

Independent mainstream

Schools

38

January 2024, including 10
boarding schools

New registrations 2023-2024: Cardiff Muslim High School (Feb 2024)

Schools closed 2023-2024: Castle School (August 2024)

Schools deregistered by Welsh Government 2023-2024: none

Independent School Standards

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

All schools inspected this year complied with these standards.

Independent school visits

In addition to our core inspections, we also carry out a range of other visits to independent schools:

One initial registration visit, to register a new independent school

Two follow-up to registration visits, to ensure that a newly opened independent school continues to comply with the Independent School Standards

Eight material change visits, to provide the Welsh Government with advice regarding a change in circumstances of an independent school

Core inspections

This year, we inspected five independent mainstream schools.

Three schools are all-age, one is a secondary school and one has only has pupils in Key Stages 4 and 5.

Summary

Pupils at independent mainstream schools inspected this year achieved exceptional examination results, consistently surpassing national averages. These schools emphasised pupil well-being and offered a broad and enriched curriculum, particularly individualised for older students. Support for

accessing future destinations, such as UK or international universities, was a significant strength. However, in all schools, a few leaders' quality assurance activities lacked sufficient focus on the impact of teaching on learning, leading to missed opportunities for improving school provision.

Teaching and learning

Across the inspected schools, pupil attainment was notably strong, with public examination results significantly above national averages. Nearly all pupils demonstrated high oracy and communication skills, confidently presenting and debating with a broad vocabulary tailored to different contexts. Most pupils developed effective reading skills, applying phonics to decode unfamiliar words and progressing to summarising, sequencing, and making inferences from texts. Many pupils also read for pleasure and valued reading for learning. Writing skills were similarly well developed, with younger pupils quickly advancing and older pupils producing sophisticated written arguments for various purposes. However, in two schools, a minority of pupils' work presentation lacked neatness.

Mathematical skills were generally strong, with most younger pupils grasping concepts well and most older pupils applying advanced skills across the curriculum. However, in a few instances, pupils either did not apply these skills at the expected level outside mathematics lessons or were not expected to do so. In one school, many pupils' mathematical skills were underdeveloped.

Digital skills varied across the schools, although pupils generally used technology confidently to support learning. In one school, digital skill development was particularly strong due to the range of integrated learning opportunities.

Staff across the schools were dedicated, fostering a culture of ambition and high expectations. Teachers built strong relationships with pupils, provided well-matched lessons and resources, and offered valuable additional support. Most teachers excelled in preparing pupils for public examinations, although in some cases teaching was overly directed, limiting independent learning.

In all schools, the curriculum was broad and supported knowledge acquisition and personal development. Four schools offered an extensive, individualised curriculum for older pupils, aligning well with their future aspirations. Three schools provided an extraordinary range of co-curricular activities, enriching pupils' educational experience.

Care, support and guidance, and their impact on pupils' well-being

The schools inspected this year demonstrated a strong commitment to pupil well-being, fostering positive relationships between staff and students. This supportive environment created a strong sense of belonging among pupils, who showed pride in their school and respect for everyone involved. Nearly all pupils' behaviour and attitudes were exemplary, with most pupils displaying high levels of concentration and enthusiasm in their lessons. Leadership opportunities were extensive, contributing to pupils' responsibility and self-confidence.

A particular strength across the schools inspected was the advice and support pupils received when considering their future destinations and careers. [Cardiff Sixth Form College](#) provided highly effective support for university entry and future career planning through a well-developed and extensive co-curricular programme.

All schools excelled in promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, offering

various opportunities for community involvement through volunteering and charitable activities. This fostered a deep understanding of the importance of helping others. At Monmouth School for Boys, we reported that the library is a large, friendly and inclusive space blending modern resources with historic values, which supported reading, literacy, and well-being for the entire school community.

Support for pupils with additional learning needs was robust, with early identification and effective strategies to help pupils succeed academically. Safeguarding practices were well established. There were rigorous recruitment processes and comprehensive training for staff and governors, often exceeding statutory requirements.

Two out of the five schools needed minor policy adjustments to fully comply with Welsh Government legislation, which were addressed during the inspections. Overall, the schools provided nurturing, respectful, and well-supported educational environments ensuring the well-being and development of all pupils.

Leadership and improvement

For one of the schools inspected, this was their first core inspection since registering as an independent school. Across all the schools inspected, leaders were well established, although one long-serving head was absent due to illness, and another had recently been promoted from headteacher to principal. One school inspected was undergoing significant strategic reorganisation through a merger with two other schools within its 'family'. All schools fully complied with the Independent School Standards.

Leaders in all the schools inspected this year had a clear and ambitious vision for their school and for the development of pupils' knowledge, skills and character. They were well respected and led by example to build strong and cohesive school communities. As a result, most staff in these schools felt valued and were highly loyal, working collaboratively in the best interests of pupils.

Governance arrangements in four of the five schools inspected were robust and effective. In these schools, governors provided leaders with an appropriate balance of challenge and support. They reviewed policies and procedures robustly and managed the schools' finances at a strategic level appropriately.

Leaders in all schools inspected actively promoted safeguarding and placed a high regard on the well-being of all members of the school community, particularly pupils and staff. In four of the five schools inspected, pupil attendance over time was extremely high.

Leaders in four of the five schools inspected analysed a range of data, particularly public examinations results, to understand pupils' attainment. In three of the schools inspected, systems and approaches to tracking individual pupils' progress over time were underdeveloped or at a very early stage of implementation. In four of the five schools inspected, leaders undertook a suitable range of quality assurance activities and had used this information to inform their school improvement plans. However, lesson observations did not focus upon the impact of teaching upon learning sharply enough or identify subtle aspects of teaching practice that may benefit from improvement. In one school, leaders had, in part, suspended the usual arrangements for quality assurance and consequently had an incomplete overview of the quality of teaching and learning across the school.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 - 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected five independent mainstream schools.

4 providers were given a recommendation to refine quality assurance or self-evaluation processes, particularly in terms of the quality of teaching.

2 providers were given a recommendation to build on existing practice to improve consistency across the school.

2 providers were given a recommendation about leadership:

- Strengthen the school's current practices to ensure that roles and responsibilities at directorate and governing body level are clearly defined
- Ensure that the leadership team effectively distil available information to develop a coherent overview of teaching, learning, attendance and the curriculum across the whole school

Other recommendations provided to independent mainstream settings included improving attendance, ensuring teachers' expectations are appropriately high, making best use of assessment data to inform/enhance pupil progress, and sharpening monitoring and improvement work to focus on pupil outcomes.