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Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

**Aberdare High School
Cwmdare Road
Aberdare
Rhondda Cynon Taf
CF44 8SS**

Date of inspection: November 2011

by

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



During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the school's current performance and on its prospects for improvement.

In these evaluations, inspectors use a four-point scale:

Judgement	What the judgement means
Excellent	Many strengths, including significant examples of sector-leading practice
Good	Many strengths and no important areas requiring significant improvement
Adequate	Strengths outweigh areas for improvement
Unsatisfactory	Important areas for improvement outweigh strengths

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

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Context

Aberdare High School is an 11-18 boys' comprehensive school. It has 507 pupils on roll, including 109 pupils in the sixth form.

The school is located on the outskirts of the town of Aberdare in the Cynon Valley, an area of high unemployment. It serves Aberdare and the nearby villages of Penywaun and Hirwaun. Twenty-nine percent of the pupils are entitled to free school meals. This figure is greater than the national average of 17.4%.

Virtually all pupils have English as their first language. No pupil speaks Welsh as a first language. About 2% of the pupils are from other ethnic backgrounds. One pupil receives support teaching in English as an additional language.

The school's intake represents the full range of ability, but there are more pupils of below average ability than there are of higher ability. One pupil has a statement of special educational needs. Around 19% of the pupils are recognised as having some special educational need. This figure is just below the national average of 20.2% and the proportion having statements of special educational needs is well below the national average of 2.6%.

The headteacher has been in post since the previous inspection. Recently, there have been significant changes in the management structure due to falling numbers of pupils. The deputy headteacher and one assistant headteacher retired in the previous school year and the two remaining assistant headteachers have taken on additional responsibilities in a reduced leadership team.

The individual school budget per pupil for Aberdare High School 2010-2011 means that the budget is £4,311 per pupil. The maximum per pupil in the secondary schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf is £4,590 and the minimum is £3,679. Aberdare High School is third out of the 19 secondary schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf in terms of its school budget per pupil.

Summary

The school's current performance	Adequate
The school's prospects for improvement	Good

Current performance

The good features of the school's work include:

- the improvement in performance in the core subject indicator (the expected performance in English or Welsh, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum) in key stage 3 and in many key indicators in key stage 4;
- the progress that pupils make in the majority of lessons in developing their knowledge understanding and skills;
- no pupil leaving full-time education without a recognised qualification;
- the behaviour of pupils and their positive attitudes to learning;
- the good quality teaching by a majority of the staff;
- the inclusive ethos and good support for vulnerable pupils; and
- the range of effective partnerships.

However, current performance is judged as adequate overall because:

- performance in English and mathematics at key stage 3, the level 2 threshold (equivalent to five GCSEs at grade A* to C) including English and mathematics and performance of pupils eligible for free school meals is below the average for similar schools;
- attendance levels are below the average for similar schools;
- pupils do not make enough progress in a minority of lessons;
- the quality of marking varies too much between and within subjects; and
- pupils' progress is not tracked across all subjects well enough to identify underachievement.

Prospects for improvement

The school's prospects for improvement are judged as good because:

- the headteacher and senior leadership team provide a clear sense of direction based on an accurate assessment of the school's strengths and weaknesses;
- staff at all levels are clear about their roles and responsibilities;
- planning for improvement focuses sharply on improving teaching, learning and skills;
- the school has made significant improvements in standards in key stage 4;
- self-evaluation processes draw on an appropriately wide range of first-hand evidence; and
- the school is managed efficiently.

Recommendations

The staff and governors of Aberdare High School need to:

- R1 improve performance in English and mathematics at key stages 3 and 4, the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics and the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals;
- R2 improve attendance;
- R3 increase the rigour and challenge in teaching to match the high expectations in the best practice in the school;
- R4 make sure that marking and whole-school tracking of assessment are more consistent in quality and help pupils to improve and make progress; and
- R5 improve the measurement of progress against targets in self-evaluation and improvement planning.

