

A report on

Ysgol Maesydderwen

**Tudor St
Ystradgynlais
SA9 1AP**

Date of inspection: January 2025

by

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

About Ysgol Maesydderwen

Name of provider	Ysgol Maesydderwen
Local authority	Powys County Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	542
Pupils of statutory school age	477
Number in sixth form	65
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in Secondary is 21.1%)	23.1%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Secondary is 11.2%)	12.8%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	7.3%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	1.3%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2018
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	09/10/2017
Start date of inspection	27/01/2025

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website:
mylocalschool.gov.wales

- a.** The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

Summary

Ysgol Maesydderwen provides a supportive environment where pupils benefit from positive relationships with staff. As a result, many pupils feel safe in school and believe that the school will deal well with any instances of bullying. The majority of teachers have strong subject knowledge and offer pupils clear explanations, helping them to develop their understanding. In these lessons, pupils engage well in their learning, behave positively, and participate in discussions with confidence. However, in a minority of cases, the quality of teaching is poor and as a result, a minority of pupils make limited progress.

In the minority of lessons, teachers' expectations are too low, and pupils are not offered enough challenge. Tasks do not support deeper learning, and teachers do not always use questioning effectively to develop pupils' thinking. Written feedback is often too broad, meaning pupils are unsure how to improve their work. In addition, opportunities for extended writing and numeracy development across the curriculum are limited. In the sixth form, most pupils contribute well in lessons and feel well-prepared for their next steps in education or employment.

The school offers a broad curriculum with a good balance of general and vocational subjects. Pupils receive helpful guidance when choosing courses, and recent curriculum adaptations aim to support those at risk of underachievement. Pupils in the 'Haven' specialist teaching facility (STF) thrive in a nurturing environment with experienced staff who tailor the curriculum to their needs. The school also provides valuable extra-curricular activities, that help pupils develop their skills and interests beyond the classroom.

The school places high importance on pupils' well-being. Most feel safe at school and know where to seek support if needed. The school's behaviour policy is beginning to have a positive impact, and reward systems help to encourage good attitudes to learning. Attendance initiatives are showing early signs of impact, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals, though overall attendance remains very low and well below pre-pandemic levels.

In general, senior leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the school's work, but subject leaders' tend to be too generous. Overall, leadership has not had a strong enough impact on improving crucial aspects of the school's work, particularly in improving the quality of teaching and its impact on pupil progress or the progressive development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills.

Recommendations

We have made four recommendations to help the school continue to improve:

- R1 Improve the quality of teaching to raise expectations and provide appropriate challenge for all pupils, including those with additional learning needs
- R2 Strengthen leadership to ensure leaders at all levels evaluate their work accurately and robustly, and secure the improvements required
- R3 Improve cross-curricular planning to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills progressively
- R4 Improve attendance

What happens next

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that special measures are required in relation to this school. The school will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the school's progress usually every four to six months.

Main findings

A majority of pupils, including those with additional learning needs, make at least adequate progress in their learning. They recall prior knowledge appropriately, and more able pupils apply their understanding successfully in new contexts. However, in a significant minority of cases, they make only limited progress, particularly in developing a deeper understanding of key concepts.

In the majority of lessons, where pupils make adequate or better progress, teachers have secure subject knowledge and model language well using subject-specific terminology. They provide clear explanations and use appropriate praise to reinforce pupils' understanding. Many teachers establish effective classroom routines, ensuring that pupils settle quickly and engage with their learning. The majority plan a range of sequential tasks that help pupils build on prior knowledge and develop new skills. In a majority of lessons, teachers structure activities well and provide helpful resources. They also monitor progress effectively and offer timely verbal feedback to individuals and small groups.

The majority of teachers ask appropriate questions to assess pupils' recall and link learning to prior knowledge. They use open-ended questions appropriately to encourage pupils to think for themselves and employ simple techniques to involve all pupils in discussion.

In the few lessons where pupils make stronger progress, teachers set high expectations and provide suitably challenging tasks. They use assessment information to adapt their teaching and ensure that learning builds well on pupils' prior knowledge. These teachers use questioning skilfully, allowing pupils time to think and respond thoughtfully. They ask follow-up questions to probe understanding and address misconceptions effectively. In these lessons, activities sustain pupils' interest and encourage them to develop their thinking and reasoning skills.

