Independent special

Provider Data

48

No. of providers in 2025

Independent School Standards

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

No. of schools inspected that did not fully comply with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

2024-2025: 4

Inspection activity

No. of core inspections: **8**

No. of monitoring inspections: **6**

No. of initial registration visits: **2** **(1 unsuccessful and 1 in progress)**

No. of follow up to registration visits: **4**

No. of material changes: **19**

No. of follow-up visits: **25** **(including 11 final follow-up inspections)**

Spotlights

No. of spotlights: **10**

Chestnut Hill x 2
Amberleigh x 2
Red Rose
Gwenllian
Dan y Coed x 3
Mynydd Haf

Summary

In 2024-2025, nearly all independent ALN specialist schools that we inspected provided calm, supportive environments where pupils felt safe, respected and valued. Strong, trusting professional relationships between staff and pupils were a notable strength across the sector. These relationships,

often built through therapeutic approaches and consistent routines, enabled pupils to regulate their emotions, develop self-confidence and engage positively with learning. Staff placed a high priority on knowing pupils well and tailoring support to their individual needs.

Curriculum design across most schools prioritised practical, personalised learning experiences. Life skills, independence and vocational pathways featured widely, preparing pupils effectively for adulthood. In a minority of schools, this was further enhanced through enterprise projects, college link courses or structured work experience. Careers education continued to develop as a strength, with clear planning in most schools and highly bespoke support in a few.

Leadership was effective in most schools. Where it was strongest, there was a shared vision and robust quality assurance aligned to pupil needs. Over half of schools inspected this year had new leaders in post, many following significant restructuring. Where leadership was still embedding, weaknesses in evaluation and improvement planning were more evident, particularly around teaching and safeguarding.

In 2024-2025, compared to the previous academic year, the proportion of schools that were compliant with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024 increased substantially. However, a few schools did not meet all the standards at the time of inspection. This year, nine schools received final compliance inspections after previously failing to meet the regulations. Of these, eight were found to be compliant, highlighting leaders' commitment to improvement and their ability to act on previous recommendations. One school remained non-compliant and is due to close at the end of the 2024-2025 academic year.

In addition to scheduled inspections, four follow-up to registration visits took place, one of which identified non-compliance. Inspectors also undertook a focused safeguarding visit at the request of the Welsh Government, finding the school to be compliant. These inspections underlined the importance of strong oversight by proprietors and the consistent application of safeguarding procedures.

Teaching and learning

In nearly all schools that we inspected, pupils engaged positively with learning activities and benefited from carefully considered classroom environments. Where teaching was strongest, staff provided structured, therapeutic and creative approaches that enabled pupils to develop independence, curiosity and resilience. In many schools, teaching strategies were informed by pupils' communication profiles, personal targets and emotional regulation plans. However, in a few schools, particularly where staff turnover was high or leadership had recently changed, inconsistencies in teaching quality limited pupil progress. In these cases, a few staff lacked the subject knowledge or pedagogical expertise to deliver specialist subjects confidently, particularly at GCSE level. In a few schools, a minority of pupils remained overly reliant on adult support and did not have regular opportunities to work independently or develop problem-solving skills. This limited the level of challenge and hindered pupils' progress over time.

Most schools offered a highly individualised curriculum. In the best examples, this linked explicitly to pupils' interests, needs and long-term aspirations. Across the sector, there was a growing focus on practical and vocational learning, with many schools integrating enterprise or community-based activities. These included managing café stalls, planning events or running small businesses linked to craft or animal care. These experiences helped to develop core life skills and provided meaningful

context for learning. In the most effective examples, these activities were delivered alongside formal qualifications.

In a few schools, the breadth of the curriculum was too narrow or failed to include important subjects such as science, humanities, health and well-being. In a very few cases, curriculum planning for specific phases, such as early years, was underdeveloped and lacked coherence. A minority of schools offered limited opportunities for qualifications or accreditation that matched pupils' abilities. These limitations restricted pupils' readiness for the next stage of learning or employment and contributed to non-compliance with the Independent School Standards.

Core skills, including communication, literacy and numeracy, were developed well in most schools. A few provided valuable opportunities for pupils to apply these across contexts, for example through planning trips, writing newsletters or taking part in structured debates. However, in a few schools, expectations for literacy and digital competence were too low or inconsistently embedded. Early reading strategies were present in many settings but were not always applied consistently, especially for pupils with more complex needs.