What happens next?

The school will produce an action plan that shows how it will address the recommendations. Progress in addressing the recommendations will be monitored by Estyn.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?

Adequate

Standards: Adequate

Performance at key stage 3 improved significantly in 2011, with achievement of the core subject indicator placing Aberdare High School in the top half of schools with a similar proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals (free-school-meals benchmarks). However, performance in English and mathematics at level 5 is in the bottom half of that for similar schools. Pupils' performance in English and science at level 5 is higher than the family of schools average for boys, while mathematics performance is just below the boys' average for their family of schools. Performance in the core subject indicator is above expectations when compared with that of similar schools. However, pupils' progress from the previous key stage is judged as adequate.

In key stage 4, pupils' performance in 2011 in the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics improved, and is above expectations. However, in relation to this indicator the school remains in the bottom half of similar schools in terms of free-school-meals benchmarks. Performance in the level 2 threshold has shown a steady improvement over the past three years and is in the top half of that for similar schools. Pupils' performance in all indicators at key stage 4 is higher than the family average for boys. In 2011, pupils attained higher than the family and Wales averages for science. However, when compared with their performance in previous key stages, learners in key stage 4 do not make enough progress in many indicators.

No pupil left the school without a qualification over the last three years and the proportion staying on in full-time education after 16 is high. Eight per cent of the pupils who left school at 16 are reported as being not in education, employment and training, which is just above local and Wales averages.

In the sixth form, students' performance is just below all-Wales averages.

Pupils eligible for free school meals do not achieve as well as expected at key stage 3 and key stage 4, and there is a larger than expected gap between their performance and that of those not eligible for free school meals. Pupils with special educational needs achieve in line with their abilities.

In the majority of lessons, pupils make good progress and display positive attitudes to learning. They work well in groups and remain well focused on tasks throughout the lesson. They remember work they have learned before and use this to develop their knowledge and understanding. However, in a minority of lessons, pupils do not make enough progress, particularly where they are not given enough challenge or support.

Many pupils listen well and give extended responses to questions, showing good understanding. In group tasks, they listen carefully and offer thoughtful contributions in discussion. They show good problem-solving skills. However, a few pupils are reluctant to participate and lack confidence in presenting their views.

Many pupils read fluently and are able to select relevant information from a range of texts to show a clear understanding. Where pupils are given challenging texts to read, pupils demonstrate good skills in selecting and beginning to analyse details. However, in a few classes, a minority of pupils do not show a clear understanding of the tasks they are set or how to improve their work.

Generally, pupils write accurately and use subject-specific vocabulary well. Pupils write clearly for a wide range of purposes and audiences. For example, they write reports and imaginative accounts in several subjects. A minority of pupils do not take enough care with the presentation of their written work and do not learn to correct spelling and punctuation errors.

Pupils develop their numeracy skills appropriately in science and geography to measure accurately and use data from graphs and charts. In a few subjects, pupils demonstrate competent information and communication technology skills.

A few post-16 pupils attain level 3 qualifications in application of number, information and communication technology and other wider key skills.

In Welsh second language at key stage 3, results have improved over the past three years. Performance in Welsh second language is in the top half of that for similar schools and above family and Wales averages. At key stage 4, over the last four years, performance at level 2 has been close to the family and Wales averages. Nearly all pupils gain a GCSE qualification in Welsh second language and a minority of pupils take the full course qualification. Around half of these pupils gain GCSE A* to C grades.

Wellbeing: Good

Most pupils feel safe and well cared for. They understand how to keep healthy, through what they eat and by undertaking physical activity. Pupils participate in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, in school and in the community, which contribute to their social and cultural development. Around half the pupils take part in '5x60' sporting activities. Most pupils believe the school deals effectively with incidents of verbal and physical bullying.

Pupils are polite and courteous to one another and to adults. Most pupils behave well in lessons and around the school. They are punctual to lessons and show a readiness to engage in their learning.

