

Independent ALN specialist schools

Schools

47

January 2024

Core inspections

This year, we inspected 12 independent special schools as part of a core inspection.

Monitoring visits

We also visited 16 schools as part of annual monitoring visits.

Independent School Standards

In independent schools, we inspect the extent to which the school complies with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

Independent school visits

In addition to our core inspections, we also carry out a range of other visits to independent schools:

Five initial registration visits, to register a new independent school

Two follow-up to registration visits, to ensure that a newly opened independent school continues to comply with the Independent School Standards

16 material change visits, to provide the Welsh Government with advice regarding a change in circumstances of an independent school

Nine responses to action plans where a school does not meet the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024

17 regular follow-up visits to the schools who did not meet the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations to check their progress

One announced focused visit to visit a school at the request of the Welsh Government with a particular focus on the welfare, health and safety of pupils

Summary

In 2023-2024, compared to the previous academic year, the proportion of schools that were compliant with the [Independent School Standards \(Wales\) Regulations 2024](#) increased.

Overall, inspectors found that independent ALN specialist schools provided a nurturing environment where staff foster positive relationships with pupils. These relationships and an understanding of pupils' needs, abilities and interests enabled staff to engage pupils and deliver a balanced curriculum.

Around half of the schools inspected and a minority of schools visited for monitoring visits during 2023-2024 had experienced recent leadership changes. The majority of these schools did not meet the requirements of the Independent School Standards during their core inspection. Additionally, schools continued registering to provide additional learning provision (ALP) in response to ALN reform, although around half did not provide details of their ALP to the Welsh Government.

Independent schools, like maintained special schools, reported a change in pupil profiles, noting an increase in referrals of pupils with complex mental health needs.

Teaching and learning

Many pupils at independent ALN specialist schools had previously experienced significant educational disruptions, but the strong support provided by most staff enabled many students to make suitable progress from their starting points. Many pupils generally developed good social and communication skills. They interacted confidently with staff and visitors, and took pride in their schools.

Progress in literacy was notable in many schools, although a few schools provided limited opportunities for developing pupils' progressive reading skills and extended writing. Numeracy skills were sound overall, with many pupils effectively applying mathematical concepts in practical contexts such as when budgeting or planning trips. While the majority of pupils made appropriate use of ICT within learning tasks such as word processing and online research, the development of pupils' digital skills across the curriculum was insufficient in many schools.

Many pupils gained a range of relevant qualifications, from entry level to A levels, along with additional accreditations in various fields. However, in a few schools the accreditation opportunities were too limited. The curriculum generally addressed individual pupil needs, their interests and their abilities well. However, a few schools had weaknesses in subjects like science, humanities, and digital skills.

The effectiveness of teaching varied. In the most effective schools, teachers demonstrated strong subject knowledge and effective questioning, setting clear learning objectives. However, in a few schools, staff offered inconsistent challenge, and limited opportunities for pupils to develop as independent learners, with a minority of pupils relying excessively on support staff. Feedback practices also varied, with verbal feedback often used effectively, while written feedback in a few schools lacked clear guidance on how pupils could improve. Most schools used assessment information to inform planning and track progress, but a few did not use assessments effectively to ensure that pupils developed their skills progressively over time. Enrichment through external visits and partnerships enhanced pupils' life skills and social confidence. However, a few schools did not meet all Independent School Standards due to poorly tailored learning experiences and ineffective lesson planning and time management.

Care, support and guidance and its impact on pupils' well-being

Overall, schools focused well on creating inclusive and supportive environments to address pupils' needs. This approach led to nearly all pupils feeling safe and knowing whom to turn to with concerns. Most pupils displayed good behaviour and enjoyed learning, while staff generally fostered strong, respectful relationships with pupils. Many pupils demonstrated improved attendance over time, although low attendance from a few pupils negatively affected their progress and well-being. In a few schools, inadequate tracking of attendance, punctuality, and behaviour hindered the evaluation of strategies that were intended to improve pupil attendance.

Most schools created valuable documents to support pupils with ALN and set relevant targets linked to individual development plans (IDPs). However, a minority of schools had underdeveloped systems for tracking progress against these targets. Support for ALN was mostly appropriate, with a range of services available, including therapeutic and outreach teams. At Ysgol Tŷ Monmouth, staff recognised that many of the pupils lacked the vocabulary to clearly express their feelings to adults. The therapies team supported the pupils to contribute to their behaviour plans and develop symbolised behaviour strategies. Pupils had a say in how they would like staff to behave in response to any 'big feelings' they were having. This improved pupils' social skills, peer relationships, empathy and overall well-being. However, many schools did not effectively evaluate the impact of these interventions on pupils' well-being and attitudes to learning.

