos. Staff know their pupils well and generally adapt approaches to meet their emotional and well-being needs successfully. Over time, many pupils develop their confidence and begin to engage suitably in their learning.

In addition to the support provided by class teachers and youth learning mentors, the school's well-being team and outreach team offer a range of services to pupils and where appropriate, parents. For example, they support parents in encouraging the regular attendance of pupils and share useful strategies to support their engagement with their learning.

Overall, the school has suitable processes in place to monitor and improve attendance. For example, they have recently introduced trauma informed approaches to support pupils' emotional well-being. This work is at an early stage of development, and it is too early to evaluate its impact. The school works with individual pupils and their families to implement strategies to improve engagement and attendance. There are useful incentives to encourage pupils to attend, including competitions and trips. However, attendance rates remain low across the school, especially on the Caerphilly site, and there are a few pupils who do not attend.

The school has suitable processes for supporting behaviour. In the most effective lessons, where learning intentions are clear, and the support and challenge is robust, pupils are well motivated, respond enthusiastically and behave well. However, observations from lessons and around the school indicate that the use of the agreed strategies are inconsistent. Staff do not consistently reinforce the school's agreed behaviour policy.

Staff implement a developing range of interventions to support pupils' well-being and learning. For example, identified pupils receive support for reading, which is having a positive impact on their reading skills and improves their attitudes to reading. Pupils also benefit from support from trained counsellors on site. There are suitable systems to monitor the progress that pupils make in relation to their individual targets. Data from intervention tracking indicates that a minority of pupils are occasionally absent and miss their session or choose not to attend. Overall, the impact on the progress and outcomes of interventions on pupils' progress is variable.

The school provides a suitable personal and social education (PSE) curriculum within the health and well-being area of learning. For example, they provide opportunities for pupils to learn about healthy and unhealthy relationships and develop their understanding of identifying and challenging stereotypes. The curriculum encourages older pupils to explore what shapes and influences their identity. Leaders have developed a useful 'respect' calendar, which encourages pupils to learn about their own and other cultures. However, this is at an early stage of implementation. Currently opportunities to enable pupils' appreciation of and respect for other cultures are limited.

Many parents believe that the school helps their child to settle well into school. Many feel that their child is well supported and receives the additional learning support that they need.

Leaders have fully embedded a pupil centred approach across the school. For example, one-page profiles very helpfully capture pupils' like and dislikes, and what is important to them. The school works effectively with a range of agencies to determine appropriate provision to support pupils' social and emotional needs. However, learning plans do not always focus well enough on improving pupils' literacy and numeracy skills.

Recently the additional learning needs co-ordinator (ALNCo) has introduced an effective ALN panel to ensure that the school identifies accurately the emerging additional needs of learners, where they have not previously been identified by the local authority. The panel comprises a range of key stakeholders. Staff across the school complete referral forms, which provide key information about the needs and progress of the pupils, to be considered by the panel. The panel also reviews and amends the additional learning provision for pupils at the school. Notifications of additional learning needs are then created and passed to the relevant local authorities for agreement. As a result, the school has secure provision for identifying and reviewing additional learning provision. This is a strength of the school.

The school shares its premises with other providers and ensures, through effective security arrangements, that the school is suitably safe and secure. The school implements safer recruitment processes effectively. It monitors background checks

on staff more regularly than the statutory minimum, and additionally, all staff have undertaken safeguarding training which exceeds minimum requirements.

Leaders have a strong understanding of safeguarding. They have established effective systems within the school to report, track and review safeguarding concerns. The designated safeguarding person (DSP) co-ordinates the safeguarding work of the school across its two sites effectively. There are regular meetings between the team to review cases, actions and to standardise and improve practice. The safeguarding team is responsive to safeguarding issues and takes swift and suitable action in the case of a concern, including making timely referrals to external agencies if required. Safeguarding leaders, through effective delegation of ongoing concerns, ensure that safeguarding team members have the capacity to monitor their cases closely. This ensures that consistent and secure practice is maintained. The robust proactive culture of safeguarding is a strength of the school.

Leadership and management

Leaders have successfully established and actively promote a strong culture of safeguarding. As a result, most pupils feel safe at school.

Senior leaders work cohesively and demonstrate a clear understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. Consequently, leaders' operation of the school is efficient. Leaders have developed and effectively implemented suitable policies to underpin the work of the school. Across the school at all levels, there is a coherent range of meetings to ensure the smooth operation of the school. Senior and middle leaders meet regularly, and in turn, they share important information with staff through daily briefings and weekly meetings. As a result, staff are well informed about a range of pupil and operational matters and communication between leaders and staff is effective.

Performance management processes are well embedded. Leaders meet with staff periodically throughout the year to discuss teaching and learning, core values and collaboratively agree on any ongoing training needs. If any underperformance of staff is identified, leaders take swift and appropriate action to support staff. Leaders have recognised the need to actively promote staff well-being and are implementing initiatives to support this. These include 'kudos' and 'thank you cards' sent by leaders for a job well done, amendments to the performance management process to include more regular check-ins, and the appointment of a staff well-being officer. As a result, many staff feel supported by leaders and are comfortable with approaching them with any problems they may have.

Leaders undertake a suitable range of quality assurance work. As a result, they have developed a manageable range of school improvement priorities and identified a few inconsistencies in practice accurately. Leaders have organised worthwhile training to address these inconsistencies and actions to embed the school improvement priorities, such as introducing a trauma informed approach to teaching, which are progressing well. However, leaders' quality assurance of lessons does not focus sharply enough on pupils' progress or consistently identify aspects of teaching that would benefit from improvement. As a result, leaders do not have an accurate understanding of the quality and consistency of teaching across the school.

The school is in the early stages of implementing a new curriculum which leaders have designed to match pupils' abilities and needs more closely. However, due to the current arrangement of the timetable, specialist lead teachers for literacy and numeracy are under-utilised and their oversight of planning for these skills lacks rigour. Furthermore, leaders have not developed and implemented an effective system to monitor and track pupil progress within the new curriculum. As a result, leaders do not have an accurate understanding of the progress that pupils make.

Governance arrangements for the school are well-structured. Senior employees from ACT Training and Cardiff and the Vale College group (CAVC) form a series of governance structures and executive committees to provide strategic oversight of the school. These committees meet to discuss all ACT Training providers and do not solely focus on ACT Schools. Within these arrangements, there is sufficient separation of directors' roles to ensure an appropriate level of independence and challenge to school leaders. Overall, governance arrangements for the school are secure.

The school supports staff to access training to support them in gaining further professional qualifications. These represent meaningful opportunities for staff to develop and progress in their careers. On appointment, staff complete a beneficial and robust induction process. This includes a range of statutory safeguarding training and other relevant courses to working in a school delivering additional learning provision. However, ongoing professional learning to further develop staff's understanding of pupils' additional learning needs is limited. Collaborative links with other schools and providers to share effective practices are also underdeveloped. Consequently, effective strategies to support pupils' needs are not used consistently by staff limiting pupils' ability to make more rapid progress.

Parents benefit from effective communication with the school, particularly the school's persistence if initial attempts to contact parents are unanswered. Parents say that their children are happy at school, and that their attendance has improved from their previous setting. Many parents and staff feel that the school and its leaders communicate and listen to them suitably. As a result, many parents and most older pupils would recommend the school.

The school is not fully compliant with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from parent/carer and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and support staff through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents/carers to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors/proprietor(s), leaders 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
- visit lessons and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning
- 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 had 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 (where appropriate), 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

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website ([Estyn Website](#))

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 publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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