



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru  
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

**A report on**

**Abertillery Learning Community  
Alma Street  
Abertillery  
Blaenau Gwent  
NP13 1YL**

**Date of inspection: February 2018**

**by**

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

## About Abertillery Learning Community

Abertillery Learning Community is an English-medium 3 to 16 all-age school, maintained by Blaenau Gwent local authority. There are currently 1,655 pupils on roll with 611 in the secondary department and 1,044 pupils over four separate sites in the primary department. The school opened in September 2016 after the amalgamation of Abertillery Comprehensive School, Abertillery, Bryngwyn, Roseheyworth and Queen Street primary schools.

The school serves communities in and around the town of Abertillery. Over 30% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is higher than the national average of 17% for secondary schools and 19% for primary schools. About 44% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales.

Very few pupils receive support to learn English as an additional language or come from a minority ethnic background. The school hosts two resource bases, one at the secondary site and one at a primary site, for around 50 pupils with complex educational needs. Currently, about 2.7% of pupils have statements of special educational needs, which is higher than the national average. Less than 1% of pupils speak Welsh fluently.

The current principal took up post in September 2017, but has worked at the school since 2016 as a vice principal and acting principal. The senior leadership consists of three teams. The executive leadership team comprises of the principal, vice principal and business manager. The community leadership team includes the head of each campus. The extended leadership team includes the deputy heads of campus of the primary campuses, the secondary assistant heads of campus and the finance and business team leader.

The school is currently a pioneer school and is working with the Welsh Government and other schools to proceed with developments relating to the curriculum.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website at the link below.  
<http://mylocalschool.wales.gov.uk/Schools/SchoolSearch?lang=en>

## Summary

Abertillery Learning Community has a supportive and inclusive ethos where many pupils feel part of a caring and safe community. However, strengths seen in the primary phase of the school are often not seen in the secondary phase.

Nearly all pupils in the primary phase behave well and are courteous to adults and each other. Most pupils make strong progress as they move through the primary phase, but pupils' progress in the secondary phase is weaker.

In general, teaching and assessment are effective in the primary phase but there is too much variation in the quality of teaching in the secondary phase. Staff in the primary phase have created an innovative and well-structured curriculum that includes interesting and diverse thematic work. However, the curriculum at key stage 3 is not planned well enough to enable pupils to build successfully on prior learning and the current curriculum at key stage 4 offers too limited a range of options.

The quality and impact of leadership vary too much and overall leadership has not had enough impact on improving provision and standards in the secondary phase. In the primary phase, senior and middle leaders are effective but significant weaknesses in the leadership of the secondary phase have not enabled the school to self-evaluate or plan for improvement well enough. Consequently, this has not led to sufficient improvement on important aspects of the school's work, in particular pupil outcomes at key stage 4 and the quality of teaching.

<b>Inspection area</b>	<b>Judgement</b>
<b>Standards</b>	<b>Adequate and needs improvement</b>
<b>Wellbeing and attitudes to learning</b>	<b>Adequate and needs improvement</b>
<b>Teaching and learning experiences</b>	<b>Adequate and needs improvement</b>
<b>Care, support and guidance</b>	<b>Adequate and needs improvement</b>
<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement</b>

## **Recommendations**

- R1 Improve standards, in particular outcomes at the end of key stage 4
- R2 Improve standards of behaviour in the secondary phase
- R3 Improve the quality of teaching
- R4 Improve planning for progression of skills, including the Welsh language, and the breadth of the secondary phase curriculum
- R5 Improve the quality and impact of leadership at all levels, including in self-evaluation and planning for improvement
- R6 Provide robust financial management to address the deficit budget

## **What happens next**

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school is in need of significant improvement. The school will draw up an action plan that shows how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the school's progress about 12 months after the publication of this report.

## Main findings

### **Standards: Adequate and needs improvement**

When they start school, a minority of pupils have communication, mathematical and personal skills that are below those expected for their age. Most pupils make strong progress as they move through the primary phase.

In the secondary phase, many pupils recall previous learning suitably and they make sound progress in the majority of lessons. However, in a minority of lessons where expectations are not high enough, secondary pupils complete little work and make limited progress in their skills and subject knowledge.