Assessment was used effectively to inform planning in many schools. These schools had robust systems to track small-step progress, often closely linked to IDP outcomes. In a few cases, assessment processes were still developing or used inconsistently, and teachers lacked confidence in using them to inform next steps or evaluate impact.

Work to embed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ongoing in most schools. However, this work was still in the early stages and not yet fully integrated into everyday practice. In many schools, curriculum content did not support pupils well enough to develop a secure understanding of equality, diversity or protected characteristics, limiting their broader social and cultural awareness.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

In nearly all schools, well-being was a central focus and a strong feature of the provision. Many schools had adopted trauma-informed approaches and consistent, whole-school systems to support behaviour. Staff responded calmly and reliably to pupils, using visual supports, co-regulation and therapeutic input to help them manage their emotions. In the most effective schools, education and therapy teams worked closely together to plan and review support, often through regular multi-agency meetings.

Pupil voice was a strong feature in many schools. Regular meetings, surveys and leadership roles helped pupils influence school life and decision-making. In a few schools, pupils contributed to policy changes or redesign of key spaces such as outdoor areas or dining rooms. This supported a strong sense of ownership and community. However, in a few schools, pupil leadership roles were underdeveloped. In these schools, pupils' influence on whole-school decisions was limited.

Attendance was good in most schools. In the majority of these, staff had supported pupils to improve their attendance over time, often from very low starting points due to previous disengagement or anxiety. Behaviour was generally managed well across the sector, although, in a few schools, inconsistency in policy application or staff understanding limited the effectiveness of systems.

Careers education and preparation for adulthood were effective in most schools and particularly

strong in a few. In these settings, pupils accessed personalised careers programmes, including college visits and vocational qualifications. This helped them to make informed decisions about their next steps and gain confidence in new environments. In addition, valuable enterprise and work placements helped pupils to develop confidence and awareness of the world of work.

Leading and improving

Where leadership was inspected, it was found to be effective in most schools, with clear vision, strong relationships and an increasing focus on evaluation and quality assurance. In the strongest cases, leaders fostered a culture of collaboration, continuous improvement and accountability. Lesson observations, data reviews and stakeholder feedback were increasingly used to inform development planning. Staff generally felt supported and valued, and professional learning was better aligned to school priorities than in previous years.

Many schools inspected this year had undergone recent leadership changes. Where these were well managed, they resulted in clearer roles, improved systems and renewed staff confidence. However, in a few schools, leadership capacity was stretched or still embedding. In these cases, self-evaluation lacked rigour, and improvement planning was reactive or overly broad.

The effectiveness of governance arrangements was variable across schools. In around half of schools, governors or proprietors provided effective challenge and support. In others, oversight was too limited, particularly where providers operated across multiple settings. In a very few cases, this lack of strategic oversight contributed directly to systemic failures, including non-compliance with safeguarding or teaching and learning standards.

Most schools provided access to appropriate professional development. Many made effective use of internal expertise and therapy teams to deliver training tailored to pupil need. However, in a few cases, professional learning lacked coherence or failed to address school improvement priorities. In addition, the impact of training was not always evaluated effectively, limiting leaders' ability to judge what worked well or where further support was needed.

A few schools were found to be non-compliant with the Independent School Standards at the time of inspection. In these schools, non-compliance related to a range of regulatory areas. Common issues included weaknesses in curriculum planning, inconsistencies in safeguarding and behaviour policies and lack of appropriate implementation, checks or oversight. These regulatory shortfalls limited pupils' entitlement to a safe, well-rounded education and highlighted the need for more robust quality assurance and operational systems.

Overview of recommendations from inspections

In the 2024-2025 academic year, Estyn carried out eight core inspections and six monitoring inspections of independent ALN specialist schools.

- Nine schools (64%) were given a recommendation to improve or refine quality assurance, self-evaluation or improvement planning. Eight schools (57%) were given a recommendation to develop or refine their curriculum.
- Six schools (43%) were given a recommendation to strengthen either professional learning or the quality and consistency of teaching.
- Four schools (29%) were given a recommendation to comply fully with the Independent School

Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024. Three schools (21%) had recommendations linked to safeguarding.

- Several schools received individual recommendations relating to specific aspects of provision. These included improving pupil attendance (three schools, 21%), communication with parents (one school, 7%), behaviour and attitudes to learning (one school, 7%), and the promotion of pupils' independence skills (one school, 7%).

There were no clear differences in the nature of recommendations between core and monitoring inspections, suggesting a consistent set of improvement priorities across the sector.