

Portland College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108884
Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	377843
Inspection dates	12–13 January 2012
Lead inspector	Ann Muxworthy

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	146
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dorothy Elliott
Headteacher	Melanie Carson
Date of previous school inspection	16 June 2009
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Introduction

Inspection team

Ann Muxworthy
Saleem Hussain

Additional inspector
Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. The inspectors observed teaching and learning in 17 lessons, taught by 17 different teaching staff, and carried out a 'learning walk' with the headteacher. Discussions were held with staff, a member of the governing body and students of the school. Inspectors took account of the responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection, observed the school's work, and looked at policies, minutes of the meetings of the governing body, school self-evaluation, external reports and students' progress. They analysed the 52 questionnaires returned by parents and carers and questionnaires completed by staff and students.

Information about the school

Portland College is a larger than average secondary special school. The school caters for students with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. There are a growing number of students with autistic spectrum disorder and some students have additional sensory, physical disabilities or present challenging behaviour. All students have a statement of special educational needs. Students attend from across the City of Sunderland. Most students are White British and a high proportion is known to be eligible for free school meals. There are a very small percentage of speakers of English as an additional language. The school has attained specialist school status in cognition and learning and achieved Healthy School status, Arts Mark silver, 14-19 Quality Mark gold and the International Schools Award.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory and 4 is inadequate
Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall Effectiveness	2
Achievement of pupils	2
Quality of teaching	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	1
Leadership and management	2

Key Findings

- This is a good school. Parents and carers are highly appreciative of the school's caring ethos and the effective support their children receive. The outstanding behaviour and safety exemplifies the staff, governors and students commitment to their school. These factors give the school good capacity for continued and sustained improvement.
- Teaching is good across the school. Students greatly enjoy their lessons because they are interested and have lots of fun in their learning. Students achieve well because teachers, teaching assistants and other professionals have a secure knowledge and understanding of their individual needs. They, therefore, make good progress in their learning.
- Most staff use day-to-day assessment very effectively to match the challenge in students' work to the next steps required in their learning. However, although improving this is not consistent across the school and, consequently, planning does not always have challenging objectives for all abilities.
- The sixth form is good. Students make good progress from their starting points because of the good teaching. However, accreditation within the pathways needs developing to meet the changing needs of students entering the sixth form.
- The new headteacher, governing body and the leadership team, in a short time, have developed a strong and tangible sense of common purpose. They strive successfully to raise achievement for all students by continual improvements within teaching and sharing existing expertise among staff. The school has a good focus on continually and systematically evaluating practice and setting priorities. Self-evaluation is good.

- The good relationships with parents, carers and partners of the school meets its purposeful drive for a cohesive learning community that values and contributes to students' good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- In order to develop skills for all abilities and achieve whole-school consistency ensure that:
 - planning has a range of clear objectives for developing skills
 - assessment for learning captures small steps of progress to inform future teaching.
- Take further steps in ensuring the curriculum in the sixth form meets the individual needs and aspirations of all students by:
 - introducing an appropriate range of accredited courses in each pathway.

Main Report

Achievement of pupils

Students make consistently good progress in their lessons when measured against their individual starting points, which are low in relation to age-related expectations. Students enjoy their learning and have a good level of engagement in activities and acceptance of challenge to improve their learning. Students build on their prior learning well and benefit from the cumulative effect of good-quality teaching. The small number of the more-able students with less complex needs gain success in Entry Level and Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network awards. In Year 11 more students than in previous years are accessing functional skills entry level in English and mathematics, supporting their pathway into sixth form. The school is seeking to increase the numbers gaining accreditation by providing new courses linked to pathways.

Those students eligible for free school meals are making good progress when compared to similar students nationally. The school's high expectations shows that the more able learners are meeting challenging targets.

Assessment information and students' targets are used effectively to provide individually targeted support with the result that students with communication difficulties make good progress in developing their skills for speaking, listening and reading. The few students who speak English as an additional language thrive in equal measure to all other students and clearly benefit from learning in an environment rich in alternative modes of communication, such as signing and Picture Exchange Communication System.

The large majority of parents and carers feel their children are making good progress, one parent commented that, 'Portland College enables my child to reach her potential. Every day her day is enriched and she loves it and is very happy.'

Quality of teaching

The quality of teaching is good and secures good progress and learning. The admirable relationships with teaching staff motivate students to learn. Support staff and other professionals make consistently strong contributions to teaching and learning. For instance, they provide valuable support to Picture Exchange Communication Systems and sensory learning. In good lessons, teachers apply their specialist skills and knowledge well to motivate, challenge and plan for students to achieve their best. Questioning is used skilfully to determine students' understanding of what is being taught and what they have remembered.

However, in a few lessons teachers' assessment of students' attainment is less well developed to capture small steps in learning and inform planning. High-quality classroom resources, including information and communication technology (ICT), and practical activities provide engaging and exciting opportunities for learning.

