

Secondary

Schools Data

178

No. of schools in 2023

176

No. of schools in 2024

174

No. of schools in 2025

70% of schools inspected in the academic year 2024 -2025 had a sixth-form

Pupils Data

170,424

All pupils

151,835

No. of pupil under 16

18,589

No. of pupils 16 and over

19.5%

eFSM (Aged 5-15)

3.9%

EAL A-C (Aged 5-15)

15.8%

Able to speak Welsh (Aged 5-15)

9.0%

Pupils with additional learning needs (Aged 5-15)

Follow-up Data

No. in FU September 2024

ER: **9** SM: **7** SI: **4**

No. removed 2024-2025

ER: **5** SM: **2** SI: **1**

No. downgraded from ER to SI
2024-2025: **1**

Inspection activity

No. of core inspections: **30**

No. of interim visits: **25**

Welsh-medium: **11**

English-medium: **44**

No. downgraded from SI to SM
2024-2025: 1

No. went into FU after core
inspection 2024-2025

SM: 5 SI: 8

Total in FU August 2025

ER: 3 SM: 11 SI: 11

Summary

We saw consistently high-quality teaching in a minority of schools. In a few cases, pupils made rapid progress in their skills and subject understanding as a result of careful curriculum planning and delivery. The quality of teaching was very variable across schools. In the majority of schools, there were challenges related to weak teaching and poor skills development. In these cases, teaching lacked the quality needed to support strong pupil progress, and planning for literacy, numeracy and digital skills was often insufficient.

In most schools, there was strong pastoral provision and careful attention to pupils' well-being. However, attendance remained an important issue. Despite efforts to promote it, rates stayed well below pre-pandemic levels, with particularly low attendance among pupils from low-income backgrounds. Too many pupils were persistently absent.

Interim visits showed that many schools had made suitable progress against their recommendation from their last inspection. The most successful took a collaborative, accountable approach. Where progress was weakest, recommendations were ignored or not approached well enough. This was often linked with poor self-evaluation and improvement planning.

Teaching and learning

During 2024-2025, a majority of schools received a recommendation to improve teaching.

In the few strongest cases, lessons were well-structured and purposeful. Teachers had clear learning objectives in mind and planned activities carefully to ensure that pupils achieved them. They had high expectations and strong subject knowledge. The pace of learning was appropriate to the age and needs of the pupils, and activities challenged pupils to improve. Teachers adapted their approaches to support a wide range of pupil needs, monitored their progress in the lesson carefully and adapted their teaching in response. These teachers provided regular, clear and effective feedback and used questioning skilfully to probe understanding and extend pupils' thinking. In these instances, pupils responded with enthusiasm, engaged productively with their learning and made strong progress over time.

In two-thirds of all schools inspected, teaching was generally satisfactory in the majority of lessons

but we saw weak teaching and planning in other lessons. Lessons often lacked pace and purpose, and the quality of teacher questioning did not sufficiently support pupils' understanding nor challenge them appropriately. Expectations were too low, and feedback was inconsistent or lacked clarity, limiting its impact on pupil progress. In a few cases, the overuse of poorly designed worksheets and basic, repetitive tasks that merely kept pupils occupied reduced opportunities for pupils to think critically or apply their knowledge creatively.

Across many schools, staff fostered a suitable learning culture where pupils collaborated well and had a generally positive attitude to learning. However, poor behaviour and negative attitudes to learning were common features in a few schools and behaviour management was inconsistent.

Skills development

The provision for developing pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills was not strong enough in the majority of secondary schools. Too often, teachers set tokenistic or superficial literacy and numeracy tasks that did not help skills development and distracted from subject learning. In other cases, subject teachers missed opportunities to reinforce literacy skills, particularly where they lacked confidence in promoting oracy or developing reading and writing within their areas of specialism. As such, we made a recommendation to strengthen the provision for skills in two thirds of all schools inspected.

Pupils' progressive development in their literacy skills was a positive feature in only a minority of schools. Many pupils read a range of texts with suitable fluency and understanding and used basic reading strategies suitably to locate and interpret information. The few most effective schools had prioritised a culture of reading. As a result, pupils developed an appreciation for a wide range of genres and used their reading skills effectively to support learning across the curriculum. However, in many schools, teachers of subjects other than English or Welsh did not consistently provide opportunities for pupils to develop and apply advanced reading skills, such as inference, deduction, and synthesis. Furthermore, there was a lack of understanding amongst leaders about what constituted advanced reading skills and a lack of clear vision generally about developing pupils' literacy skills.

