Secondary

Schools

176

No. of schools 2024

178

No. of schools 2023

182

No. of schools 2022

Pupils

172,818

All pupils

154,347

No. of pupils of secondary age (compulsory education)

18,471

No. of pupils in sixth form

20.4%

eFSM (Aged 5-15)

19.0%

eFSM (All pupils)

3.6 %

EAL A-C (Aged 5-15)

16.0%

Able to speak Welsh (Aged 5-15)

11.2%

Pupils with additional learning needs (Aged 5-15)

Follow-up

No. in FU September 2023

SM: 6   SI: 4   ER: 6

No. removed 2023-2024

SM: 2   SI: 1   ER: 3

No. went into FU after core inspection 2023-2024

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 31

Interim visits: 2

Welsh-medium: 8

Bilingual:

English-medium: 25

Faith: 2

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 12

Published on website: 15

SM: 2   SI: 2   ER: 6

Total in FU August 2024

SM: 7   SI: 4   ER: 9

Engagement visits

No. of visits/calls: 6

Welsh-medium: 2

Bilingual:

English-medium: 4

Faith: 0

Summary

There were notable strengths in teaching and learning in a minority of schools. However, shortcomings in lesson planning, verbal and written feedback, the strategic development of literacy, numeracy, Welsh, and digital skills hindered pupils' progress in too many cases. Implementation of the Curriculum for Wales was inconsistent, with challenges in ensuring sufficient subject depth and effectively promoting the Welsh language. Care and support for pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), were generally strong, but the impact of efforts to improve attendance varied, and rates of attendance remained significantly below 2019 levels. In schools with effective leadership, there was a clear focus on equity and teaching quality. However, the majority of schools faced challenges in conducting accurate self-evaluation and implementing impactful improvement planning.

Teaching and learning

Improving teaching and learning was a priority within most schools' improvement plans. However, there was substantial variation in how schools approached these areas and how precise they were in identifying the aspects of teaching and learning that required strengthening. Consequently, there was a marked difference in how successful schools were in securing improvements. High-quality teaching was seen consistently in only a very few schools. While there were strengths in the majority of schools, shortcomings in teaching were seen too frequently. Consequently, the majority of schools received recommendations to improve teaching quality.

In the very few schools with consistently high-quality teaching, thoughtful planning led to excellent pupil progress. Teachers set clear goals, monitored progress closely, and adapted learning accordingly. They questioned pupils effectively to deepen understanding, develop oracy, and foster independence. The most successful teachers provided rigorous challenges for all pupils, supporting those with weaker skills without over-managing. Their enthusiasm and expertise resulted in high levels of pupil engagement and strong progress in subject knowledge and skills, particularly in oracy

and independent learning.

In the majority of schools, positive teaching features enabled many pupils to make suitable progress in subject knowledge, understanding, literacy, and, where relevant, numeracy. Effective practices included:

- Creating or sourcing appropriate resources
- Planning sequential steps and engaging learning activities
- Giving clear instructions and explanations
- Regularly questioning pupils to check understanding

However, at least a minority of lessons had shortcomings, leading to pupils' under- achievement. The main shortcomings included:

- Weak lesson planning, including activities that keep pupils busy but do not promote progress
- Insufficient consideration of pedagogical approaches and learning objectives
- Over-scheduled activities lacking developmental value
- Misaligned challenge and pace relative to pupil abilities
- Inadequate modelling or insufficient support to ensure pupils' understanding
- Over-supporting pupils, hindering the development of their independence
- Low expectations for pupils' engagement and effort
- Acceptance of under-developed oral and written responses from pupils

The quality of feedback from teachers varied within and across schools. The most useful examples involved meaningful evaluations and precise improvement advice, with clear expectations for pupil responses. Conversely, a few schools had burdensome marking systems focused on the frequency of marking rather than the overall impact of feedback on learning.

A minority of schools had clear strategies for developing literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, resulting in compelling pupil progress in applying these skills across contexts. An example of a school that develops these skills well, Cefn Hengoed Comprehensive. The majority of schools, however, lacked strategic approaches for developing these skills, prompting recommendations for improvement in 21 out of 31 inspected schools. In many cases, they did not use the helpful frameworks for literacy, numeracy and digital competence. Many schools rightly focused on improving oracy, which had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, often leaving pupils reluctant to engage in discussions or provide extended responses. However, a minority of schools provided insufficient opportunities for pupils to develop their speaking and listening skills.