From an early age, most pupils develop strong speaking and listening skills. By the end of the foundation phase, they speak confidently and clearly, for example when explaining to their peers how to keep themselves safe online. In key stage 2, most pupils provide relevant examples to support their views, for instance when debating whether animals should be kept in zoos. They convey information well in more formal situations when giving presentations and they engage an audience effectively. Across the school, many pupils share their ideas successfully, listening respectfully to each other and adults. However, a few pupils in the secondary phase do not engage in discussions well enough. They struggle to express their ideas coherently and they have limited vocabulary to draw upon. As a result, their responses often lack appropriate detail and clarity.

During their time in the primary phase, most pupils develop sound reading skills. They read with fluency, expression, understanding and enjoyment. By Year 6, many pupils develop suitable higher-order reading skills and they apply these effectively in their work in other subjects, for example when researching information to write a non-chronological report. Across the school, many pupils infer meaning from texts suitably and they identify quotations to support their points competently. In the secondary phase, a few key stage 4 pupils analyse texts perceptively, for example when examining the theme of ambition in Macbeth. A minority of pupils categorise sources appropriately and they use these to reach reasoned conclusions, for instance when considering the political, economic and social effects of anti-semitism. However, a minority of pupils do not gather information from texts well enough and they draw superficial conclusions from their reading.

In the primary phase, many pupils write effectively for a wide range of purposes and audiences, such as diaries, instructions, letters, discussion texts and newspaper reports. Many pupils' handwriting is neat and legible and they present their work with a sense of pride. More able pupils demonstrate good stamina for writing, producing high-quality extended narratives with adventurous vocabulary that engages the reader. In the secondary phase, very few pupils build upon these strong foundations successfully, to produce fluent, sophisticated and thoughtful writing. For example, in religious education, a few more able pupils write a letter, providing reasons and examples why some people find it hard to believe in God. Across the school, a majority of pupils structure their writing appropriately in paragraphs. In general, they spell accurately and they use a suitable range of punctuation correctly. However, a minority of secondary pupils do not write well enough in a range of genres. They

make poor language choices and they use a limited range of sentence structures in their writing. Consequently, their writing lacks control and an appropriate tone.

In the primary phase, most pupils achieve well in mathematics. Foundation phase pupils develop secure understanding of basic number, shape and measuring skills. For example, they add and subtract numbers in the context of money, and measure successfully the distance an object travels from a catapult. By Year 6, most pupils use a good range of calculation methods to solve multi-step problems and they apply these skills competently in their work across the curriculum. In general, many pupils demonstrate accuracy in selecting and plotting graphs to display data appropriately and they are able to interpret this data purposefully. Many pupils have a firm grasp of general rules to simplify algebraic fractions. However, too often, pupils in the secondary phase do not apply their numeracy skills in their work in subjects other than mathematics effectively. A minority of pupils have weak basic number skills and this limits their progress. Early in the foundation phase, many pupils make valuable progress in developing sound oral Welsh skills, which they use confidently in their role-play activities. They read Welsh texts with appropriate fluency and pronunciation, and they write suitable short pieces, such as fact-files of famous Welsh people. However, very few pupils of all ages speak Welsh in less formal situations around the school. In particular, most pupils in the secondary phase lack the confidence and ability to speak and write in Welsh. In key stage 4, a minority of pupils sit a GCSE examination in Welsh, though only a few achieve a level 2 qualification.

Many pupils in the primary phase develop useful skills in information and communication and technology (ICT). They create successfully multimedia presentations and video blogs, for example about how to make a healthy snack. However, their skills in interrogating and creating databases and spreadsheets are limited. Secondary pupils' use of ICT in subjects across the curriculum is weak. Their skills do not build progressively upon their previous learning.

Many pupils develop their creative skills beneficially in the primary phase, for example when making birds' nests out of natural materials in the foundation phase and when producing clothes from used and discarded objects for a 'trashion' show in key stage 2. A few secondary pupils demonstrate creativity well, for instance in making a short film for primary pupils to help them stay safe.

In key stage 2, many pupils develop their thinking skills effectively. For example, in a science topic on the human body, more able pupils skillfully analyse forensic information from a crime scene. They deduce the probable age and height of a victim from its skeleton and identify the possible cause of death. However, most pupils' thinking skills in the secondary phase are underdeveloped.

Performance in the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics and the capped points score in 2017 is well below the average for similar schools. Very few pupils gain five GCSE or equivalent grades at A\*-A and performance in this indicator is lower than that in similar schools. In 2017, pupils made little progress in these indicators from the end of key stage 2 to key stage 4.

At the end of key stage 4, the performance of boys in nearly all indicators is below the average for boys in similar schools. Girls' performance has improved in 2017 but

remains below the average for girls in similar schools in many indicators. The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals in 2017 is below the average for the same group of pupils in similar schools in all indicators.

