

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

# A report on

Pen-Y-Dre High School

Gurnos Estate Merthyr Tydfil CF47 9BY

Date of inspection: January 2024

by

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

# **About Pen-Y-Dre High School**

Name of provider	Pen-Y-Dre High School
Local authority	Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	942
Pupils of statutory school age	942
Number in sixth form	N/A
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 Secondary is 21.2%)	32.2%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Secondary is 14.8%)	23.4%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.6%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	5.8%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2012
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	02/11/2015
Start date of inspection	22/01/2024
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The school is currently undergoing a £55 million refurbishment programme funded by the Welsh Government and is part of the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme. The refurbishment began in Summer 2022 and is due for completing in Autumn 2025. Currently the refurbishment is focused on a third of the existing site. When completed the school will be Wales' first carbon net zero secondary school.

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: <a href="mylocalschool.gov.wales">mylocalschool.gov.wales</a>

a. The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

## **Overview**

Pen y Dre High School is an inclusive, caring and supportive environment that sits at the heart of its community. In this nurturing environment leaders and staff create a safe space where all are valued and encouraged to 'aspire, achieve, believe' despite the challenges they may face. Leaders are relentless in their vision to remove any barriers to learning, including those related to the impact of poverty and ensuring that all pupils have the best life chances. Pupils benefit from the outstanding opportunities to develop their Welsh language skills and to become immersed in the local and national culture and heritage of Wales. The wealth of opportunities provided ensure that pupils at the school develop an empathy and lifelong appreciation of Wales.

The headteacher provides thoughtful and sensitive leadership. He creates a strong sense of belonging amongst staff and pupils, and a learning environment that encourages and supports pupils to make progress from their starting points in the school. The unique working relationships between staff and pupils creates a culture where pupils are confident to take risks. Staff support for pupils with a diverse range of needs is a notable strength. During the inspection, pupils' attitudes to learning and their interactions with adults and their peers were an outstanding feature.

The school provides an ambitious tailored curriculum that allows pupils the freedom to thrive in their areas of interest. However, currently, the school's provision for the progressive development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum is underdeveloped. In many lessons, teachers' high expectations and careful planning engage pupils' interest and curiosity and encourage them to achieve their best. As a result, in these lessons pupils make secure progress in their knowledge, understanding and skills. In a minority of instances, teachers do not develop pupils' understanding, knowledge and skills well enough, and this limits the progress they make.

Leaders have developed a wide range of opportunities for professional learning, and this is having a positive impact on many aspects of the school's work including understanding the diverse needs of pupils and developing leadership at all levels. There is a genuine ambition through secure self-evaluation activities to improve all aspects of the school's work, though in a few instances processes need to be sharper. Despite considerable effort by leaders, whole-school attendance remains too low, in particular persistent absenteeism and is a concern.

Despite the notable challenges faced during the refurbishment, staff have worked diligently to ensure pupils continue to learn and thrive.

## Recommendations

- R1 Improve pupils' attendance especially of those persistently absent from school
- R2 Address the shortcomings in teaching identified in this report

- R3 Improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills by strengthening the planning for the progressive development of these skills across the curriculum
- R4 Strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning processes

## What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Estyn will invite the school to prepare a case study on its work in relation to 'Creating a strong culture and appreciation of Welsh language and heritage'.

## Main evaluation

## Learning

In many lessons, pupils make at least suitable progress and in the majority they make good progress in their knowledge understanding and skills. In a few lessons, where the teaching is particularly effective, pupils make strong progress. A few pupils do not make as much progress as they could because teachers' expectations of what they can do being too low. Pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) make very strong progress from their starting points.

Most pupils are attentive and listen respectfully to their teachers and each other. Many contribute willingly to class discussion and are confident to provide brief answers to questions. A few pupils provide extended answers and justify their responses with well-considered reasons for their opinions, for example in religion, values and ethics when discussing discrimination versus prejudice. Generally, pupils do not extend their responses sufficiently. They provide basic answers and do not expand on their ideas. Often this is because of a lack of opportunity, although a few pupils are reluctant to contribute to class discussions.

Many pupils have sound basic reading skills and can extract relevant information successfully from a range of texts. In English lessons, many pupils have a suitable understanding of the storylines and characters in the texts that they study. A majority of pupils infer implied meaning appropriately and a minority are beginning to analyse the effect of language choices and literary devices. In general, pupils do not develop their advanced reading skills well enough across the curriculum due to limited opportunities to do so.