In a minority of lessons, teaching is not effective enough and as a result pupils make limited progress. In these instances, expectations are too low, and tasks lack sufficient challenge. Teachers do not always consider the desired learning outcomes carefully enough. They plan activities that keep pupils occupied but do not develop their knowledge and understanding effectively. At times, the pace of learning is inappropriate, often with overly structured tasks that limit opportunities for pupils to think and work independently. In these lessons, teachers do not use assessment well enough to inform their teaching, and they provide only simplistic tasks to develop literacy or numeracy skills. Their questioning does not challenge pupils to develop their answers fully. Classroom management is inconsistent, and a few teachers do not challenge passivity or ensure that all pupils are actively engaged in their work.

In a few cases, teachers provide useful written feedback. This helps pupils understand what they have done well and what they need to improve. However, in many instances, comments are too broad or lack clarity, making it difficult for pupils to know how to improve. There is often little follow-up to check whether pupils act on feedback, leading to repeated errors in their work. Overall, written feedback does not support pupils to develop the technical accuracy of their writing well enough.

Many pupils engage well with their learning, particularly when tasks are interesting and well-structured. They pay attention in lessons, follow teachers' instructions, and listen respectfully to their peers. However, around a half of pupils do not take enough pride in their work, leading to untidy presentation and incomplete tasks. In a few cases, pupils require frequent encouragement from teachers to stay on task.

In the sixth form, most pupils have positive attitudes towards their learning. They contribute well during lessons, demonstrate a sound understanding of their subjects, and recall prior knowledge effectively. They respond well to teachers' questions, with a few

articulating their ideas particularly well. Most pupils in the sixth form feel well-prepared for their next steps in education or employment.

Many pupils listen attentively to each other and their teachers. Most respond appropriately to teachers' questions and the majority do so confidently and clearly. However, many pupils' oral responses are brief due to shortcomings in teachers' questions, which often do not develop pupils' thinking or encourage extended answers. A few pupils speak articulately using relevant subject-specific terminology and a broad vocabulary. The majority engage well in group discussions, collaborating effectively in tasks like debating moral statements in their religious studies lessons. However, a few pupils do not listen well enough to instructions and explanations, affecting their ability to understand and complete tasks. A minority are hesitant to collaborate or fail to make meaningful use of group work opportunities.

Many pupils locate information accurately in suitably challenging texts in many subjects through scanning and skimming techniques, and the majority identify relevant evidence to support their ideas, such as when considering the theme of betrayal in 'Macbeth'. A few pupils demonstrate advanced reading skills well when comparing or interpreting texts. However, opportunities to develop these advanced reading skills are limited, as most tasks only focus on locating facts or demonstrating basic comprehension.

Many pupils produce suitable but brief written assignments, and the majority write with reasonable accuracy and structure. A few produce detailed work that demonstrates a good awareness of purpose and audience, such as when explaining scientific concepts or analysing how the author depicts homelessness in the novel 'Stone Cold'. However, a minority of pupils make regular basic errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. There are too few opportunities across the curriculum for extended writing. In addition, the work of pupils who make use of these opportunities is often formulaic. In general, pupils' writing is characterised by a narrow range of basic vocabulary.

Many pupils develop their Welsh language oracy skills appropriately. A majority pronounce Welsh words clearly and correctly and respond suitably in class discussions. Most pupils have opportunities to speak Welsh in pairs or whole-class settings. However, many lack confidence when communicating in the language. The majority of pupils use appropriate retrieval strategies effectively to locate facts in simple texts in order to answer basic questions. Most pupils can write basic sentences in Welsh independently, but their ability to construct more complex responses is underdeveloped. The majority of pupils rely too heavily on vocabulary lists and structured sentence patterns rather than developing independent speaking and writing skills. Opportunities for pupils to practise Welsh language skills outside of Welsh lessons are limited.

A majority of pupils have a suitable understanding of basic number and geometry concepts. They apply the four rules of number accurately and work confidently with fractions, percentages, and decimals. For example, they successfully calculate the amount of income tax an employee needs to pay. A few pupils demonstrate strong numeracy skills, using direct and inverse proportion effectively in mathematics and calculating moments successfully in physics. A minority of pupils have weak number skills, which hinders their ability to solve problems in real-life contexts.

Pupils' ability to analyse data varies considerably. In the most successful instances, pupils select appropriate graph types and use them effectively to draw sensible conclusions. Too often, however, graphing skills are weak, and pupils struggle to analyse data for relationships, trends or anomalies. Overall, provision for numeracy is underdeveloped across the curriculum. Although there are a few valuable opportunities in mathematics and other relevant subjects, numeracy tasks often lack sufficient challenge.

