

Portal House School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	119062
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	379720
Inspection dates	1–2 December 2011
Reporting inspector	James Bowden

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	56
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Elizabeth Talbot
Headteacher	Rose Bradley
Date of previous school inspection	25 March 2009
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 12 lessons, seeing 11 teachers. Meetings were held with the headteacher, the senior leadership team and others with posts of responsibility. In addition, a meeting was held with the Chair of the Governing Body. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at development plans, curriculum planning, school policies, the school's tracking data showing students' progress, teachers' lesson plans and samples of students' work. They met formally with two groups of students, attended an assembly and observed students arriving and leaving at the end of the school day. The lead inspector analysed questionnaires from four parents and carers, 31 students and 29 staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The school's track record of sustaining and improving students' achievement at the end of Key Stage 4.
- Whether teaching is sufficiently challenging for students, enabling all groups to learn effectively and make the best progress possible.
- The effectiveness of leadership at all levels in moving the school onwards and upwards.
- The effectiveness of the school's procedures for reducing absence.

Information about the school

Portal House School provides for pupils and students with statements of special educational needs for social, emotional and behaviour difficulties. Several have additional needs over and above their emotional and behavioural difficulties, receiving support from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and other medical services. Most have been suspended or excluded from mainstream schools and some have been out of school for up to two years prior to entry.

Almost all students are from White British backgrounds. The majority comes from a mix of urban and rural areas within the East Kent area. Some spend over two hours travelling to and from the school each day. Thirteen students are looked after by their local authorities and the proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. Although the school is designated as a mixed provision, no girls have ever been referred.

The school has gained the International School Award and Healthy 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: how good is the school?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

The school provides a good quality education for its students. It is effective in meeting its core aim of improving students' level of educational attainment, within a safe, caring and healthy school environment. This is reflected in the improving numbers achieving A* to C grade passes at GCSE over the past two years, including in English and mathematics. The school has significant strengths which underpin students' well-being and learning. The outstanding partnerships between the school and other professionals from outside agencies, including the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and other psychiatric and medical services enhance greatly the outstanding quality of care, guidance and support. Students' knowledge and understanding of how others live is developed well as a result of the European dimension of the curriculum and the numerous exchanges and joint residential visits with schools in Belgium and France, as well as links with schools beyond Europe. Students therefore have first-hand experience as to how their peers in other countries live and are educated. This breadth and a good range of enrichment activities, both within the school day and beyond, rekindles students' interest in learning and contributes particularly well to their excellent spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The school's work in this respect has been recognised by the International Schools Award. All staff ensure each student is looked after in a safe, healthy and caring environment. As a result, the large majority of students say that the school is a safe place to learn. Their responses to the pre-inspection questionnaire show that all have positive views about the care, guidance and support they receive. One student, commenting on what he thought was the best thing about the school, said, 'The staff, if I have a personal issue they can be approached.' In addition, the school works highly effectively in forging close links with parents and carers from around the county. In the school's own recent parental questionnaire survey, a parent, reflecting the views of many, noted, 'This is a very caring school. They expect the children to learn lots and achieve good exam results.'

Attainment is below average compared with mainstream schools at the end of Year 11 but in some areas is improving steadily. There are no significant differences in terms of different groups of students, including those who are known to be eligible for free school meals or those whose circumstances make them the most vulnerable. School data show students achieve well in relation to their starting points, including in the key skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology, as well as making good progress in their organisational skills and independence. The school's focus on improving literacy skills has developed students' interest and confidence in choosing to read books of their own choice at the start of

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the day.

Teaching is good. Information and communication technology is used effectively across the school to support teaching and enliven learning. Individual subject targets are set and students are informed of the levels they are working at. However, teachers are inconsistent in ensuring students fully understand the small steps needed to achieve these targets. In addition, the school recognises that the higher attaining students are not always offered suitably challenging work. The good curriculum, with a focus on academic subjects, underpins the school's focus on preparing students for the next stage of their education.

The headteacher and her reorganised, and acting, senior leadership team have a clear sense of direction and purpose for the school. At the forefront of this is their focus on continuing improvement, including raising attainment, improving behaviour and improving the quality of teaching and learning. The staff support the school's ethos and have the best interests of students at heart, ensuring students are safe. Good curriculum content and a broad range of enrichment activities support the school's excellent promotion of community cohesion, particularly within the school itself and the local community, as well as nationally and internationally. School self-evaluation is accurate and underpins strategic planning in order to move the school onwards and upwards. Areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection have been addressed effectively. Taking all of this into account, the school's current capacity for sustained improvement is good.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching to that of the best practice by:
 - providing more challenge for the more able students
 - ensuring students fully understand the small steps needed to meet their individual subject targets.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Students' attainment on entry to the school varies, but is generally lower than expected because students have not thrived in previous settings. In lessons, individual students and different groups, regardless of their additional emotional and social needs, consolidate and build on previous learning and make good progress in new learning. They benefit greatly from working in small groups where they receive focused individual attention from all adults in the room. In an English lesson, using the class reader, all students enjoyed discussing why paragraphs were set out as in the book. They then used this knowledge to divide a block of text from a Harry Potter novel into separate paragraphs. In a religious education lesson, students were involved in an interesting discussion about Christmas and Advent and the beliefs and values involved, which raised their awareness of why people raise funds to help others less fortunate than themselves. Students were on task and motivated

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throughout.