When given the opportunity, the majority of pupils produce suitable extended written responses across the curriculum. For example, in geography, they consider whether humans are to blame for climate change. A few, more able pupils write well creatively, employing ambitious vocabulary and literary devices skilfully. For example, they vary sentence types to create impact when writing dystopian descriptions inspired by 'The Hunger Games'. A minority of pupils struggle to

communicate their ideas coherently. Around a half of pupils write with suitable technical accuracy. However, a similar proportion do not use paragraphs and continue to make frequent basic errors in their spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Overall, many pupils make sound progress in numeracy skills in their mathematics lessons. They generally, they have a good grasp of the four rules of number and apply their knowledge suitably when working out basic problems involving decimals, percentages and fractions. Many pupils carry out simple mental mathematical calculations accurately. A majority plot bar and line graphs accurately and make appropriate scales for their axes to show patterns in data. A minority of pupils find it difficult to create their own scales or plot data points accurately. A few have weak numeracy skills and struggle with basic calculations. Generally, pupils develop too narrow a range of numeracy skills due to limited opportunities in relevant subjects.

In general, pupils develop their digital skills suitably including creating websites, using spreadsheets with simple formulas and coding. Pupils also develop their digital skills well through creating stop-animation and transferring this to software to edit and add sound.

When given the opportunity, pupils develop their thinking skills suitably, for example to identify cognates between Spanish, Welsh and English. In a few cases, pupils use computational thinking to create algorithms.

Many pupils develop their creative and physical skills well. For example, in performing arts, pupils experiment successfully with scenarios that do not have a predetermined or fixed outcome. In physical education lessons, pupils develop good hand eye co-ordination and participate enthusiastically demonstrating speed and agility in activities such as circuit training.

In Welsh lessons, most pupils make strong progress in developing their understanding of the language and culture. Nearly all use Welsh confidently when responding to their teacher's questions. Many expand their vocabulary, have good pronunciation and communicate clearly in Welsh. They write short sentences in Welsh accurately and in the correct tense. Over time, they use an increasingly wide range of sentence structures, for example when writing an article for the school newsletter on life in Wales.

#### Well-being and attitudes to learning

Pupils at Pen y Dre High School are positive ambassadors for their school and are exceptionally proud to belong to the school community. Their attitudes and behaviour are a notable strength. Nearly all pupils are polite, keen to interact with adults and their peers, and welcome visitors with courtesy and warmth. Many are resilient, even when facing adversity, and display positive attitudes towards their learning and school life in general.

Most pupils feel safe and secure and appreciate the strong relationships and support they receive. They talk about their school positively and feel it is a community built on respect. Many feel that staff treat them fairly and equitably. There are few instances of bullying, and most pupils have confidence that staff will address any incidents that do occur.

During the inspection week, nearly all pupils behaved well in lessons and during break and lunch times. In many cases, pupils displayed exemplary behaviour. Most pupils have developed a sound understanding of the purpose of the school's rules and procedures. They appreciate the rewards system and understand the sanctions processes, which they believe are applied consistently and fairly.

Most pupils participate enthusiastically in their lessons and are eager to learn. Many work well on their own and in groups or pairs. However, a few do not persevere when the work is more challenging or when they are required to work independently due to a lack of resilience. A minority of pupils lack pride in their work and their books are untidy.

Many pupils respond thoughtfully and sensitively when considering aspects of the curriculum that focus on equality, for example when discussing 'Black Lives Matter' and the impact of deforestation. In general, many pupils understand the importance of developing their physical skills and making healthy choices. They engage well in physical education (PE) lessons and personal and social education (PSE) sessions where they learn about healthy lifestyles. They enjoy participating in after school clubs and activities where they are available.

Most pupils feel that their opinions and feelings are listened to and are acted upon. Pupils of all ages value and benefit from their role in the school parliament. It plays a purposeful role in school life, for example by influencing the design of the new school building. However, a minority of pupils are unclear about the work of the parliament.

Between the academic years 2018-2019 and 2022-2023, the school's rate of attendance fell by a much larger amount than seen nationally. Last year it was below that of similar schools. The school's attendance rate remains below pre-pandemic levels and is not recovering quickly enough. Although there has been a slight increase this year in the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals, compared to the same period last year. However, the high rate of persistent absence among this group of pupils is a concern and impacts upon the progress they make.

#### Teaching and learning experiences

In nearly all lessons, teachers create an atmosphere in which pupils are unafraid to make mistakes. They foster positive working relationships with their pupils and are sensitive to their emotional and learning needs. Most teachers are good language models and deliver their lessons with infectious enthusiasm.