The school provides a suitable range of valuable opportunities for pupils to develop their digital skills. Leaders ensure that pupils experience a variety of software applications, including those used for research, data analysis, and presentation. There are valuable opportunities for pupils to develop their computational thinking. For example, in geography, they use database software to store and interrogate climate change data. As a result, pupils make appropriate progress in developing their digital skills.

Pupils in the specialist teaching facility (STF), 'Haven', benefit from access to experienced and qualified teaching staff who provide a nurturing environment. Staff adapt the curriculum well to meet their varied needs. As a result, nearly all pupils engage fully with their learning and make good progress from their individual starting points.

The school works closely with local primary schools to plan its Curriculum for Wales and develop a shared understanding of progression. However, this work has had limited impact on pupils' learning experiences.

The curriculum at Key Stage 4 and the sixth form offers a suitable range of general and vocational subjects. Pupils and parents receive helpful information about course content and staff provide pupils with individual guidance throughout the options process. Powys schools as part of the Chweched Powys 6 provision. Most recently, the school has made adaptations to the curriculum to meet the needs of a small number of pupils at risk of disaffection, although this provision is at an early stage of implementation.

Pupils benefit from a wide range of well-attended extra-curricular activities, such as the 'Hot Potato' debating group and a creative writing club. The school actively promotes participation in these activities, for example through a club taster day.

The curriculum suitably supports the spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness of many pupils. A broad range of enrichment activities contributes positively to pupils' personal and social development. These include team-building sessions to foster a sense of belonging and community, as well as informative events such as road safety talks for sixth form pupils. The school supports pupils' understanding of the characteristics of healthy relationships and lifestyles appropriately and uses well-being data and pupil surveys to design an appropriate programme of activities and lessons. However, there are insufficient opportunities for pupils to learn about the history and experiences of Black, Asian and Ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ people.

The school promotes Welsh heritage and culture suitably through enrichment opportunities such as Dydd Santes Dwynwen and the annual Eisteddfod. Many pupils achieve an appropriate qualification in Welsh.

Staff at Ysgol Maes y Dderwen strive to create an environment that embodies its ethos of 'working together, achieving more'. The school is a caring and welcoming community, where staff know pupils well. There is a strong emphasis on nurturing pupils' well-being so that many pupils feel safe at school and are aware of who to turn to for support. Most pupils say they do not feel bullied in school. However, when incidents of bullying do occur, many pupils feel that the school deals with them effectively. Partnerships with external agencies provide valuable support, ensuring timely and sensitive responses to individual needs.

The school has a well-planned transition process that helps pupils to feel confident when moving to the school. These valuable activities include numerous beneficial transition days and an open evening for parents and pupils.

The school has recently reviewed and relaunched its expectations for behaviour and attitudes to learning through the 'Positive Behaviour for Learning' (PB4L) policy. Although it is in its early stages, this policy is beginning to have a positive impact on pupils' behaviour in lessons. The introduction of the reward shop and celebration assemblies as part of the new rewards system has also successfully contributed to improving pupil engagement and attendance. However, pupils feel that staff are not always consistent when using this system.

The school provides clear and supportive advice to pupils, which includes interviews with school leaders and the careers officer. Many pupils feel that this guidance helps them make informed decisions about their next steps.

Pupils enjoy a wide variety of extra-curricular activities that support their interests. This includes a broad range of enrichment activities such as 3D printing club and sporting clubs. Pupils also benefit from the opportunity to participate in local and overseas trips.

The school also provides an extensive array of opportunities for pupils to take on worthwhile leadership roles, including the '6th form Head Team', peer mentors and sports ambassadors.

Leaders listen to and seek the views of pupils to participate in decision making. For example, the school council played a significant role in developing the new rewards system. However, not all pupils are fully aware of the school council's work.

This year, the school has strengthened its campaign to promote good attendance. Staff work with pupils and their families to identify the causes of poor attendance and offer tailored support to help pupils to return to school and overcome these barriers. This is beginning to impact on the attendance of individual pupils as well as those eligible for free school meals. Internal unverified data for this academic year to date indicates that attendance is higher than it was for the same period last year, although it remains too low and is substantially below the pre-pandemic level. The school's data also suggests that the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals has continued to increase, although it remains below the national average for this group of pupils.

The school has robust safeguarding procedures that are regularly reviewed and updated. All staff receive relevant training at the appropriate level and are secure in their understanding of how to refer any concerns that may arise. The school works closely with local authorities and outside agencies to support the well-being of pupils and ensure their safety. The school site is secure and entry for visitors is well managed. As a result, the school has a strong safeguarding culture.