Most schools placed an appropriate emphasis on developing pupils' life skills and their preparedness for the future, with some excelling in transition planning. Many pupils progressed to further education, employment, or training. Further, in a few schools with residential provisions, care staff effectively collaborated on career development opportunities, including work experience. However, a few schools had insufficient career guidance and planning.

Most schools provided a good range of experiences to develop pupils' spiritual, moral, and social understanding, with a few also enhancing their Welsh identity and culture. Opportunities to explore equality and diversity were less developed. A few schools offered limited chances for pupils to contribute actively to school life, affecting their development as responsible citizens.

Safeguarding was a high priority in most schools, but a few lacked formal policies and procedures, weakening their safeguarding practices. Three schools received recommendations to improve safeguarding management. In addition, seven schools were evaluated as non-compliant with the Independent School Standards in relation to Standard 3: The welfare, health and safety of pupils. In around half these cases, the school had not paid appropriate regard to Welsh Government guidance on keeping learners safe.

Leading and Improving

Effective leadership was common, with strong community cultures and clear visions. However, in a few cases, recent changes in leadership affected quality assurance processes, leading to a lack of robust evaluations of teaching effectiveness and additional learning needs.

Most schools lacked a comprehensive quality assurance culture or processes, which impacted on leaders' understanding of strengths and areas for improvement. Performance management processes in a few schools did not adequately consider teaching effectiveness. Professional learning opportunities for staff were generally provided, with notable examples of strong development

programs, which linked well to school improvement priorities. At [Bryn Tirion Hall School](#), for instance, we reported on their effective collaboration with clinical professionals and other schools to enhance staff's skills and develop a new curriculum. However, very few schools with linked residential provision provided educational training for care staff working in school.

Challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff were significant in a minority of schools, affecting teaching quality and improvement priorities. Learning environments were mostly supportive and well-designed to meet individual pupil needs. Notable improvements included adding new spaces like sensory rooms and art galleries. However, a few schools faced severe issues with their learning environments, prompting safeguarding concerns, which required immediate actions.

Follow-up

In 2023-2024, a greater proportion of schools were compliant with the Regulations compared to the previous academic year. In the majority of non-compliant schools, learning experiences were not matched well enough to the needs of pupils, especially those with IDPs. A few schools failed to meet the standards in relation to ensuring the suitability of staff and a very few failed to meet the standards in relation to the provision of information.

Where schools failed to comply with all of the Regulations, key shortcomings also related to the quality of education and teaching. Whilst the Regulations do not specifically cover leadership, weaknesses in school leadership, a lack of strategic oversight and the lack of robust quality assurance were key features in the shortcomings of these schools.

There are currently a total of nine schools (19.1%) who do not comply with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024 and are currently in a follow-up category.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 - 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected 12 independent special schools.

11 (91.7%) providers were given a recommendation to establish or refine their quality assurance processes and improvement planning, 7 of which recommended focusing on pupil progress.

Seven providers (58.3%) were given a recommendation to comply fully with ISS (Wales) Regulations 2003, and one was given a recommendation to ensure the pupils' additional learning needs comply with their registration category.

Four providers (43.3%) were given a recommendation to strength or develop their curriculum, to either improve provision for careers, spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (SMSC) and personal social education (PSE), support pupils to follow their desired learning pathways, ensure that programmes of study are supported by appropriate schemes of work and assessment to develop pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills progressively, or to provide opportunities for pupils to learn in real life contexts and follow their desired learning pathways.

Three providers were recommended to strengthen the management of safeguarding and address shortcomings identified during the inspection.

Three providers were given a recommendation to strengthen planning to improve the development of pupils' skills.

Three providers were given a recommendation to refine roles and responsibilities of staff.

Two providers were given a recommendation to improve the quality of teaching.

References

Welsh Government (2022) *Keeping learners safe: The role of local authorities, governing bodies and proprietors of independent schools under the Education Act 2002*. Cardiff: Welsh Government. Available online: [Keeping Learners Safe \(gov.wales\)](#) (Accessed 4th October 2024)

Welsh Government (2024) *The Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2024/27/contents/made> (Accessed 1st November 2024)