Attendance has fluctuated too much over the last three years and is just below the expected level when compared with that of similar schools.

The school council is an effective forum for representing pupils' views on a wide range of school matters. It has been influential in improving many aspects of school life, for example in discussing aspects of learning and addressing the issue of e-safety.

Pupils show a strong awareness of rights and responsibilities. They show respect and concern for others have raised considerable funds for charity. Many pupils acquire the skills to prepare for life and work outside school.

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Good

Learning experiences: Good

The school offers a broad and appropriate range of learning experiences throughout the key stages. The key stage 3 curriculum meets requirements and the well-planned transition arrangements ensure that the curriculum builds on pupils' existing knowledge and understanding. At key stage 4, the school offers a wide range of academic and vocational courses, which meet the requirements of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure. The newly-introduced courses have contributed to improvements in the level 2 threshold performance for 2011. There is an appropriate range of extra-curricular opportunities, including sporting, musical and academic activities.

Recent initiatives have helped to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills more effectively across the curriculum. Teachers plan well to develop pupils' skills, particularly in literacy and their thinking skills. The school provides suitable intervention for pupils in need of additional support in literacy and numeracy. Sixth form students have suitable opportunities to gain skills qualifications in the wider key skills but not in communication.

Provision for Welsh at key stage 3 and key stage 4 is good, with a high proportion of pupils gaining GCSE qualifications at the end of key stage 4. However, there are not enough opportunities to promote the Welsh dimension or for pupils to systematically develop their use of Welsh outside Welsh lessons.

A few subjects promote work on sustainable development well. The personal and social education programme is helping to increase pupils' awareness of global citizenship, but this is currently under-developed.

Teaching: Adequate

Many teachers plan lessons well with a clear structure and often use stimulating starter activities. Working relationships between teachers and pupils are good and expectations of pupils' behaviour are high. In many lessons, teachers provide pupils with a high level of challenge, and lessons proceed at a brisk pace. Teachers engage pupils with well-organised activities and give pupils frequent opportunities to review their learning. In these lessons, teachers regularly identify opportunities for pupils to develop and use their literacy and numeracy skills well. They use effective questioning techniques to reinforce key concepts. Many teachers deploy learning support staff well.

In the minority of lessons where teaching is less effective, teachers do not set high enough expectations or challenge all pupils enough. As a result, pupils do not make the progress that they should. Homework is not set consistently and often the tasks do not extend pupils' learning.

Teachers generally give pupils supportive and encouraging oral feedback on the standard of their work in lessons. Most teachers mark work regularly. However, the quality of marking is too inconsistent and written feedback does not always show

pupils how to improve their work. Pupils are not aware enough of their levels of achievement.

Many subject departments keep good records of pupils' progress. However, pupils' progress across all subjects is not tracked well enough in order to identify underachievement. Information about pupils' progress is not collected regularly enough at a whole-school level to enable managers to monitor pupils' progress and take appropriate action.

Parents receive helpful and informative reports on the progress of their children.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The school promotes a safe, caring environment and provides effectively for pupils' wellbeing and personal development. A wide range of learning experiences promotes pupils' moral and cultural development well. Assemblies and tutorial sessions provide appropriate opportunities for reflection and help promote pupils' spiritual development. A particular strength of the school is the way it fosters and maintains good relationships and positive behaviour.

The school uses specialist agencies appropriately in delivering the personal and social education programme, including sex and relationships education and education about substance misuse. Pupils receive suitable advice on option choices for key stage 4 and post-16 opportunities.

The form tutors help pupils effectively to manage their feelings and develop self-awareness. The school's learning coach programme is extensive and involves nearly all form tutors and a range of appropriate outside agencies in providing effective support for pupils' wellbeing. This is improving pupils' social skills and organisation and has contributed to a reduction in the number of temporary exclusions.

The school has procedures and an appropriate policy for safeguarding.