In many cases, teachers plan their lessons carefully to build pupils' knowledge and understanding. They know their pupils well and have high expectations of what they can achieve. They set clear objectives and offer pupils useful learning activities that build well on their prior learning. In these lessons, teachers model useful approaches to solving problems and ensure that pupils understand the criteria for good quality work.

In the majority of lessons, teachers ask pupils questions to check their recall and give them enough thinking time to formulate their answers. They correct any misconceptions promptly and sensitively. In many cases, teachers adapt their teaching well to support pupils who are struggling with their work. In general, learning

support assistants offer specific pupils valuable help to ensure that they make progress from their starting points. In a minority of lessons, teachers use open questions to probe pupils' understanding and extend their verbal responses. They develop pupils' independence and encourage them to think.

In a very few lessons, there is inspirational teaching. In these cases, teachers plan stimulating learning activities that capture pupils' imagination and challenge them to achieve to the best of their ability. They encourage pupils to question their preconceptions and elaborate on their thinking. As a result, pupils in these lessons make substantial progress in developing their knowledge and skills.

In the majority of cases, teachers do not use open and follow-up questions well enough to extend pupils' responses or probe their understanding. In a minority of lessons, teachers do not have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve and plan lessons that keep pupils busy but do not promote progress. In a few lessons, the learning objectives are unclear and there are activities that present little challenge such as copying text or wordsearches. In a few cases, teachers do not match the work well enough to pupils' abilities and do not stretch the more able enough.

Most teachers share useful assessment criteria with pupils and provide them with helpful verbal feedback as they circulate the classroom. In the majority of cases, teachers offer pupils helpful written feedback and provide them with useful opportunities to respond to this and improve their work. In a minority of cases, this feedback is not helpful enough and targets for improvement are either generic or too vague to be of use. In a few cases, teachers are overly tolerant of poor quality work and do not pick up on important errors in pupils' work.

The school's vision for the curriculum reflects its aims to be inclusive and aspirational, and to build resilience in pupils. The curriculum meets the needs of all pupils well and takes full account of their individual learning needs. The curriculum provides pupils with a suitable breadth of learning experiences within lessons and beyond. At Key Stage 4 they are offered a wide variety of subject choices, including computer science and hospitality and catering. They are well supported throughout Years 10 and 11 to make informed choices about the next stage in their learning journey.

Over the past year, there has been a systematic approach to the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales. The school has worked to make the curriculum relevant to the local area, though there is too much variability in how well this has been applied in different departments and around a shared understanding of how to measure pupils' progress.

The school works closely and effectively with partner primaries on developing pupils' experiences of Welsh culture and language. For example, the school holds a joint Eisteddfod with all the partner primary schools. However, joint working with the primary schools on developing other aspects of the curriculum is underdeveloped.

The school provides suitable opportunities to develop pupils' basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills in different subjects. Skills leaders are beginning to work with subject leaders to plan and co-ordinate opportunities for pupils to apply and develop these

skills across the curriculum, but this is at an early stage of development. Planning for the progressive development of more advanced literacy and numeracy skills is not sufficiently strategic.

Test data is used purposefully to identify pupils who need additional support for skills and to inform suitable literacy and numeracy interventions that focus mainly on improving their basic skills. However, the impact of these interventions is not evaluated in enough detail.

The school promotes a strong sense of Cynefin, which is largely driven by the Welsh department. This is an outstanding feature. There is a wide range of innovative learning activities that reflect the cultural, linguistic, and diverse nature of Wales and an inspirational diet of extra-curricular opportunities to develop pupils' understanding of Welsh language, history, and culture. This includes highly successful participation in school, cluster, community, regional and national events, such as the Urdd Eisteddfod. The school also has very high aspirations for the development of pupils' Welsh language skills and the standards achieved by pupils in Welsh lessons are high.

There are valuable opportunities to learn about the history and experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities through assemblies and across the curriculum in, for example, subjects such as PSE and history. There is also a range of useful opportunities to learn about the history and experiences of LGBTQ+ people, both inside and outside of lessons. For example, the artist in residence has carried out innovative work with groups of pupils to produce books on LGBTQ+ issues.

Pupils in all year groups benefit from a well-planned PSE programme that is adapted in light of evidence such as that from the School Health Research Network survey. Overall, PSE provision supports suitably the development of all pupils' social and emotional skills. In addition, the school's artist in residence, in conjunction with external organisations, has led innovative work with groups of pupils to explore healthy relationships. The PSE programme also supports pupils well to make healthy lifestyle choices.