In their questionnaire responses, a small minority of students were critical of behaviour in the school but in meetings with inspectors, students told how their behaviour has improved. One commented, ‘My behaviour is better and I do not intimidate others, even when I am angry.’ As they get older, students take more responsibility for their behaviour, rekindle their interest in learning and look forward to gaining accreditation before they leave. Overall, behaviour is good. Their personal development is underpinned by strong staff and student relationships. Instances of unacceptable behaviour resulting in fixed-term exclusions are declining. The extent to which students adopt healthy lifestyles has been recognised by the award of Healthy Schools status. As well as eating healthily and enjoying school lunches, students enjoy the comprehensive range of physical activities provided, as well as an extra two hours of swimming per week in Key Stage 3. Students have a say in the running of the school through the school council and support local, national and international charitable causes. Although the persistent absence of a very few continues to distort the overall figures, attendance is satisfactory overall and unauthorised absence is low and on a downward trend.

These are the grades for pupils’ outcomes

Pupils’ achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils’ learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils’ behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attendance ¹	3
The extent of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

Teachers and support staff work effectively together and know the needs of students well. Planning is supported by careful and ongoing assessment of their capabilities using the school’s ‘flight path’ assessment programme, which, students commented,

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

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helps them see how well they are making progress over time. At the start of lessons, learning intentions are made clear, thus students are aware of what is expected of them. On occasions, these are not expanded upon to include qualitative explanations, so challenging students even more. Sensitive interventions help students stay on task and make sure their needs are met. This was particularly evident in a physical education lesson where students were looking at aspects of the components of fitness and how these affect performance in different activities. Prior to playing a small-sided game of basketball, students had been guided to take measurements to give an indication of their flexibility as well as looking at their individual body compositions. The impact of these measures was then considered as part of their performance in the game. Students rose well to this level of challenge. All teachers are adept at providing appropriately pitched praise and constructive criticism throughout the lessons.

The curriculum contributes effectively to the good academic progress made by students. As well as reflecting the National Curriculum, the school has added further breadth to the curriculum by incorporating opportunities for students to attend a range of vocational courses either locally to the school or locally to students’ homes. The personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum contributes well to students’ personal development and attributes, as well as providing them with good opportunities to learn about the world of work and make choices for further education courses.

Students’ health, safety and well-being are at the forefront of the school’s excellent ethos of care. All adults work hard to ensure this, helping each individual, including those whose circumstances make them most vulnerable, in very specific ways. A high level of staff supervision throughout the day, including at lesson change-over times, results in all being looked after in a safe, healthy and caring environment. A carefully managed and executed programme of reviews is highly effective in supporting every student when they first join the school, throughout each year and when they leave. Careers guidance is highly effective and results in all students moving on to further education or training. Parents and carers, too, are given careful advice and support when needed. Broadly average attendance is a result of the school’s effective procedures for reducing absence, particularly unauthorised absences. Those students who are absent because of medical needs receive appropriate support from the school and other specialist professionals.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account:	
The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils’ needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

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How effective are leadership and management?

The drive and vision of the headteacher are shared by her newly restructured acting senior leadership team. The priority of improving academic performance remains, as does the focus on improving further the quality of teaching and learning through careful monitoring and evaluation. This has sustained strengths identified at the previous inspection as well as identifying further areas for improvement. The governing body is effective in holding the school to account and working with it to ensure safeguarding procedures and practices have a high priority, are effective, up to date and reflect current good practice. The school is effective in ensuring all learners have equality of opportunity. It tackles any discrimination and achieves an effective ethos of inclusion, with no underachievement by any particular groups. The school’s work in promoting community cohesion within the school, locally and beyond, is outstanding and underpinned by effective policies and planning for provision. Given the outcomes the school achieves, it provides good value for money.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school’s engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Views of parents and carers

The proportion of questionnaires returned was well below the national average for special schools. Of those returned, all parents and carers were happy about all aspects of the school’s work. This inspection endorses these views.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Portal House School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 4 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 56 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	1	25	3	75	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	4	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
The school informs me about my child’s progress	3	75	1	25	0	0	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	3	75	1	25	0	0	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	4	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
The school helps me to support my child’s learning	3	75	1	25	0	0	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	2	50	2	50	0	0	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	3	75	1	25	0	0	0	0
The school meets my child’s particular needs	4	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	4	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	2	50	2	50	0	0	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	3	75	0	0	0	0	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child’s experience at this school	4	100	0	0	0	0	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

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

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	48	6	0
Primary schools	6	47	40	7
Secondary schools	12	39	38	11
Sixth forms	13	42	41	3
Special schools	28	49	19	4
Pupil referral units	14	45	31	10
All schools	10	46	37	7

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 December 2010 and 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.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

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.



10 December 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Portal House School, Dover CT15 6SS

Not so long ago, two of us came to Portal House to see how well you are getting on. We also wanted to know whether we could suggest anything to make things even better for you. We thoroughly enjoyed our time at the school, meeting some of you as a small group, and individually in lessons and around the school. The great majority who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire said you felt the school helped prepare you for the future, that adults explained to you how to improve your work and that the headteacher and senior leadership team do a good job. We agree, and can see why.

These are some of the other good things we found.

- All the staff care for you and make sure you are safe and happy.
- You all make good progress in your learning.
- Aspects of your personal development are outstanding.
- Teachers and other adults give you lots of help and support.
- There are so many interesting and enjoyable things for you to do.
- The school works really well with lots of other people, including your parents and carers, to help you.
- The headteacher and her senior staff have plans to make things even better for you.

We found that the school could make some changes to improve your learning further and so we have asked the school leaders to make sure all teachers provide more challenge for the most able students and ensure that all of you know exactly what you have to do to meet your subject targets.

You can help too, by continuing to work hard and some of you need to improve your attendance. I would like to wish you all the best for your future education.

Yours sincerely

James Bowden
Lead inspector

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