The school has strengthened its systems and processes appropriately to support pupils with ALN and is making suitable progress in meeting the requirements of the Additional Learning Needs and Tribunal (Wales) Act. The ALN team build positive relationships with pupils and understand their individual needs well. They have developed suitable interventions to help pupils develop their communication, literacy and numeracy skills. The 'Nurture' provision offers a calm, supportive environment for vulnerable pupils. Staff provide high quality care to help these pupils develop their confidence and readiness to learn and is highly valued by the pupils.

In general, one-page profiles and individual development plans (IDPs) for pupils with ALN, including those in the STF, provide useful information about pupils' needs and identify suitable individual targets. However, IDPs are not always thorough or detailed enough. In addition, the majority of teachers do not always use the available information well enough when planning lessons for pupils with ALN.

The headteacher has a clear vision to strive to ensure that 'learners leave prepared', which focuses on helping pupils to become well-rounded young people who are resilient, aspirational, independent thinkers. This vision is communicated regularly to staff.

Senior leadership roles are clearly defined, equitable and balanced and generally understood by staff. Very recently, they have revised their improvement strategies and adopted a more focused approach. This is because, in the past, they have sometimes put in place too many initiatives simultaneously which has reduced their impact. For example, leaders have refined their approach to professional learning to focus more closely on pupil engagement and attitudes to learning, and this has led to improvements in behaviour and a notable reduction in fixed-term exclusions. In addition, leaders have been successful in developing a strong safeguarding culture.

Line management arrangements provide leaders with a generally helpful balance of support and challenge. However, there is insufficient consistency in how robustly leaders are held to account. Middle leaders have a generally suitable understanding of their role, although there is considerable variation in how effectively they drive improvement, especially with regard to the quality of teaching and provision to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills where appropriate.

Senior leaders use a suitable range of first-hand evidence for self-evaluation. Pastoral leaders use a range of data well to monitor various aspects of pupils' well-being and put appropriate support in place. At subject level, however, senior and middle leaders are often too generous in their evaluations of teaching, pupil progress and skills provision. This makes it difficult for them to identify specific areas for improvement precisely enough. Recently, the school has taken suitable steps to strengthen subject leaders' contribution to self-evaluation processes, but this is at an early stage of development and this aspect of their role remains underdeveloped.

Whole-school improvement planning focuses suitably on the areas for improvement identified through self-evaluation activities. In general, leaders plan a suitable range of actions to address these aspects, although they do not always set precise enough success criteria to enable them to track progress rigorously. Middle leaders are provided with a helpful framework to ensure that their improvement plans align closely with whole-school priorities. Although senior leaders have recently taken appropriate steps to develop subject leaders' autonomy in setting improvement priorities, their planning is often too generic and does not address the specific needs of their subject areas precisely enough.

The school provides beneficial opportunities for staff to share good practice, for example through weekly briefings. 'Professional growth plans' help staff to engage purposefully with action research to develop their teaching and leadership. However, leaders do not evaluate the impact of these strategies on teaching and pupil progress thoroughly enough.

The school has put in place a wide range of well-understood strategies to reduce the effects of poverty. This includes supporting pupils from low-income households with school uniform, equipment and the cost of extra-curricular activities. In addition, staff are provided with helpful information regarding strategies to best meet these pupils' needs. Leaders monitor these pupils' engagement and progress closely. This is starting to have a positive impact, for example on the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals. However, the school has not effectively addressed other national priorities, such as the development of literacy, numeracy skills, the promotion of the Welsh language, and improving overall rates of attendance.

Governors are committed supporters of the school who provide senior leaders with generally appropriate challenge. The headteacher, supported by the governing body, monitors expenditure closely to ensure that it is targeted on improvement priorities. However, the school currently has a deficit budget.

Despite relatively recent refinements to strengthen leadership, overall, leaders have not had sufficient impact on important aspects of the school's work. In particular the overall quality of teaching, pupil progress and the development of their literacy and numeracy skills.

Additional information

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils do not give any cause for concern.

The school's arrangements for site management do not give any cause for concern.

The school has appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors, senior and middle leaders (where appropriate) and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee, where appropriate
- visit a broad sample of lessons, including learning support groups and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. ‘*most pupils...*’ or ‘*very few pupils...*’. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (<http://www.estyn.gov.wales/>)

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

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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