Many teachers effectively developed basic reading skills suitably within subjects, with regular reading tasks that enhanced subject knowledge. However, the development of more advanced reading skills was often neglected, with over-reliance on language departments to do this. Similarly, opportunities for extended writing in subjects other than English or Welsh were inconsistent. Where writing development was strong, pupils progressed substantially, but inadequate development involved overuse of poorly designed worksheets that limited pupils' responses. A significant minority of pupils frequently made spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors, with handwriting and presentation having deteriorated since the pandemic.

The majority of pupils displayed secure basic numeracy skills but meaningful opportunities to apply these skills were often lacking. A minority of schools effectively planned for progressive numeracy development across the curriculum. These schools generally ensured that science, geography and design and technology provided increasingly challenging tasks in authentic contexts. Read about Ysgol y Creuddyn's numeracy strategy here.

In a very few schools, leaders had well-considered strategies for developing digital skills, resulting in rich opportunities across subjects. Read here about Blackwood School's approach to developing pupils' digital skills. However, many schools offered insufficient digital competence practice outside computing or IT.

A few English-medium schools provided beneficial opportunities for pupils to develop their ability to converse in Welsh. Read here how Pen-Y-Dre School creates a strong culture and appreciation of Welsh language and heritage. However, in many schools, teachers offered pupils mundane tasks and did not provide enough opportunities for them to speak and listen to the language. Often, pupils' exposure to Welsh history and culture was limited to narrow events such as the school eisteddfod. Recruitment of Welsh teachers remained a challenge for most schools.

Welsh-medium and bilingual schools offered pupils strong cultural opportunities but often had low-expectations of pupils' use of the language. In a minority of cases, teachers had low expectations for language accuracy and did not challenge pupils' use of English in class nor support them sufficiently to express themselves in Welsh.

Most schools have a generally broad curriculum. See how Ysgol John Bright approach this. However, a minority had a three-year Key Stage 4 which narrowed the range of experiences for pupils and limited subject continuity at the end of Year 8. Effective curriculum planning in the best schools met nearly all learners' needs. The majority provided strong support and guidance for future learning and careers, with a few beneficially reintroducing work experience placements for Years 10 and 12. However, only a minority of secondary schools take full advantage of opportunities to work with local colleges to enhance their curricular offer. In addition, they do not always offer pupils impartial guidance regarding their future choices.

With the Curriculum for Wales becoming statutory for Years 7 and 8, most schools made broadly adequate arrangements. Partner primary school collaboration ensured learning continuity, but repetition and low levels of challenge were common. Often, schools' attempts to broaden the curriculum led to a lack of depth and cohesion in some subjects, particularly the humanities subjects. In these cases, the curriculum has become too fragmented with pupils moving from topic to topic too quickly without developing a required depth of understanding. In some cases, schools' attempts to broaden learning experiences by providing short units of work on 'new' subjects, such as taster units in other modern foreign languages resulted in learning that was too shallow or disintegrated and resulted in issues with sequencing of learning as pupils moved up to study these subjects at Key Stage 4. In the most effective cases, Curriculum for Wales developments were aligned closely with leaders' vision for developing teaching and learning. In general, schools' strategic approach to planning for progression and their assessment of knowledge and skills was at an early stage.

Many schools provided suitable opportunities for understanding Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic and LGBTQ+ experiences, often through the curriculum, assemblies, and visiting speakers. Celebrating achievements and diversity was a positive focus, though a few schools' provision in this area is under-developed.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

In general, schools' care, support, and guidance for pupils remained strong, with most schools offering beneficial enrichment activities that supported pupils' development, including concerts, theatre productions, and sports and music competitions.

Early in the autumn term, we conducted a national thematic review of attendance (Read about it here), identifying ongoing concerns, particularly in secondary schools where attendance rates remained significantly below pre-pandemic levels. Despite a slight national increase, secondary school attendance did not recover quickly enough, especially among pupils from low-income households and those with persistent absence. About half of the inspected schools were recommended to improve attendance. Most schools made considerable efforts to engage parents, carers, and pupils, emphasizing the importance of regular attendance. The majority also identified groups of low attenders and offered support or mentoring. However, where attendance improvements were minimal, leaders often failed to thoroughly analyse data to identify patterns and did not strategically review the effectiveness of their approaches. Read about how staff at Pontarddulais School improved attendance.

The majority of schools had clear, well-understood systems to address poor behaviour and celebrate positive behaviour and attitudes. Schools with a strong ethos of inclusivity often provided targeted programs and support in internal centres to help pupils modify their behaviours., In general, many pupils behaved appropriately. They concentrated well, responded appropriately to tasks, and developed independence and perseverance when given the opportunity. In a minority of schools, some pupils exhibited disruptive behaviour. These schools noted an increased need for advanced and specialist support due to the complex nature of pupil behaviour. However, staff were concerned about the lack of availability of such external support.