There is a range of valuable extra-curricular clubs and trips, which aid the development of pupils' social and emotional skills. The school's commitment to making the Duke of Edinburgh award available free of charge for all pupils is particularly noteworthy.

#### Care, support and guidance

Pen-y-Dre High School is a caring and welcoming community where senior leaders prioritise pupil and staff well-being. This inclusive approach ensures that pupils and staff feel valued and supported in their work.

The well-being team works relentlessly to meet the varied and complex needs of pupils and their families. There are highly effective and well-established partnerships with a range of external agencies. For example, the school works closely with Barnardo's to identify and support those pupils who are young carers. The focus on well-being is a notable strength which permeates all aspects of the school's work.

Support for pupils with additional learning needs is highly effective. The ALN team have a clear vision, they identify their needs and provide pupils with individualised support. They provide a wide variety of interventions and work well with outside agencies to support pupils. There is a strong focus on ensuring that pupils with ALN attend mainstream lessons where possible. The school is making good progress in implementing ALN reform. The ALN team updates staff regularly on pupils' needs through useful one-page profiles. The school has nurtured valuable relationships with the parents of pupils with ALN and with cluster schools to support their transition. There are effective systems to monitor the interventions that pupils with ALN receive and to monitor the progress they make against their individual targets.

A particular strength of the school's provision is the use of specialised support areas such as 'Oasis' and 'Y Nyth'. These spaces respond to the varying needs of pupils and provide purposeful support to improve their engagement and well-being. A notable feature of the school's work is the high degree of co-operation between the ALN, well-being and pastoral teams for the benefit of all pupils.

Pupils benefit from a well-considered and comprehensive PSE programme, which caters well for pupils' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development. There is a wide range of well-planned opportunities to explore themes such as mental health and emotional needs, as well as identifying and promoting equality and diversity. The involvement of guest speakers and experts is a key feature of the provision as it brings expertise and authenticity to the pupils' experience. For example, Llamau informs pupils about young people and women's homelessness. The school's provision is monitored carefully and is adapted promptly in response to any local social issues. The needs of the community are central to this provision.

Sport and recreation activities during the school's lunch break have continued despite being limited due to the extensive building work. Pupils receive appropriate impartial guidance and advice on career choices.

Leaders have established a strong culture of safeguarding in which all staff understand their responsibility to keep pupils safe. The safeguarding team provide useful and regular training to help staff identify and refer any pupils who may be at risk of harm. They work purposefully with a range of external agencies. These valuable partnerships and the wealth of knowledge and experience within the safeguarding team ensure that the most vulnerable pupils receive the support they need. Senior leaders ensure that staff have appropriate support for their well-being through beneficial supervision with safeguarding professionals within the local authority.

Despite the significant challenges of managing the school site during the construction phase of the new school buildings, staff ensure that the site is safe for all members of the school community. There are robust systems in place to manage the access of visitors and contractors.

Staff respond to any allegations of bullying swiftly and appropriately. Leaders have developed a useful and well-understood graduated response system to address any incidents of poor behaviour. There is a strong focus on inclusion and building positive relationships. Staff, at all levels, are relentless in their efforts to address any barriers to learning and engagement. There are highly effective strategies in place to meet

the needs of pupils with the most complex emotional and behavioural difficulties. For example, the Aspire Centre provides a safe alternative environment for those pupils who are at risk of permanent exclusion, where they can learn to self-regulate and develop coping strategies to enable them to return to mainstream classes.

Leaders are prioritising the need to improve pupils' attendance and have introduced a range of suitable strategies. The school monitors pupils' attendance robustly and promotes and rewards good attendance. The pastoral team work closely with families, providing additional support for those pupils who are persistently absent. The school also works closely with cluster primary schools and the local authority to identify and work with persistent absentees before they join the school. Despite these considerable efforts, rates of attendance remain a cause for concern, particularly the number of pupils who are persistently absent. Leaders do not always review the effectiveness of their approaches to improving attendance strategically enough.

### Leadership and management

Among staff and governors, there is a palpable shared commitment to the school's core mission of enabling pupils to 'aspire, achieve, believe'. There is a collective appreciation that the school is more than the sum of its parts. Staff understand the central importance of the school to its local community and the pivotal role it plays in shaping the life chances of its young people. There are well-established links between the school and the community, and communication with parents and carers is effective.

There is a strong team ethos in the school. Leaders place a clear emphasis on supporting the well-being of staff, as well as pupils. 'Staff Well-being Ambassadors' are volunteers who have received bespoke training on how to support the well-being of their colleagues. They provide confidential support to staff, including those who have been away with illness, celebrate their contributions and provide treats to motivate them.