The school provides good support for pupils with additional learning needs. All teachers receive detailed information on reading ages of pupils and copies of individual education plans. Mentoring and intervention procedures are effective in identifying and meeting the needs of these pupils. Initiatives such as 'Project 180' support vulnerable learners to remain engaged in their education and to gain valuable qualifications.

Learning environment: Good

The school is a calm, friendly environment reflecting its inclusive ethos. It is keenly aware of each individual's personal and social background, and seeks to ensure that this does not adversely affect his level of achievement. The school works hard to develop mixed-gender activities with other schools and to challenge the stereotyped nature of pupils' aspirations. There is an equality of opportunity to everything the school provides. Pupils and parents are very positive in their view that oppressive behaviour is dealt with appropriately.

While the fabric of most of the buildings is in a poor condition, the school is kept clean, tidy, and well maintained. Overall, the interior accommodation meets the needs of pupils, although a very few classrooms are too small for the numbers of pupils in them. The sports hall is of a very high standard, but the on-site outdoor physical education facilities and the toilets in the upper school are poor. Displays in classrooms are very effective in creating a positive learning environment. Pupils have access to a suitable range and quality of learning resources and provision for information and communication technology equipment is particularly good.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?	Good
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Leadership: Good

Despite standards being adequate, leadership is good because the headteacher, supported by the two assistant headteachers, provides a clear and well-communicated sense of direction and has an ambitious vision for the school. This has contributed to recent improvements in standards.

The school calendar includes an appropriate and coherent range of meetings for managers and staff. As a result, all staff, including non-teaching staff, feel valued, work well together and understand their roles.

The three senior managers have well-defined roles. Each of them acts as a line manager to different subject departments. They have good knowledge and understanding of the work of their respective departments, are aware of most areas that need improvement, and are readily available for informal consultation. They provide encouragement but not always enough rigorous challenge or support on progress in other matters, for example self-evaluations, development plans, department targets, or teaching and assessment strategies.

Senior managers have ensured that there has been a strong focus in recent years on improving classroom practice and promoting literacy and numeracy, for example through encouraging professional learning communities within the school.

Middle managers generally look after their respective areas well and work hard to provide good experiences for pupils.

Governors are becoming increasingly focused in their support for the school and have a growing understanding of performance data. There is a clear committee structure, and individual governors are linked with specific areas such as child protection or special educational needs. Governors scrutinise and approve school documents such as the self-evaluation report and the development plan, but the level of challenge to the school is not yet robust enough.

The school is actively addressing national priorities such as literacy and numeracy, has responded very positively to the local authority's plans for school reorganisation, and meets the requirements of Learning Pathways 14-19.

Improving quality: Adequate

The school has detailed arrangements for self-evaluation and draws upon a wide range of first-hand evidence. There is a well-established programme of departmental reviews led by the headteacher, which focuses on lesson observations, the scrutiny of pupils' work and discussions with selected pupils. This process leads to a thorough report with detailed information and recommendations for the department to consider. Regular reviews of departments by external specialists also provide useful reports on the quality of teaching and standards achieved. Senior managers, therefore, have a secure knowledge of the school and the performance of individual departments. However, opportunities to discuss findings and recommendations from these reviews by senior and middle leaders are not frequent enough. Leaders and managers take good account of the views of pupils and parents about whole school issues. Individual departments are now beginning to seek the views of pupils on their learning to improve classroom practice.

The school improvement plan provides clear and relevant priorities for school improvement, and focuses well on improving teaching, standards and skills. However, it does not include clear enough quantitative targets, sharper strategies, or manageable timescales. There are appropriate systems for subject leaders to review their areas of responsibility. A few very good departmental improvement plans identify clear actions and goals. However, in other plans, strengths and areas for improvement are not always identified clearly enough. This makes it difficult to monitor progress effectively. A minority of department improvement plans link closely with department self-evaluation priorities. Many departments produce a thorough analysis of examination and assessment outcomes in their self-evaluation report. However, good practice in a few departments' self-evaluation and improvement planning is not shared effectively.