Pupils with additional learning needs make good progress towards their targets in the primary phase. However, pupils with additional needs do not make enough progress by the end of key stage 4.

At the end of Year 11, most pupils remain in full-time education or training.

### **Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Adequate and needs improvement**

Most primary and the majority of secondary pupils are eager to learn and concentrate well on their learning. Nearly all primary pupils are enthusiastic and happy, and they enjoy coming to school. These pupils are confident, resilient and independent learners and have a clear understanding of what to do when they find work difficult. They work well in pairs and small groups and persevere successfully to complete their tasks on time, for example when identifying features of a newspaper report

The majority of secondary pupils are confident learners, although a minority are too dependent on teacher guidance and have not developed as independent learners well enough. Many key stage 3 pupils work well with learning partners and show resilience, for example, in physical education when persevering to complete circuit training activities.

Most primary pupils and many secondary pupils feel safe at school. Nearly all primary pupils and majority of secondary pupils behave well and are courteous to each other and adults. This is a notable strength across the primary phase. Most primary pupils and many secondary pupils are courteous towards peers and adults, and often hold doors for each other. These pupils respect property in the class and during playtime. Many pupils have a caring attitude towards others and the way that primary phase pupils support each other is a particular strength. For example, playground buddies support pupils' play at lunchtimes this helps to develop good behaviour during these periods. Pupils' understanding of the need to be safe online is developing well across the whole school. However, not all pupils in the secondary phase build upon the firm foundation of good behaviour in the primary phase. As a result, the unacceptable behaviour of a few pupils in lessons impacts negatively on the learning of others. Furthermore, the poor behaviour of a few pupils around the secondary campus has a detrimental effect on other pupils' wellbeing.

Pupils have a strong influence on the life and work of the school in the primary phase. For example, one campus council designed and introduced a zoning project for the school yards during lunch and break time to encourage good behaviour. Most representatives speak confidently about their role and explain the reasons for their decisions that affect school life. Pupil voice is at an early stage of development in the secondary phase.

Many pupils are aware of the importance of healthy eating and have a good understanding of how to stay healthy. Across the campuses, many pupils develop positive attitudes to regular exercise through the wide range of sporting activities on offer. For example, primary pupils benefit from a 'daily mile' exercise and around a half of pupils on the secondary campus take part in a wide range of sporting activities during lunchtime or after school, such as free running and freestyle dance.

Pupils develop a good sense of the importance of taking care of their world through environmental projects such as litter clearing and working with the community and a local business to develop the school garden. Pupils of all ages are involved in charitable work and raise money for local and national causes. Pupils develop a good understanding of how to contribute to their local community. They participate in a community event jointly arranged by the town council and the school, which involves art, music and dance. This helps to develop well their understanding of multicultural diversity.

### **Teaching and learning experiences: Adequate and needs improvement**

Overall, the quality of teaching is adequate and needs improvement. In general, teaching and assessment are effective in the primary phase but there is too much variation in the quality of teaching in the secondary phase.

Many teachers have strong subject knowledge and establish constructive working relationships with pupils.

The majority of teachers create an engaging and productive learning environment. They plan a suitable range of carefully sequenced tasks and use resources effectively to engage pupils. In the foundation phase, teachers ensure a good balance of adult-led and free play activities. This develops pupils' independent learning skills successfully. Enrichment trips provide a useful stimulus for learning experiences. For example, visits to castles lead to building activities using blocks and the use of 'real-life' materials such as wood, mud and sand. The majority of teachers plan effectively to meet the needs of individual pupils suitably. For example, teachers challenge more able Year 6 pupils well to consider how authors use language to create effects. In a few instances, teachers use questioning effectively to challenge pupils' thinking and deepen their understanding. For example, in the foundation phase, the teacher challenges pupils to predict which object will travel the furthest and why.

In a minority of cases, particularly in the secondary phase, teachers' expectations of what pupils can do are too low. They do not provide pupils with a suitable degree of challenge and do not help pupils to develop their skills and understanding sufficiently. In these lessons, explanations and demonstrations are unclear and the pace of learning is too slow. A minority of teachers do not develop pupils' independence and resilience in their learning well enough. As a result, pupils in these lessons do not make enough progress. In a minority of lessons at key stage 3 and key stage 4, teachers do not manage the behaviour of a few pupils well enough.

