



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

A report on

Maesgwyn Special School

**Cwmdare Road
Cwmdare
Aberdare
RCT
CF44 8RE**

Date of inspection: February 2023

by

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

About Maesgwyn Special School

Name of provider	Maesgwyn Special School
Local authority	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Special
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	125
Pupils of statutory school age	65
Number in nursery classes	0
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in Maintained Special is 46.2%)	64.3%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Maintained Special is 99.8%)	100.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.0%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	0.0%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/10/2017
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	21/10/2014
Start date of inspection	06/02/2023

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

Maesgwyn Special School is a nurturing and welcoming community that places a strong focus on pupil and staff well-being. Members of the school well-being team support pupils and their families extremely well. The well-being manager is employed to work throughout the school year, including during school holidays. Pupils are happy to come to school, feel safe and have strong working relationships with the staff team.

Across the school, most pupils develop a range of valuable skills that help them to make suitable progress from their individual starting points. They value the leadership opportunities provided by the school and school council members take their responsibilities seriously. They are proud to have influenced changes such as the tone of the school bell and the refurbishment of several areas of the school.

Teachers and support staff work together effectively to support learning. Teaching assistants are valuable role models in lessons. They know pupils very well and work effectively with them. However, the quality of teaching across the school is inconsistent. In the majority of lessons, teachers plan effectively to ensure that pupils make secure progress. In a minority of lessons, work is not always planned well enough to meet the additional learning needs of individual pupils and as a result they do not make the progress they are capable of.

The school has a very strong professional learning offer for all staff, which covers a range of valuable topics and will support the development of the curriculum within the school. Nearly all staff have strengthened their professional development through a strong network of support with valuable professional partners. However, the school does not consistently evaluate the impact of professional learning on the quality of teaching and its impact on learning.

The school has a valuable outdoor learning area, which is used effectively to enhance the curriculum offer. The offsite provision at "The Railway" is also used well to support older pupils in a vocational setting. However, limitations within the main school building do not allow for flexibility to meet the additional learning needs of pupils. For example, it does not allow sufficient space for pupils to self-regulate away from other pupils.

Leaders have a clear vision to develop the school. However, the extensive range of improvement priorities lack a clear enough focus on the quality of teaching, the standards pupils achieve and the progress they make. Across the school, quality assurance activities do not always focus well enough on pupil outcomes. As a result, there is not a robust understanding across the school of the most important areas for improvement.

Recommendations

- R1 Improve consistency in the quality of teaching and ensure that teaching meets the additional learning needs of all pupils
- R2 Strengthen procedures for quality assurance and improvement planning to focus on pupil progress and the standards they achieve
- R3 Improve the quality of the learning environment

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will work with the local authority to review the school's progress.

Main evaluation

Learning

Pupils at Maesgwyn Special School settle well into the caring and nurturing environment. As a result, most pupils make suitable progress from their starting point and against their individual targets. They develop a range of worthwhile skills that help them to make progress during their time at school and in their future lives.

Across the school many pupils engage well in learning activities and make suitable progress within lessons and intervention sessions. Most pupils develop their social skills well. Overall, they are kind and respectful to each other and to teaching staff and work together well in pairs and groups.

Many pupils develop their oracy and communication skills successfully. They listen to teaching staff and follow instructions readily. For example, pupils listen attentively to instructions to construct a worry monster and discuss confidently how it might be used. Overall, many pupils are confident in responding to questions in line with their ability. More able pupils express their ideas and thoughts clearly. For example, they discuss the different genres of literature successfully.

Many pupils develop appropriate reading skills to access a variety of texts. This ranges from identifying phonic sounds and letters and locating information from short reading texts to independently selecting books such as factually based materials about cartoon characters. More able pupils read independently and read aloud with confidence. They show a good level of understanding of what they are reading, such as when they read and discuss extracts from Onjali Q. Rauf's "The Boy at the Back of the Class." A minority of pupils respond enthusiastically to the teacher's questions to recall information.

Many pupils at the school develop their writing skills appropriately. They improve their letter formation and legibility; they can spell words correctly and write short sentences successfully. The majority of pupils develop an awareness of writing for different purposes. For example, younger pupils use effective adjectives, such as repulsive and revolting, to describe their own marvellous medicines and older pupils summarise the results of flame test experiments to use as supporting evidence to solve a murder. Many more able pupils develop their extended writing skills appropriately. For example, they outline what happens in events in Romeo and Juliet and make appropriate references to the play.