The school has made generally good progress in addressing recommendations from the previous report. In particular, it has made good progress in improving standards at key stage 4, developing work-related education and personal and social education and improving the quality of teaching, although there are still shortcomings in aspects of assessment.

The school is involved in several networks of professional practice both within the school and with other partners. These focus well on teaching and learning, pupils' achievement and the development of skills.

Partnership working: Good

The school works well with a wide range of partners. Partnerships with parents are strong and a wide range of organisations in the local community supports pupils well. There are well-established links with local primary and secondary schools. Good transition arrangements with partner primary schools and other agencies enable pupils to settle quickly into Year 7. Effective partnerships with local schools and colleges increase the range of courses offered for 16 to 19-year-olds. However, links at key stage 4 are limited. Quality assurance procedures are robust, ensuring consistency of practice across the consortium at post-16.

The school works well with local businesses, agencies and organisations. These links help to develop pupils' awareness of life skills and the world of work, and support more vulnerable learners to engage with education.

Resource management: Adequate

The school has a significant budget deficit dating back to before the time of the headteacher's appointment in 2004. The headteacher, with the agreement of the local authority and supported by the governing body, has managed this well, and successfully reduced a proportion of the deficit despite the challenge of falling pupil numbers. In the face of the need to be very prudent in spending, the school has maintained adequate staffing, ensured good overall provision of learning resources and maintained the buildings in satisfactory condition. A recent detailed audit by the local authority concluded that systems are appropriate and meet requirements.

Despite this good financial management, the school provides adequate value for money because standards are judged to be adequate.

Appendix 1

Commentary on performance data

In key stage 3, performance in the core subject indicator has improved over the last three years. In 2011, when compared with the performance of co-educational schools with a similar percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals, the core subject indicator was above average. Performance at level 5 and above in English, mathematics and science has fluctuated from year to year. In 2011, science performance was in the bottom half of that for similar schools, while English and mathematics performance was in the bottom quarter of that for similar schools. Achievement of level 6, for all core subjects, was below family and Wales averages; however, at level 7 performance in English was above the family average. Pupils' progress from the previous key stage is adequate.

In key stage 4, achievement of the level 2 threshold has improved over the last three years, including a significant improvement of about 11 percentage points in 2011. This places the school in the top half of similar schools in terms of the free-school-meals benchmarks. However, performance in the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics and the core subject indicator remains in the lower half of that for similar schools, despite a slight improvement in 2011. The gap between these two indicators has widened in 2011. Achievement of the level 1 threshold (equivalent to five GCSEs at grade D to G) and wider points score (comprising all qualifications approved for use in Wales at the age of 16) has shown an improving trend over three years. Performance at the level 1 threshold and wider points score has been in the second quarter in comparison with the benchmarks for schools with a similar percentage of free school meals. However, in 2011, results showed that performance in both indicators declined to the bottom quarter of that for similar schools.

Over the last three years, no pupil has left the school without a qualification. This is much better than family and Wales averages. However, when compared with their performance in previous key stages, learners in key stage 4 do not make enough progress in many indicators.

In key stage 3, when comparing boys' performance in the school with that of boys in the family of schools, boys in the school attain higher standards in English and science. In mathematics, performance is just below the average for boys in the family of schools. In 2011, at key stage 4, performance in most indicators was just above the average for boys in the family of schools but below all-Wales averages for boys. Performance in science in 2011 at level 2 was significantly higher than both family and all-Wales averages for boys. However, for the level 1 threshold and the capped points score (comprising the best eight results from all qualifications approved for use in Wales at the age of 16), performance was below family and all-Wales averages for boys.

Pupils receiving free school meals perform less well than other pupils at key stage 3 and key stage 4. The gap between them has increased at key stage 4 in all indicators and for many indicators this gap is larger than that of the family or Wales. Pupils with special educational needs achieve in line with expectations.