The majority of teachers monitor pupils' progress carefully. They provide helpful and constructive verbal feedback to pupils to clarify and reinforce key concepts. For example, in the primary phase, teachers use strategies such as talking partners to involve all pupils in learning and to assess progress and understanding.

The majority of teachers generally provide useful written feedback that identifies clearly how pupils can improve their work. However, they do not monitor closely enough how well pupils have improved their work in response to the feedback. In a minority of cases, teachers' assessment does not strike an appropriate balance between improving subject knowledge and skills.

Staff in the primary phase have created an innovative and well-structured curriculum that includes interesting and diverse thematic work. They take suitable account of pupils' suggestions about how and what they would like to learn. As a result, lessons include a range of stimulating learning experiences. Topics begin with an immersion day, for example, where pupils learn about the major food groups in the theme 'Food glorious food' and how these fit into a healthy diet. This has resulted in engaged and ambitious primary learners. Experiences in the indoors and outdoors, for example practical building activities in construction areas and role play in the grocery shop, develop pupils' oracy skills effectively.

The curriculum at key stage 3 is not planned well enough to enable pupils to build on prior learning successfully. The current curriculum at key stage 4 offers too limited a range of options. For instance, there are too few vocational courses to ensure that all pupils have a wide enough choice at key stage 4. The school supports vulnerable pupils well in the learning resource bases and through the 'Engage' programme.

There are valuable opportunities for pupils across the primary phase to develop and apply their literacy and numeracy skills. This provision includes skills challenges that successfully encourage independent and collaborative learning. For example, pupils collaborate well to plan a 'World Buffet' when learning about international food as part of the 'Scrumdiddlyumptious' topic.

Strategies to support the progressive development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across the key stage 3 curriculum are not sufficiently well organised or co-ordinated. As a result, pupils do not have a suitable range of meaningful opportunities to develop and apply these skills across the curriculum. In particular, opportunities for pupils to develop their numeracy skills at key stage 3 are inconsistent in terms of quality, challenge and relevance. Planning for the development of ICT skills across the curriculum throughout the school is at a very early stage.

Provision for Welsh language in the primary phase enables pupils to make suitable progress. Skilful planning of learning activities enhances pupils' understanding of their local heritage and Welsh culture. For example, the 'Gwlad Gwlad' topic gives pupils valuable opportunities to learn about the local history of the Six Bells Colliery. However, the school does not work strategically enough to ensure continuity and progression in Welsh language skills when pupils enter the secondary phase. This has a significantly negative impact on pupils' understanding, enjoyment and use of the Welsh language. In recent years, a majority of key stage 4 pupils have not been entered for any Welsh language qualification.

### **Care, support and guidance: Adequate and needs improvement**

The school has appropriate arrangements for the care, support and guidance of its pupils. In the primary phase, these arrangements support pupils' wellbeing successfully. In the secondary phase, pastoral leaders do not have sufficient impact on pupil behaviour or their personal development and, as a result a few pupils display unacceptable behaviour in lessons and around the campus.

The school provides appropriate opportunities for pupils to develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding. In the primary phase, a successful personal and social education programme supports pupils' personal development

well. For example, it helps pupils to develop a thorough understanding of how to stay safe online. However, in the secondary phase, the school does not plan consistently or effectively enough to support pupils' social and emotional skills.

The school has appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking. It provides pupils with suitable opportunities to learn about making healthy lifestyle choices. Pupils benefit from a suitable range of extra-curricular activities, for example the 'Glee Club' for creative arts, 'Chillax' for recreation and a variety of sporting clubs. Local and overseas trips contribute well to pupils' learning experiences, for example a trip to New York and residential courses at Gwersyll yr Urdd Llangrannog and Cardiff.

The school has appropriate systems in place to collect assessment data. In the primary phase, teachers use this information well to evaluate pupils' progress and plan suitable support. Leaders in the secondary phase have very recently strengthened systems for identifying key stage 4 pupils who are underperforming. However, overall, arrangements to track pupils' progress and make use of the information in the secondary phase remain underdeveloped.

The school provides parents with relevant annual reports on the progress of their child that identify strengths and areas for development and set them useful targets for improvement.

In the primary phase, staff support pupils with additional learning needs well. The school monitors closely the progress of this group of pupils and plans a range of effective interventions. Learning support assistants provide useful targeted support for these pupils. In the secondary phase, interventions have not had sufficient impact on the progress that pupils with additional learning needs make by the end of key stage 4. Beneficial partnerships with external agencies ensure that pupils receive appropriate specialist support. Annual reviews of pupils with additional learning needs are used well to evaluate their progress and to set them useful targets. Parents are involved appropriately with these reviews.