The curriculum is good. Portland College's specialist status as a school for cognition and learning is well deserved as it provides real, enriched and rewarding experiences that contribute well to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The strong emphasis on the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics contributes to students' good achievement, though opportunities are missed to provide a greater choice of accreditation. Literacy across the curriculum is a strength and drama and ICT are used particularly well to make it accessible to students with cognition difficulties. In the sixth form, students are supported by highly effective partnerships such as Sunderland City Hospitals and have good opportunities for work placements. A range of specialist programmes and therapies are supporting students' physical well-being and sensory needs well.

There are good opportunities to develop understanding of spiritual, moral, social and cultural developments through the curriculum, which is designed to provide 'awe and wonder', with real experiences through the cafe where they can serve food to visitors. Older students are keen to gain their Duke of Edinburgh Awards and many opt for clubs in judo, dance and ICT. One parent captures this by saying, 'Portland staff are excellent. They only want what is the best way of learning and preparing the children for the future.'

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Parents and carers strongly agree that their children feel happy and safe at school. Since the previous inspection the school has sustained a highly positive learning environment that supports respect and consideration. Students are extremely keen to help others and this is seen in their commitment to the wheelchair course, where they learn to push other children safely within the school and local community. Students behave extremely well because they are happy, friendly and caring towards each other and staff. They enjoy their lessons and enthusiastically get involved in many other activities which develop their confidence, independence and social skills. This is seen when they are using local transport and shops without adult support and managing well road safety when out in the community. Attendance is above average

for special schools nationally and improving, and students are keen to get to their lessons on time.

Instances of bullying in any form are extremely rare and lessons in personal, social education ensure students are aware of how to be safe. One parent commented typically that, 'The teachers are always there to listen to any problems and concerns, the whole staff are friendly and always helpful.' Students collectively show and say they are safe in school. This is seen in the trust they have of staff and each other in hydrotherapy and their successful engagement with students from other schools to understand 'the body and puberty' taught by a very experienced teacher and supported by a very experienced nurse.

Leadership and management

The new, highly experienced headteacher is confident in her vision for school improvement and is focused on driving through and securing nothing less than excellence for students. This is shared with all those with leadership responsibility. The school uses self-evaluation well to improve its performance and engage and communicate with stakeholders. This is seen in the most recent evaluation of the curriculum for Key Stage 4 and 5 and recommendations to include more accredited courses. This has resulted in a group of students in Year 11 accessing entry level qualifications in English and mathematics this year.

Monitoring systems for teaching and students' progress are good and effective in identifying priorities for improving achievement. A recent data analysis showed that students progress well in reading in Years 8 and 9 but progress slows up to Year 11. The school are, therefore, providing training for staff in reading and intervention to accelerate progress.

The curriculum is good and supports good achievement. The school is highly skilled in supporting the communication needs of the students and has invested highly in staffing and resources to aid communication. Teachers, therapists and support staff use their expertise imaginatively to create exciting experiences and good opportunities for capturing learning though some are missed to plan for future learning. There are effective business partnerships which are providing real and meaningful work experience placements which have resulted in some students in work, some in college and some in volunteering roles.

The governing body has a good understanding of the school's priorities and are hugely supportive of the future vision for the school. There is a good range of skills and expertise and it fulfils its duties well in holding the school to account. There is high commitment to safety and ensuring students have equal opportunities. They have welcomed the school developing greater opportunities for students to socialise and work with students in other schools and see this as essential in ensuring that students have a good understanding of their community. The school productions, invigorating school assemblies and recycling are valuable experiences that support their good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Parents and carers are appreciative of the work of the school and comments like, 'Everyday I feel safe in the knowledge that my son is well looked after and his

teachers and helpers do all they can to support him.' are typical. The school has made good improvements since the previous inspection and therefore has good capacity to improve further.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
Type of school	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



16 January 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Portland College, Sunderland SR3 2NQ

Thank you so much for being so friendly, helpful and polite when we inspected your school. We enjoyed meeting you and thoroughly enjoyed seeing your lessons and other activities. Rehearsing your new play and your school website told us so much about the very interesting things you get to do. You had a Challenge Day and did fun things about the Crystal Maze and some of you got to go to Dublin and won judo medals at the European Tournament.

We found Portland College is a good school. This is because your headteacher, staff and governors work hard to make sure your school is the best it can be. You make good progress and become confident young people; you are right to care for your school. In your lessons you are learning so many different things and we want your teachers to watch carefully to find everything you have learnt and then plan more exciting new work. By the time you get to sixth form we want you to be able to choose things to do that you will be really interested in. Because of this, we have asked your teachers to plan new things for you so you can get qualifications to help you in the future. We also found out that your school takes excellent care that you are safe, and your behaviour in school and with your friends shows how you all get on extremely well together. Please carry on working hard and we wish you continued success.

Yours sincerely

Ann Muxworthy
Lead inspector