In most schools, pupils had valuable opportunities to influence aspects of school life, particularly in health and well-being, and to develop leadership skills through groups and committees. In the best cases, leaders ensured that pupils from specific groups, such as those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) or eligible for free school meals, could contribute their opinions. However, many schools did not systematically gather pupils' opinions on important areas like teaching or empower them to be part of strategic decisions.

Support for pupils with ALN was strong in the majority of schools, with leaders making good progress toward compliance with the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET). Many schools had enhanced transition programs for ALN pupils and other vulnerable learners, helping them settle well into schools. ALN teams provided teachers with information and guidance, such as one-page profiles, to support planning. In the best cases, teachers effectively used this guidance to adapt their teaching. However, there was too much variation in how well teachers in mainstream classes planned for ALN pupils and understood the required support. Many schools offered intervention programs for pupils with weak basic skills or low scores in reading, spelling, and numeracy, but these programs often lacked clear entry and exit criteria. Common shortcomings in ALN provision included insufficient tracking of ALN learners' progress and inadequate monitoring of the effectiveness of interventions.

There were notable strengths in local authority specialist resource bases hosted by schools. These bases were nurturing, calm, and supportive environments where pupils with moderate or specific needs thrived socially and, where appropriate, academically. Many pupils integrated successfully into

mainstream classes and participated fully in school life. Pastoral leaders and staff in many schools worked purposefully with families and external agencies to support learners needing additional help due to social, emotional, behavioural difficulties, or health and family issues. In the most effective cases, staff ensured effective communication with parents and carers, as well as regular contact with statutory agencies to address concerns promptly. Many schools provided tailored interventions and support programs by trained staff, which helped pupils overcome barriers to learning. A few schools offered particularly effective support groups and facilities for vulnerable pupils and those affected by poverty, including clubs run by external organizations and after-school programs offering hot meals.

Most schools offered support for vulnerable learners, including those adversely affected by poverty, and those with behavioural and emotional needs. Many schools had specific areas where anxious or insecure pupils could receive support for their learning. Vocational subjects and tailored courses were available in many schools to keep pupils at risk of disengagement and exclusion engaged in education. These efforts contributed significantly to the inclusive and nurturing nature of schools, enabling vulnerable pupils to continue their learning. Read about how Mary Immaculate School helps vulnerable learners.

Many schools effectively promoted pupils' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development, especially in the younger years, through tutor sessions, health and well-being lessons, and assemblies. Read here about how Ysgol Maes y Gwendraeth does this particularly well. They provided comprehensive personal and social education programs exploring themes such as mental health and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The best schools addressed current and relevant issues, such as vaping, and responded promptly to specific local concerns. Guest speakers and experts were often used to bring expertise and authenticity to pupils' experiences on topics like equality and diversity. However, in most schools, there were few opportunities for older pupils to deepen their understanding of important topics like sexual health and healthy relationships. Many schools encouraged pupils to develop as ethical citizens through fundraising, links with charities, and volunteering, particularly in the sixth form.

In most schools, there was a strong safeguarding culture. Many pupils reported feeling safe and could identify staff members they could approach for support. Generally, pupils felt that staff responded appropriately to bullying and harassment incidents. Nearly all schools ensured that staff at all levels received suitable training in safeguarding and child protection, including identifying children at risk of radicalisation and issues of violence against women.

Leading and improving

Leaders in all schools prioritized equity and inclusion, often focusing on raising the aspirations of all pupils. In cases where leadership was inspirational, leaders built trust with their staff, provided clear direction, had a strong sense of moral purpose, and maintained high expectations. These schools fostered a culture of continuous improvement, driven by the understanding that effective teaching was central to their mission. Leaders in these schools ensured that professional learning was purposeful and relevant, helping staff meet pupils' needs despite ongoing challenges. However, it was concerning that many of the recommendations given, were similar to those from previous years. Common areas needing improvement included self-evaluation, improvement planning, teaching, assessment, and the progressive development of pupils' skills.

In most schools, performance management systems were sound, but objectives were often not closely tied to pupil progress or measurable outcomes. In the few schools where line management

was particularly effective, discussions consistently focused on strategic matters, with a clear emphasis on teaching and learning. However, in schools requiring follow-up, overlapping leadership roles and inequitable responsibilities hindered progress and created a lack of clarity around accountability.

Professional learning led to positive changes in teaching practices in a minority of schools. However, in too many cases, leaders did not systematically evaluate the impact of professional learning on teaching quality or pupil standards. In the best schools, there was a strong culture of professional learning where teachers' practices were informed by evidence and research, supported by professional trust, and fostered through collaboration with peers. These schools encouraged staff to pursue their professional interests, collaborate, innovate, and learn from one another.