A strong reading culture at Fitzalan School

All pupils benefit from the whole-school prioritisation of reading and the development of a strong reading culture. This is underpinned robustly by suitable book recommendations, role models among teaching staff and regular reading time in form periods and within a dedicated library space. By covering many subject areas, including social issues outside of school, pupils learn to appreciate that reading has a place in many aspects of life, and helps them develop as well-rounded individuals, receptive to new ideas.

Many schools promoted oracy appropriately. In the most successful cases, pupils engaged willingly in discussions, used subject vocabulary precisely and expressed opinions clearly. In a minority of schools, effective professional learning led teachers to plan purposeful oracy activities, helping pupils to become confident communicators. However, in other schools, oracy development lacked coherence. Too often, teachers did not plan opportunities for pupils to converse independently or use sophisticated vocabulary. Questioning was often too limited to allow extended responses.

In the majority of schools, basic writing was generally sound. Many pupils wrote appropriately for different purposes, showing growing awareness of audience and style. In the minority of schools with consistent literacy approaches and meaningful writing opportunities across subjects, pupils organised ideas well and improved accuracy in grammar, punctuation and spelling. They redrafted work following feedback. However, in two-thirds of schools, at least a minority of pupils had too limited a vocabulary and weak spelling or punctuation.

In the majority of schools, pupils generally developed sound basic numeracy skills in mathematics, showing secure understanding of number, shape, data and algebra. They calculated accurately and solved problems using appropriate methods. However, teachers did not always plan well to develop conceptual understanding or address misconceptions, often focusing on procedures. In the best provision, pupils applied numeracy skills confidently in maths and across subjects such as science and geography. In a minority of schools, numeracy development was inconsistent. Pupils struggled with basic operations and applying skills in new contexts. Weak planning in relevant subjects hindered progress. Assessment often failed to identify gaps, and interventions were not timely or targeted.

In many schools, digital competence lagged behind literacy and numeracy although, across the sector, pupils generally used a suitable range of digital tools to support learning. A few schools were at an early stage of development, with limited purposeful use of technology. Teachers lacked the training or confidence to integrate it effectively. In schools where digital tools were embedded, pupils used them confidently to access platforms and communicate, improving engagement and organisation. In the few strongest cases, ambitious leadership enabled pupils to use creative technologies to code, make multimedia and solve problems.

A minority of schools focused strongly on wider skills like collaboration, creativity and critical thinking. Pupils worked in groups, debated and reflected on learning. Where most successful, pupils developed confidence, resilience and independence. In many schools, extracurricular activities supported life skills, including enterprise and charity work. A few pupils enhanced interpersonal skills through councils or leadership roles. In a few schools, opportunities for wider skill development were limited. Tasks were overly teacher-led and restricted exploration, problem-solving and independence. Pupils were passive and lacked creative or independent thinking skills.

The majority of pupils had positive attitudes to learning Welsh. They engaged enthusiastically in lessons and cultural activities such as the Eisteddfod. Pupil-led groups like 'Cryw Cymraeg' further enhanced interest. Many pupils in Welsh-medium and bilingual schools made good progress in their Welsh language skills over time.

In English-medium schools, pupils made broadly suitable progress in basic Welsh. They translated simple words, identified details in short texts, and wrote basic sentences with accuracy. A few more able pupils wrote extended pieces using idioms, tenses and mutations. However, in a minority of schools, pupils relied too heavily on structured support, limiting their independent learning and spontaneous communication. Pupils had too few opportunities to use Welsh outside lessons. We recommended increasing opportunities for pupils to use Welsh in and beyond lessons in a minority of schools. In a few schools, only around half of pupils were entered for a Welsh GCSE, reducing recognition of their progress.

In secondary schools with sixth form provision, many older pupils made worthwhile contributions to the life of the school such as organising fundraising activities and volunteering as learning mentors or buddies to younger pupils. In around half of these schools, there were valuable opportunities for

pupils in the sixth form to lead pupil groups and influence school decisions.