The headteacher is driven by a strong sense of moral purpose and a heartfelt commitment to the pupils and the local community. He promotes consistently the importance of kindness and compassion, coupled with a determined focus on ambition and high standards.

Senior leaders work well as a team and support the headteacher very effectively. Following a recent restructure, their roles and responsibilities are distributed sensibly to make the most of leaders' skills and experiences. Most middle leaders are fully committed to their roles and the pupils. Overall, they know their areas of responsibility well.

Leaders have a generally sound understanding of the school's main strengths and areas for improvement. Effective leadership has had a positive impact on several important aspects of the school's work including pupils' attitudes and behaviour, pupils' standards and the quality of teaching. The school has also made generally positive progress against the recommendations from the last inspection. However, leadership has not had enough impact on a few aspects, including improving attendance, in particular.

There is a strong emphasis on the national priorities of promoting the Welsh language, fostering a safeguarding culture and alleviating the impact of poverty on educational attainment.

The school's work to alleviate the impact of poverty is of particular note. Staff are acutely aware of the challenging circumstances facing many of the school's pupils. They work sensitively to remove any barriers by providing pupils with enrichment and curricular experiences to broaden their horizons, material support to mitigate financial pressures and extensive well-being provision.

The school's use of grant funding to fund an 'Artist in Residence' is particularly innovative and impactful. This initiative involves employing an artist as a member of staff to work with pupils in and out of the classroom, with the community and with partner primary schools. The work of the 'Artist in Residence' goes far beyond the remit of art. The artist is involved in providing art therapy to selected pupils who are experiencing emotional difficulties, in supporting pupils to improve their skills in art lessons and in raising their aspirations by involving them in cultural activities. The artist also leads projects involving pupils and the community to celebrate the local area and its identity.

Line managers provide support and suitable challenge, and the line management system is organised, ensuring regular focus on the school's improvement priorities. Performance management systems are clear and align with the school's priorities in order to support the improvement process.

The school offers teaching and support staff a very wide range of well-considered professional learning, focussed on developing pedagogy and the school's curriculum. This is aligned appropriately to the school's priorities for improvement. There are useful opportunities for staff to collaborate with others on priorities such as Curriculum for Wales and assessment. Staff who wish to develop their leadership skills are given valuable opportunities to by shadow other leaders and take internal secondments to leadership roles. Overall, professional learning is having a beneficial impact on the quality of teaching across the school.

There is a clear cycle of self-evaluation processes that is well understood by staff. All leaders are involved, to varying degrees, in the gathering of first-hand evidence through useful activities such as lesson observations, gathering pupil views, learning walks and work scrutiny, though the processes around work scrutiny are not always robust.

In general, leaders make effective use of findings from these activities to inform their improvement planning. For example, curriculum middle leaders use findings from their analysis of data and lesson observations well to plan for improvement. However, leaders, especially at middle leader level, do not always bring together the findings from a range of activities to identify common aspects in need of improvement. In addition, the current self-evaluation system does not enable middle leaders to take full ownership of the process.

There is a consistent focus on the school's improvement priorities in all aspects of its work, including meetings. Leaders monitor progress against them regularly and, overall, evaluate the impact of their work effectively. They also work well with

selected partners to gain an external view on their work. In a few areas, however, leaders do not always evaluate the impact of their work in a sufficiently strategic and objective manner. As a result, their evaluations can be too generous and their improvement planning not sufficiently precise.

The school offers teaching and support staff a very wide range of well-considered professional learning, focused on developing pedagogy and the school's curriculum. This is aligned appropriately to the school's priorities for improvement. There are useful opportunities for staff to collaborate with others on priorities such as Curriculum for Wales and assessment. Staff who wish to develop their leadership skills are given valuable opportunities to shadow other leaders and take internal secondments to leadership roles. Overall, professional learning is having a beneficial impact on the quality of teaching across the school.

There are robust processes for managing the school's finances. The governors' finance committee, the business manager and the headteacher work alongside the local authority to manage and monitor spending, ensuring that it aligns with the school's improvement priorities. Grant spending, including spending of the Pupil Development Grant, is planned appropriately and evaluated suitably.

Governors have a detailed knowledge of the work of the school and its context. They embrace fully the moral mission of the school and have high ambitions for its staff and pupils. They offer wholehearted support but also fulfil their role as critical friends effectively. They understand their responsibility for ensuring that the school meets the healthy eating and drinking measure.

## **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 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, where appropriate
- visit a broad sample of lessons, 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 afterschool 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 (http://www.estyn.gov.wales/)

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

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