At post-16, the percentage of students gaining the level 3 threshold (equivalent to two A levels at grade A* to E) has improved over the past three years, although it is still below the Wales average. Attainment of the average wider points score (comprising all qualifications approved for use in Wales at the age of 18) has also improved over the last three years, but dipped in 2011 and remains below the Wales average.

At 16, 94% of leavers went onto full-time further education and training, which is well above the local authority and Wales averages.

In key stage 3 assessments, standards of oracy, reading and writing have fluctuated from year to year, and improved in 2011. Standards in writing at level 5 and above are higher than the family average but below the Wales average. However, performance in reading and oracy at level 5 is below family and Wales averages.

Appendix 2

Stakeholder satisfaction report

Responses to learner questionnaires

Estyn received responses from 133 learners, selected at random from across the age range.

Most learners state that they feel safe in school and indicate that they have someone to turn to if they have any concerns. Most learners believe that the school deals well with bullying. A majority of learners comment that pupils behave well and that they can get on with their work.

Many learners state that the school teaches them to be healthy and most indicate that there are plenty of opportunities to get regular exercise.

Many learners feel the school takes account of their views. Most learners consider that they are doing well. Nearly all say that staff help them to learn and make progress, and encourage them to take responsibility. Most believe that they have enough books and equipment. Many learners say that homework helps them to understand and improve their work. In the sixth form, many learners say that they received good advice when choosing their courses in contrast to much lower proportions on this issue in other secondary schools. Most feel well prepared for further education or employment.

Most learners confirm that the school helps them to understand and respect people from other backgrounds, and many say that staff treat them fairly and with respect.

Responses to parent questionnaires

Estyn received 32 responses to the parent questionnaire. Most parents gave a positive or very positive response to the questions.

Nearly all parents are satisfied with the school. Most state that it is well run and that their children are safe and like the school. Most parents indicate that their children were helped to settle in well when they started school. Nearly all consider that there is a good range of extra-curricular activities and that their children are encouraged to be healthy. Many parents feel very comfortable about approaching the school to discuss matters about their child's education and wellbeing.

Most parents feel well informed about their children's progress and believe that staff treat all children fairly and with respect. Many parents believe that pupils behave well in the school. The proportion believing that the pupils behave well in school is lower than the proportion of parents saying this in other secondary schools.

Nearly all parents believe that their children are making good progress and consider staff expectations to be good. They also indicate that teaching is good. Most parents feel that staff support their children well and many believe that homework reinforces learning. Most parents feel that their children are well prepared for moving on to the next school or college.

Appendix 3

The inspection team

Jackie Gapper	Reporting Inspector
Steffan James	Team Inspector
Carol Beer	Team Inspector
Dylan Gwyer-Roberts	Team Inspector
Edward Tipper	Lay Inspector
Colin James	Peer Inspector
Ian Machin	School Nominee

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.uk)

Under the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, the school must provide copies of the report to all parents of the school. Where a pupil is subject to placement by a local authority, a copy of the report should be sent by the school to each relevant authority.

Year groups and key stages

Schools use a common system of numbering year groups from the start of compulsory schooling to 18 years of age. This system emphasises the importance of continuity and eases communication among schools, governing bodies, parents and LEAs.

The term 'Reception' (R) refers to the year group of pupils in a primary school who reach the age of five during the academic year. Year 1 refers to the year group of pupils who reach the age of six during the academic year and so on. Year 13 is the year group of students who reach the age of 18 during the academic year.

Primary phase:

Year	R	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Ages	4-5	5-6	6-7	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11

Secondary phase:

Year	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Y12	Y13
Ages	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18

The four key stages cover the following year groups:

Key stage 1	Year 1 and Year 2
Key stage 2	Year 3 to Year 6
Key stage 3	Year 7 to Year 9
Key stage 4	Year 10 and Year 11