Curriculum

Leaders and staff in most schools articulated a clear vision for Curriculum for Wales, often rooted in school or community values, Welsh identity or their 'cynefin', local area. Many schools had begun promising collaboration with primary partners, although a minority were still developing progression frameworks with limited joint planning and assessment. In the strongest schools, shared planning, transition projects and professional learning improved progression. However, the quality of this work was variable and, in a few cases, repetition of primary content was a concern.

Many schools offered a broad and balanced Key Stage 4 and sixth form curriculum, although provision varied. The majority provided a wide choice of academic and vocational qualifications, including construction, health and engineering. Many schools expanded their offer of subjects through partnerships with colleges and other schools. A minority offered enrichment for more able pupils, for example by offering additional mathematics, Mandarin lessons or STEM projects. However, in a few cases, planning for the most able was weak, limiting their development.

Pupils in Specialist Resource Bases and those with ALN often benefited from personalised support, although mainstream provision varied in quality. The majority of schools offered tailored alternatives, like nurture groups or vocational pathways, for those at risk of exclusion, which often secured positive engagement and led to qualifications.

The majority of schools took a creative approach to their curricular design in Years 7 to 9, using cross-curricular projects and events like "expedition days" and embedding Welsh heritage and culture well. In the few best examples, planning ensured progressive, relevant learning. However, at least a minority of schools showed inconsistency in implementation. In these cases, schemes of work lacked coherence or progression. A few schools offered pupils weak challenge or subject continuity, especially in the humanities. Thematic approaches in these schools reduced subject-specific depth, leaving gaps, for example weak understanding of chronology in history or limited fieldwork in geography. In the few schools where curriculum leadership and professional learning were strong, pupils progressed well and were well-prepared for further study.

In many schools, personal and social education (PSE) was a consistent strength, supported by structured, age-appropriate programmes that used pupil voice, well-being data and external partnerships effectively. More schools were adapting content based on data and emerging issues. For instance, several strengthened focus on mental health and relationships in response to local and national trends. Across all schools, topics included emotional health, social media, online safety and, in a few cases, parenting. In general, PSE supported pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. Many schools reinforced this through assemblies and presentations by external agencies. In a minority of schools, PSE coverage in Key Stage 4 and sixth form was limited or irregular.

Many schools showed strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. Curriculum and enrichment opportunities promoted understanding of the histories and experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and LGBTQ+ individuals. A small minority had embedded this well through literature and thematic units. Pupil-led groups like LGBTQ+ clubs or equality forums supported inclusive cultures. In a minority of schools, equality and diversity topics were not fully embedded in the curriculum.

Most schools provided rich and varied opportunities for learning beyond the classroom. Clubs, sports, performances, and cultural activities were generally well-attended and valued by pupils. Worthwhile activities such as debate teams, archaeology clubs, coding groups and musical theatre productions nurtured pupils' creativity and social skills particularly well in many schools. There was an increase in the number of educational visits compared to the previous year and since the time of the pandemic with visits to Welsh cultural sites, museums, European cities and outdoor centres enhancing the curriculum well.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

A strong safeguarding culture was evident in most schools. Staff received regular training, and safeguarding teams worked closely with external partners to ensure timely support. Assemblies, PSE lessons and campaigns were used to reinforce safeguarding messages.

Across most secondary schools, leaders and staff showed a clear commitment to well-being, support and inclusion. They promoted respect, kindness and belonging. Generally, staff had strong, trusting relationships with pupils, who reported feeling safe and valued. Many leaders reinforced values such as respect and honesty, with pastoral teams working hard to meet learners' diverse needs. Many pupils responded well to inclusive environments, behaving respectfully in lessons and social times.

Strong pastoral systems underpinned well-being in most schools. Many had pastoral hubs or well-being centres offering accessible support including counselling, restorative practices and social skills support.