Many pupils develop their numeracy skills suitably within a range of meaningful contexts. For example, pupils are able to respond accurately to basic activities that include reading bar charts, adding and subtracting two-digit numbers, reading bus timetables and identifying journey travel time.

The majority of pupils develop appropriate digital skills across a range of contexts. For example, they use coding programmes and use search engines to research and produce information sheets.

Across the school many pupils improve their physical skills appropriately. For example, pupils enjoy fitness sessions, hill walking, kayaking and cycling to develop their confidence and team working.

Many pupils develop their creative skills well. They construct attractive bird feeders to hang on trees at the school and produce fierce Welsh dragons out of clay.

Over time, many pupils develop beneficial independence skills. They follow a recipe and prepare snacks independently and nearly all pupils make their way without support between lessons.

Over the last three years, many leavers progress successfully to planned destinations that reflect their needs and abilities well.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Overall, pupils feel happy and safe. They benefit from very strong relationships with empathetic and skilled staff and know who to talk to if they have concerns. Most pupils enjoy attending Maesgwyn School. They respond well to the community and family feel and trust staff.

Nearly all pupils behave very well in lesson times, when moving around the school and during break and lunchtimes due to the positive and nurturing ethos at the school. There has also been a marked decrease in the rates of exclusion and incidents of challenging behaviour over time.

Across the school, most pupils are considerate and supportive of others and treat each other with kindness and respect. Most pupils are polite and courteous, and many are keen to talk to visitors about themselves and their positive experiences at Maesgwyn School. For example, a very few pupils talk confidently about the positive impact the school has on their mental health.

Most pupils arrive on time to lessons, settle quickly and display positive attitudes to their peers and staff and towards their learning. For example, pupils support each other well in sports activities and demonstrate strong team working and perseverance. Many pupils engage successfully, answer questions with enthusiasm and respond well to feedback.

Nearly all older pupils who attend the school satellite provision at 'The Railway' have excellent attitudes to their own learning and work very well independently. Pupils respond very positively to this setting and appreciate the calm and stimulating environment, which they describe as 'modern' and 'grown up.' This is a strong feature of the provision.

Overall, most pupils develop a thorough knowledge and understanding of healthy lifestyles including healthy eating and the benefits of sleep. Nearly all pupils develop their physical skills well. Many pupils make good use of the outdoor play areas where they use the outdoor gym and play ball games with their peers. In addition, a very few pupils comment that they have been encouraged to continue with their exercise regime at home and talk very positively about this experience.

Members of the school council undertake their roles conscientiously and they wear their badges with pride. They undertake a number of leadership roles and represent the views and interests of their peers effectively, for example changing the sound of the school bell to soften the tone and refurbishing some of the pupils' toilets.

Teaching and learning experiences

Maesgwyn School has a broad and stimulating pupil-centred curriculum, designed in collaboration with the whole staff team. The curriculum meets the needs of pupils well and prepares them effectively for the next stage in their lives. There are valuable opportunities for pupils to engage in curriculum planning by choosing the topics they would like to learn about. For example, pupils have recently chosen "The Digital Age" and "Cymru am byth!".

The curriculum provides valuable opportunities for pupils to learn within their locality. For example, pupils benefit from visits to Cyfarthfa Castle, Penyfan and Neath Waterfalls. The school also makes purposeful use of the onsite outdoor space to provide valuable opportunities to learn outside the classroom. For example, pupils value and enjoy opportunities to build exciting dens and imaginary castles and cook foods on outside fires.

Provision to develop pupils' understanding of cynefin and Welsh culture and heritage is an important part of the ethos at the school. Pupils enjoy valuable opportunities to take part in enriching activities such as the school Eisteddfod and residential visits to Glanllyn.

The curriculum has a beneficial focus on personal, health and social education and well-being. This provision allows pupils to make healthy lifestyle choices and to keep themselves safe.

The curriculum broadens as pupils progress through the school. For example, older pupils have opportunities to gain accreditation in a range of valuable courses such as first aid, computer coding, painting and decorating and being a gym instructor. The school also offers a range of meaningful work experience placements in the local community, for example working in a care home or renovating a local library. These opportunities help pupils to develop beneficial skills for their next steps in learning or employment.

Working relationships between pupils and teaching staff are a strong feature of the school. Most staff are aware of pupils' emotions and additional learning needs (ALN) and respond in a worthwhile manner. However, on a very few occasions, staff are loud or abrupt and do not consider well enough the emotional or additional learning needs of the pupils.

Overall, the quality of teaching is not consistent across the school.