The school supports pupils' transition into the nursery class well. Nursery leaders undertake home visits to identify the needs of the children before they attend school. This establishes a strong relationship between the school and home. Arrangements for transition from the primary phase to the secondary phase have recently been strengthened and are consistent across the five primary campuses.

The school provides a range of purposeful experiences for vulnerable pupils to develop their skills and learning that help them to progress to the next stage of their learning. For example, the 'Engage' programme supports targeted pupils at risk of exclusion successfully. The school manages and supports the behaviour of pupils in the primary phase effectively. The school's arrangements to monitor and improve pupils' behaviour in the secondary phase are not effective enough. The school has developed an appropriate behaviour policy. However, staff do not apply this policy consistently enough.

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

## **Leadership and management: Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement**

Overall, leadership has not addressed well enough the weaknesses in the secondary phase of the school. The quality and impact of leadership vary too much. In the primary phase, senior and middle leaders are effective. They ensure that most pupils achieve good standards in their learning and wellbeing. However, leadership at all levels in the secondary phase is ineffective.

Until very recently, leaders in the secondary phase have not demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. For example, senior leaders have not held middle leaders to account for the quality of their work. Consequently, the leadership of departments and of pastoral provision in the secondary phase is weak. Overall, leaders do not ensure that pupils build well enough on the progress they make during the primary phase.

Senior leaders have made a few effective strategic decisions, for example to develop a business team. There are now robust arrangements to monitor the school's finances. Within the current financial year, this team has made worthwhile progress in reducing the projected financial shortfall. However, despite these actions, the school has a significant deficit budget. The school uses additional grant funding from the pupil development grant for an appropriate range of purposes. However, this expenditure has not had sufficient impact on improving outcomes or attendance for pupils eligible for free school meals.

The school has recently taken appropriate steps to strengthen arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning. In particular, it has improved the consistency and quality of processes for carrying out lesson observations and the scrutiny of pupils' work with a sharper focus on pupil progress. However, these improvements are relatively new and have not had sufficient impact on important aspects of the school's work, in particular the quality of teaching and pupil outcomes at key stage 4. Furthermore, leaders in the secondary phase have been too slow to address national priorities, such as the implementation of the literacy and numeracy framework and the development of pupils' Welsh language skills.

The whole-school self-evaluation report is a frank and honest overall appraisal of the school's work. Senior leaders have a suitable general understanding of the most important areas for development.

In the primary phase, there is a well-established culture of self-evaluation and leaders use first-hand evidence well to identify clearly specific areas for improvement. In the secondary phase, the role of leaders in evaluating pupil progress and the quality of provision is underdeveloped. They do not focus clearly enough on standards and the impact of teaching when analysing evidence. As a result, they do not identify specific areas for improvement well enough and this makes it difficult for them to plan for improvement effectively.

The school improvement plan links appropriately to self-evaluation findings and identifies a range of suitable actions. Across the school, improvement plans do not contain sufficiently precise success criteria. They do not identify clearly enough how frequently and by what means progress is to be monitored and evaluated.

In the primary phase, leaders use pupil feedback appropriately to inform self-evaluation and improvement planning. However, in the secondary phase, the use of pupils' views is underdeveloped. Across the school, leaders make suitable efforts to gather the views of parents but do not make sufficient use of the feedback.

The school plans a broadly appropriate range of professional learning opportunities for its staff. It has recently strengthened performance management arrangements to ensure that training aligns suitably to individual objectives. In the primary phase, staff regularly share good practice to develop their provision. In the secondary phase, a few staff have undertaken activities across departments and in other schools to share good practice, but this is at an early stage of development. Professional learning opportunities are suitably linked to the school's improvement priorities. However, the school does not evaluate professional learning activities rigorously enough, and overall these strategies have not had sufficient impact on standards or the quality of teaching in the secondary phase.

Overall, governors do not have a secure enough understanding of their roles and responsibilities. They have not supported or challenged the school effectively since it opened. Their involvement with the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning processes is at a very early stage of development. As a result, governors do not have a sufficiently detailed knowledge of the specific strengths or areas for improvement across the school. In addition, they focus too much on the secondary phase. The governing body has not ensured that it has suitable pupil representation.

## Copies of the report

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

Estyn evaluates a provider's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

<b>Excellent</b>	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
<b>Good</b>	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
<b>Adequate and needs improvement</b>	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
<b>Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement</b>	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

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 going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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