A minority of schools showed notable strengths in trauma-informed approaches, graduated behaviour responses and therapeutic provision. The best practice included close collaboration with agencies such as CAMHS, social services and youth services, helping to support vulnerable learners, including young carers and children in care. A large majority of schools promoted community-focused initiatives to support well-being and equity, such as uniform banks, free toiletries and foodbank links. Many schools promoted positive behaviour through clear policies, rewards and expectations. Where applied consistently, behaviour systems contributed to calm and respectful learning. In a few cases, pupils' behaviour led to disruption of learning. [Read more about behaviour in our thematic report.](#)

Improving attendance was a priority for nearly all schools. In many, attendance remained below pre-pandemic levels, with persistent absence affecting vulnerable pupils. Many schools used strategies like rewards, targeted support and family engagement. In a minority of cases, attendance or liaison officers helped re-engage pupils. Schools with strong data analysis and clear plans saw notable improvements, including for pupils eligible for free school meals. Despite this, attendance remained a concern in over two thirds of schools.

Improving attendance at Ysgol Penweddig

The school's rigorous processes for promoting attendance are a significant strength. Leaders analyse a variety of data regularly to identify trends in the attendance of school years and groups of pupils and make useful comparisons. The importance of attendance is shared effectively with parents. There is a graduated method of intervention as soon as pupils' attendance begins to cause concern and leaders ensure that all staff play a role in promoting good attendance. Regular evaluations are conducted of the effectiveness of the school's work to improve pupils' attendance, with strategies adapted as necessary. The school's work in this area has led to significant improvements.

Support for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) was sound in many schools, although classroom experiences varied. In at least a minority, staff understanding of universal provision was still developing. Most pupils had individual development plans and one-page profiles, with increasing focus on person-centred planning and pupil voice. In the best cases, effective support came from strong collaboration between ALN teams, parents, external agencies and teachers. However, in a minority of schools, teaching for pupils with ALN was weak, particularly where teachers did not use available information to plan support. Most schools with resource bases or nurture units offered valued provision for pupils with complex needs.

Pupil leadership was strong in the majority of schools. In the best examples, active councils, forums and groups such as eco-committees, LGBTQ+ alliances and anti-racism groups gave pupils real influence. However, meaningful involvement in curriculum design, teaching evaluation and policy formation was seen in only a few schools.

Transition support between primary and secondary was generally strong. Many schools had developed programmes, including taster days and cluster work, especially for pupils with ALN or anxiety. In many schools, pupils also received helpful post-16 guidance, supported by careers advisers and employers. However, this was not always the case with learners who had additional learning needs.

Leading and improving

In 2024-2025, leadership in Wales' secondary schools was generally driven by moral purpose and a vision to create inclusive, equitable communities. Many headteachers set out compelling visions based on respect, well-being, community and excellence. Leaders often worked hard to balance improvement priorities with operational challenges and national reform. However, shortcomings persisted, with weaknesses in evaluation and improvement planning in two-thirds of schools.

In the few best schools, headteachers' visions were widely shared, shaping culture and expectations. Distributed leadership helped to secure meaningful improvements in pupil outcomes. In around half of schools, leadership teams were cohesive, with roles sensibly aligned. In others, progress was hindered by weak strategic or middle leadership and unclear accountability. Overlapping responsibilities reduced leadership effectiveness, especially where improvement in teaching was slow and skills development weak. In around half of schools, recommendations were given to strengthen

leadership clarity and accountability.

Middle leadership remained variable. Where effective, middle leaders had clear roles and strong support, and engaged in robust quality assurance. However, in too many cases, they were not held to account, leading to weak responses to shortcomings in teaching or pupil progress.

Many schools had suitable self-evaluation processes, including teacher observations, work scrutiny and data analysis. In the best cases, these helped leaders to monitor progress and refine plans. However, in a majority of schools, evaluation was too superficial and overly focused on compliance, with limited insight into the quality of teaching. In a few, self-evaluation was overly generous, with weak focus on pupil progress and leadership impact.

Many schools had improvement plans aligned to national priorities, including improving teaching and raising attendance. Where planning was precise with clear success criteria, schools generally made good progress. In at least a minority of cases, plans were too broad or vague, limiting leaders' ability to monitor progress or hold others to account.

Many schools had appropriate performance management systems linking objectives to school priorities. Training and professional development opportunities were generally relevant in the majority of schools. However, in a minority, professional learning lacked strategic focus. Leaders did not evaluate its impact clearly, making it harder to target development where needed, especially in teaching. A few schools offered well-tailored development through coaching or inquiry, fostering a strong learning culture.