In a few cases, the quality of teaching is exceptional. In these lessons, teachers have an infectious passion for their subject and this motivates and inspires pupils.

In the most successful lessons, teachers use questioning and verbal feedback effectively throughout the lesson to assess pupils' understanding. They plan well and use resources skilfully, ensuring that there is a range of tasks to meet the needs of all

pupils. For example, pupils are supported by a writing frame to develop their writing, which includes engaging prompts such as 'phone a friend and ask the class'.

In a majority of lessons, teaching is effective in ensuring that pupils make secure progress in their understanding and skills. In these lessons, the pace is purposeful and the level of challenge meets the needs of all pupils.

In a minority of lessons, there are shortcomings in teaching. In these lessons, teachers do not support and challenge pupils sufficiently in line with their additional learning needs. Shortcomings include a slow pace of learning, which limits pupils' engagement, and staff not checking that pupils understand verbal or written instructions well enough. At times, teaching staff use terminology and language that pupils do not understand. Work in pupils' books shows that teachers rely heavily on using worksheets. This constrains the opportunities for pupils to develop their writing skills freely or write at length in areas across the curriculum.

Overall, across the school, teachers' written feedback does not clearly identify the pupils' next steps in learning.

The school has a range of appropriate tracking systems that are used to record pupils' progress and behaviour. These recording procedures are regularly updated to ensure that all staff working with the pupils have a range of useful information. However, teachers do not always make effective use of this information in the planning and delivery of lessons.

Annual reports for parents are informative and detailed. Many parents value the information they receive about their child's progress and well-being. In addition, a recently introduced electronic platform further supports communication with parents and enables them to view work completed in school by their child.

Care, support and guidance

The school places a strong emphasis on developing relationships with pupils and their families. The school's well-being service provides both pupils and families with highly effective and valued support, including effectively supporting the transition of new pupils to the school.

Establishing relationships that are fostered on mutual respect and understanding is at the heart of the work of the school. As a result of whole-school approaches, including where appropriate support for individual pupils, incidents of exclusion from the school are declining. The school has been successful in reducing the exclusion of pupils who, prior to joining the school, were excluded from other specialist or mainstream settings.

The school council is open to all and meets on a regular basis. Pupils bring their own ideas on how to improve the learning environment. Pupils learn the importance of listening to others and hearing different opinions. The school council has made decisions on what to sell in the school tuck shop and developed pupil versions of school policies. Pupils have also created useful videos on valuable topics such as transition, to support pupils who may be joining the school and their families.

In addition to taught sessions, there are appropriate opportunities for pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding of the community in which they live and develop important skills such as understanding and accepting the views of others. Where appropriate pupils visit the local community and go on trips, for example to the National Museum for Wales.

Older pupils take part in an extensive range of valuable volunteering activities, for example preparing morning tea parties for older residents in the community, coaching local primary pupils in football and litter picking at a local beach. In addition, the school supports older pupils to participate in the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme. This has resulted in pupils succeeding and achieving bronze, silver and gold awards.

The school engages very well with a range of professionals and ensures that other agencies play their part in supporting pupils and their families. The school is highly effective in advocating for its pupils.

The current provision for careers does not provide clear enough advice on pupils' next steps or which qualifications they need. In addition, plans do not clearly identify what further support pupils need or who can offer this support. Overall, the strategic planning of careers advice and guidance is underdeveloped.

The school supports pupils well in developing a strong understanding of sustainability and the importance of looking after the world around them. For example, there are recycling opportunities in all areas of the school and rainwater is collected from the school greenhouse to water the vegetable beds in preparation for selling produce during harvest festival.

The school is in the process of developing its provision for relationship and sex education. Staff have been involved in auditing existing provision and pupils have been involved in suggesting what they want included in the curriculum. This includes important topics such as friendships, understanding emotions, relationships and sexual health.

Timetabled regulation and reflection time provides opportunities for pupils to settle in to the school day and reflect on their successes at the end of the day. However, the use of this time is inconsistent and the value for both individuals and groups of pupils is variable. Should pupils need to use "reset and reflect" during the day, they are able to access a member of staff. However, there is no dedicated space for this important support to happen and the rooms used are not always conducive for the intended purpose.

Individual education plans (IEPs) contain an appropriate focus on developing pupils' skills in literacy, numeracy, and well-being. For older pupils these also contain targets for developing life skills. However, not all targets relate well enough to the known ability level of pupils. In such cases, targets for improvement are not always as challenging as they could be. In addition, the wealth of information on pupils that the school has is not used well enough to inform teachers' planning.