Governors generally fulfilled their responsibilities suitably, showing support and pride in their school communities. They diligently carried out their duties, particularly in areas like safeguarding and promoting healthy eating. Governors also supported schools in managing budgets and planning grant spending. However, only in a few schools were governors actively involved in setting the strategic direction. Often, they lacked sufficient information to effectively understand school performance and hold senior leaders accountable.

There was variation in how well leaders integrated national priorities into their improvement plans and daily operations. This may be in part though due to the number of current priorities . Nearly all schools demonstrated a strong culture of safeguarding. However, in terms of Welsh language development, a lack of ambition and low expectations persisted in a minority of schools. The provision for developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills remained weak, leading inspectors to recommend improvements in two-thirds of the secondary schools inspected. The implementation of the Curriculum for Wales in Years 7 and 8 was inconsistent. Systems to assess pupil progress were still in the early stages in most cases. Staff recruitment was a significant concern across all schools, particularly the shortage of qualified teachers in subjects like science and Welsh.

In many schools, leaders were acutely aware of the challenges facing pupils affected by poverty, social deprivation, and other negative factors. Schools worked sensitively to remove barriers to learning by providing material support and ensuring that pupils had access to enrichment activities to broaden their horizons. Read about Llanishen High school's work in this area. Stronger schools established links with local communities, food banks, and charities, maintaining productive relationships with families. These schools employed various strategies to engage parents and ensure they supported their child's learning. In a few cases, high expectations and comprehensive approaches to mitigating the impact of poverty were embedded in policies and systems, ensuring these schools were particularly effective in raising the attainment and attendance of disadvantaged pupils. Read about Cefn Hengoed Comprehensive school's work to mitigate the impact of poverty on achievement here.

The quality and effectiveness of schools' self-evaluation and improvement planning varied and were not sufficiently impactful in the majority of schools. As in previous years, improving this aspect was the most common recommendation given to schools. A key shortcoming was the lack of a systematic approach to evaluating the impact of teaching and other provision on pupils' academic and personal progress. The use of attendance and attainment data was often insufficient, and first-hand evidence was not systematically used or triangulated to evaluate the effectiveness of provision. Evaluation activities frequently focused too narrowly on pupils' attitudes and teachers' compliance with classroom strategies, rather than on the quality and impact of teaching and assessment. As a result,

leaders often had an overly positive view of teaching quality, and their evaluations lacked the precision needed to plan for necessary improvements.

In the most successful schools, improvement priorities were clear, manageable, and well-understood by all staff. Leaders consistently focused on these priorities, using data, information, and grant spending to accurately assess the effectiveness of their strategies. (Another very good para above)

These schools made regular, use of this information to drive improvement. In the very best schools, there was a tangible commitment to continuous improvement, supported by strong professional learning cultures and a clear understanding that effective teaching is central to their success. Read about Pontarddulais Comprehensive School's approach to school improvement.

Overview of recommendations

- In the 2023 – 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected 31 secondary schools.
- 21 (68%) secondary schools were given a recommendation to strengthen and refine their self-evaluation and/or improvement planning processes. 9 of these providers were advised to focus on teaching, learning, and pupil progress.
- 20 (65%) secondary schools were given a recommendation regarding the progressive development of pupils' skills. This was through improvement of teaching, provision, planning, and/or co-ordination. Of these providers, some of the recommendations given advised they focus on one or more specific areas of the curriculum: 10 providers were advised to focus on developing pupils' numeracy skills, 8 on pupils' literacy skills, 6 on pupils' Welsh Language skills, and 4 on pupils' digital skills.
- 16 (52%) secondary schools received a recommendation regarding the improvement of teaching. 7 of these recommendations placed emphasis on pupil progress and 6 on the challenging of pupils. 3 of these providers received a recommendation that focused on the quality of teaching and assessment. 5 additional providers received a recommendation that also related to assessment and feedback
- 15 (48%) secondary schools were given a recommendation to improve attendance.
- 10 (32%) secondary schools were given a recommendation regarding the improvement of their Welsh language provision. Of these, 6 providers were specifically given a recommendation to improve pupils' Welsh language skills, as previously mentioned. 2 of these providers were also advised to improve pupil understanding of Welsh culture and heritage.
- 9 (29%) secondary schools were given a recommendation on leadership, with recommendations issued incorporating themes of role, responsibility, accountability, strategy and improvement.
- 3 (10%) secondary schools were given a recommendation regarding the strengthening and development of the role of the governing body.
- Other recommendations issued to providers advised on themes including health and safety, pupil behaviour, exclusion, additional learning needs (ALN) provision, pupil well-being, communication between parents and pupils and staff, budget and quality assurance