A culture of professional learning at Pencoed Comprehensive School

The school is developing a vibrant culture of professional learning. There is a strong focus on developing teaching based on first-hand evidence of strengths and areas for improvement in practice across the school. A variety of complementary approaches, including coaching, research-informed practice, collaborative planning and reflection, teacher-led workshops and whole-school events, are supporting the school well in its ambition to strengthen pedagogy. The views of pupils play an important role in this work. The Pedagogy Pioneers, a group of pupil leaders, have received training to develop a valuable set of skills to work with leaders to inform improvements in teaching and learning approaches.

Most senior leaders recognised the importance of equity and had introduced strategies to reduce the impact of poverty on attainment and well-being. In the majority of schools, effective use of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) supported interventions such as mentoring, family engagement, extra-curricular activities and access to learning materials. In a few schools, these approaches led to notable improvements in attendance and outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals. However, in a minority of schools, evaluation of PDG spending was underdeveloped, and a few lacked a cohesive strategy or robust monitoring to assess impact on closing gaps.

Governors were supportive in nearly all schools, but their ability to challenge leaders was often limited. This was usually due to a lack of understanding of strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning. In the best schools, governors were well-informed and provided strategic challenge,

contributing effectively to improvement planning and school progress.

Most senior leaders, business managers and governors managed finances prudently. However, many schools faced serious financial pressures, and a small minority operated with licensed deficit budgets.

Follow-up

Six schools in Estyn review from the last academic year were reviewed in a panel with the local authority during the year, and half were removed from the list of requiring follow-up activity. One school in Estyn review was placed in the category of significant improvement.

Seven secondary schools were in special measures at the start of the academic year. These schools have been monitored each term and remain in this statutory category as progress was found to be insufficient. Two schools were removed from special measures during the year. One school that was in the significant improvement category was moved to special measures.

Thirty secondary schools were inspected this year, 21 of these had a sixth-form. Seventeen schools did not require follow-up, and eight schools were deemed in need of significant improvement. The main reasons for this level of follow-up were related to deficiencies in teaching, along with the limited impact that leaders have had on improving the provision. Five secondary schools were placed in special measures during 2024-2025. The main reasons for this level of follow-up were significant shortcomings in leadership, attendance and teaching.

Overview of recommendations from inspections

In total, 30 providers were inspected in the 2024-2025 academic year, of which 13 were placed in a follow-up category. We gave a total of 109 recommendations:

A total of 25 providers were given at least one recommendation related to **teaching and learning**:

- 67% (20) of providers were given at least one recommendation to improve provision for skill development, including Welsh, literacy, numeracy, and digital skills; this was alongside ensuring opportunities for skills to be developed and applied across the curriculum
- 63% (19) of providers were given recommendations about enhancing the quality of teaching, 47% (9) of which focused on providing appropriate challenge for pupils, and 21% (4) of which included raising teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve
- 13% (4) of providers were given a recommendation covering learning outcomes and progress; 2 of these were related to skill development and teaching quality, and the other 2 were related to improving the effectiveness of teaching so that pupils are challenged to make strong progress

A total of 20 providers (60%) were given at least one recommendation related to **well-being, care, support and guidance**:

- 63% (19) providers were recommended to improve attendance, of which 5 of these specifically noted the attendance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals
- 10% (3) providers were given a recommendation to address safeguarding issues raised during inspections
- 7% (2) providers were recommended to improve the strategic leadership or planning for the provision for pupils with additional learning needs

At total of 24 providers (80%) were given at least one recommendation related to **leading and improving**:

- 67% (20) of providers were given a recommendation related to leadership; these primarily included strengthening strategic leadership, increasing the accountability of leaders and staff, refining the responsibilities of leaders, and enhancing self-evaluation and improvement planning (sometimes in reference to the impact of provision on pupil outcomes)
- 73% (22) of providers were given recommendations related to self-evaluation and/or improvement planning; these largely echoed recommendations associated with leadership
- 33% (10) providers were given a recommendation focused on learning outcomes or progress, related to how self-evaluation processes could be used to appraise the impact of provision on learning outcomes
- 13% (4) providers had recommendations around the responsibilities of governors to offer leaders appropriate challenge, hold staff accountable, and strengthen the structures of governance
- 10% (3) of recommendations made reference to financial management, either by working with the local authority, making use of the pupil development grant, or ensuring budget management and monitoring