The school has begun the process of preparing individual development plans (IDPs) for pupils, within the timescales set by the Welsh Government. The school receives

advice and guidance from the local authority and joint activities have been undertaken by the school and the local authority to quality assure the content of the IDPs. However, significant aspects of support identified in the most recent annual review of statements of special educational needs are not routinely identified as support needs within IDPs. In addition, the timeframe identified for additional learning provision is not always clearly stated.

Annual reports to parents provide a useful overview of what pupils have studied across all aspects of the curriculum. In addition, the reports highlight the progress that pupils have made and provide useful targets for improvement.

The school places a strong emphasis on ensuring that pupils are safe. It provides pupils with relevant, appropriate information on how to keep themselves safe in a range of situations across the curriculum and online.

Staff at all levels follow appropriate procedures to ensure that the children at the school receive effective support and protection. All staff undertake regular beneficial training to keep pupils and themselves safe. They understand the school's arrangements for safeguarding and respond to safeguarding concerns promptly.

The school's arrangements to keep pupils safe meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and senior leadership team have developed a clear vision for the school, captured effectively in the school's motto 'bringing out the best.' This vision is shared and understood well by the school's community.

Senior leaders have created a supportive and caring ethos where staff are committed to the school and work well together. This ethos underpins the strong safeguarding culture at Maesgwyn School, as well as the wider work of the school.

The well-established staff team consists of an appropriate range of teaching and support staff. They support the learning and social needs of pupils well. Leaders deploy staff effectively to make best use of their expertise and experience. Leaders at all levels have clear and well-understood roles and responsibilities.

Leaders use a range of methods effectively to communicate with parents and carers and the local community. For example, the school has created videos on a variety of topics including information about the new IDPs as part of ALN reform and the school has sought the views of the local community by surveys carried out by pupils on the Curriculum for Wales. There are also opportunities for parents and carers to share their views through regular surveys.

The school has a suitable programme of quality assurance activities, including lesson observations, learning walks and book scrutiny. However, leaders have an overly generous view of the quality of teaching and learning. This makes it difficult for them to implement appropriately robust and precise strategies to improve these aspects.

There is a wealth of development priorities identified by middle leaders for each area of learning. From these, senior leaders have identified a wide range of priorities for

the school. Overall, the breadth of different plans covers too many development points and actions to be manageable and, as a result, a minority of staff are not aware of the school's priorities for improvement. In addition, the improvement work lacks rigour and cohesion.

The "Railway" site and the external school environment are stimulating and give pupils a range of valuable experiences. However, many indoor areas of the main school site do not provide pupils with a purposeful learning environment. The school layout and buildings restrict opportunities to adapt space flexibly and are not suitable for pupils with more complex additional learning needs. Leaders have identified the need for additional space within the school and are exploring options to develop the site.

Leaders benefit from the supportive role that the governing body provides. The governing body is committed to the school and has a good understanding of the school's context. Governors' understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement is generally sound. The governing body exercises its role well in relation to the school's budget, monitoring financial activity carefully. It ensures that there are appropriate arrangements for eating and drinking healthily. In a few areas, governors do not challenge the school robustly enough, particularly in relation to consistency in the quality of teaching and the progress that all pupils make over time.

The school's plans for the use of specific grants are appropriate and suitably detailed. In the case of the pupil development grant, this has led to increased capacity within the well-being team to offer valuable support to pupils and their families.

The school has a wide-ranging professional learning offer, which is appreciated by staff. There are suitable opportunities for staff to develop their understanding, knowledge and skills across a wide range of areas related to their role and future aspirations. Most teachers and support staff are involved in valuable team research activities, which are well matched to their personal interests and professional development needs. These 'enquiry spirals' are effective in developing and sharing good practice and are well supported by partnerships with other providers.

The school takes suitable steps to ensure that professional learning activities are aligned broadly to whole-school and departmental priorities. Whole-school training days cover a range of appropriate issues, and leaders evaluate and amend this particular aspect of the school's work suitably. However, on the whole, leaders do not have a sufficiently strategic approach to planning or evaluating professional learning. In particular, they do not focus closely enough on specific aspects that need improvement such as the aspects of teaching that need improving or the individual teachers that need bespoke support.

Arrangements for performance management are suitable. Staff have objectives that broadly address the school's priorities. However, overall, performance management targets are not precise enough, do not enable the school to accurately assess progress and do not link well enough to focusing on raising standards and improving teaching.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carer 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/carers 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' 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 (www.estyn.gov.wales)

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

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