

Where it's cool to be clever

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Secondary in deprived area rewarded for work with gifted pupils. A fear of looking too clever in class isn't a problem at Treorchy comprehensive school in Pengelli, Rhondda Cynon Taf, which has become the first secondary in Wales to be formally recognised for its work with more able and talented pupils.

It has shrugged off disadvantage to win a NACE (National Association for Able Children in Education) challenge award. This acknowledges work by teachers and governors in challenging all pupils to achieve their best.

However, the bar has been raised for everyone at Treorchy now, with 72 per cent of pupils gaining five good grades at GCSE. What is more remarkable is that the school is in one of the most deprived areas of the country.

Four years ago Helen Francis, head of science, was asked to co-ordinate a mission to discover and develop Treorchy's more able and talented (MAT) pupils.

"Using our knowledge we worked on the idea that 10 per cent were of MAT ability, though we've aimed to create a programme where we challenge pupils at all levels," said Ms Francis.

"We set up a register of MAT pupils in all departments. We make sure there are opportunities in class to extend them, such as developing thinking abilities. In maths we have Year 10 pupils doing GCSE and one doing AS-level.

"They also have external opportunities such as taking part in maths challenges. We do as many extra-curricular activities as we can – we have poets in for English students and the Welsh National Opera to extend the musicians."

Treorchy has managed all this without any extra cash – there's limited funding in Wales for bringing on bright children in this way and schools must use their own budgets.

NACE, which aims to help teachers cater for high-ability children while enabling all pupils to flourish, found a strong learning ethos at the school. It said teachers had high expectations and pupils are ambitious. The curriculum was innovative and broad-ranging. There was also a wealth of community, out-of-hours and enterprise learning.

NACE assessors observed lessons, interviewed pupils, teachers, parents and governors and looked at pupils' work. They commended "purposeful leadership".

"We fast-track classes in bilingual Welsh and modern foreign languages," said assistant head Janet Brown. We're also introducing other subjects to be fast-tracked and have differentiated resources within the class.

"The school is thriving – rolls are falling elsewhere but ours is going up," she added. "We had seven grade 1s in our standard inspection last year, which commented on the support we give."

"This award recognises that – there's an open dialogue between staff and pupils. Our aim is to build on and maintain the standards we have achieved already."