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Mr R Faulkner  
Headteacher  
Portland School and Specialist College  
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Dear Mr Faulkner

### **Short inspection of Portland School and Specialist College**

Following my visit to the school on 16 January 2018 with Sue Morris-King, Senior Her Majesty's Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in May 2013.

#### **The school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education at Portland School and Specialist College since the last inspection. You provide calm but determined leadership, creating a culture which puts pupils at the heart of everything you and your staff do. You and your committed team provide a truly holistic and nurturing approach to pupils' education. Leaders, staff and governors make sure that pupils, who have often had a difficult or disrupted experience of education in the past, get the support they need. The strong relationships that exist between pupils and staff are clear to see. Parents and carers appreciate the work of the family support team, describing it as 'invaluable'.

Since the last inspection, you have been promoted to the post of headteacher. You have further developed the capacity of your leadership team, which has had a positive impact on the school's work. Staff speak highly of the range of professional development opportunities and support they receive. Your actions have helped to improve the school in a number of ways. You have supported key staff to develop their leadership skills, enabling them to take responsibility for specific areas of the school, so that they can drive further improvements. At the same time, all staff have received training to enable them to support pupils' emotional and social needs more effectively. Staff recognise that as a result of this training, they have a much better understanding of the reasons why pupils sometimes behave the way they do. Staff can now help pupils more effectively to manage and self-regulate their behaviours. As a result, there has been a positive impact on pupils' attitudes to

learning and their engagement with the curriculum.

You, your leadership team and governors have a good understanding of the school's strengths, as well as where further improvements need to be made. Leaders know that the teaching of mathematics is a strength. However, they also recognise that there is still work to be done to improve pupils' basic reading and writing skills, which are often weak when they arrive at Portland School. You have a plan of action for this, but it is not yet sufficiently focused on developing a systematic approach to improving pupils' reading skills. Inspectors saw some pupils, across all key stages, held back by their poor reading. Your newly appointed special educational needs coordinator has begun to focus on identifying pupils who need targeted support in reading, but this work has only recently started.

Your school day is quite short, which is limiting pupils' learning time. You say that your current budgetary constraints are a barrier to lengthening the day. However, the local authority is working closely with you to review funding arrangements. A suitable resolution needs to be agreed so that pupils' learning time is maximised.

At the last inspection, the school was asked to ensure that teachers plan outcomes for pupils on an individualised basis so that every pupil is challenged to make the best progress they can. You and other leaders have developed the 'Portland Way', a whole-school approach that provides a rigorous but supportive model to improve the quality of teaching. Teachers' planning of lessons and an analysis of pupils' work show that work is now well-matched to pupils' abilities. Leaders make frequent checks on all aspects of teaching, making sure that they result in pupils making progress in their learning. Consequently, most pupils are making the progress you expect them to make in their learning, across all groups. You make sure that support is put in place to help those pupils who are not making sufficient progress catch up.

At the previous inspection, inspectors also asked leaders to further improve links with parents and other agencies, in order to increase the attendance of the small minority of pupils who were persistently absent. You have developed the work of the family support team, which is now having a significant impact on the care of the most vulnerable pupils at school. Compelling case studies show how individual pupils' attendance and behaviour have improved as a result of parents receiving support in a variety of ways. The team works on a one-to-one basis with parents and families and delivers parenting programmes, training events and coffee mornings. The team's evidence shows that their recent pilot project 'better together', where staff work with social workers and educational psychologists, has made a real difference to pupils and families alike, improving pupils' attendance, and reducing behaviour incidents and referrals to other agencies.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The leadership team and governors have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are robust and effective. Pupils are safe in school. Records show that appropriate checks are made on new staff before they begin working in the school. You and

other leaders receive training and updates at the required intervals about all aspects of safeguarding. You ensure that other staff and governors are trained appropriately. Staff are confident in what they should do if they have concerns about a pupil. Safeguarding files are stored securely and are well-maintained. They show that concerns are recorded and referred to other agencies, where appropriate, in a timely way.

You and staff have a good understanding of the risks to your pupils in the local area, and you make sure that the curriculum provides opportunities for pupils to learn how to keep themselves safe. Your team extends these learning opportunities to families, working closely with the police to provide training on topics such as the misuse of drugs, child sexual exploitation, and internet safety. The school has recently been awarded the 360 degree accredited safer online award, which recognises Portland School's commitment to and actions in helping pupils stay safe when using the internet.

Staff have developed excellent working relationships with external agencies. As a result, there is a shared purpose of protecting the most vulnerable pupils. Your team is able to gather information about local concerns, including gang and youth violence. One of the ways you use this information is to help inform your class groupings, reducing potential conflicts in school.

### **Inspection findings**

- Leaders and governors have taken effective action to develop the curriculum for pupils. Leaders and staff took time to consult with parents and pupils about the content of the primary curriculum, to make it as engaging as possible. For example, the theme 'around the world in 80 days' involves pupils in a range of different subjects such as modern foreign languages and geography in a meaningful way. The key stage 3 curriculum focuses on a broad range of subjects, building on pupils' earlier learning. Inspectors saw pupils being challenged but supported at the right level to develop their writing skills on the theme of 'wonder weapons', a lesson about weapons used in the First World War.
- The key stage 4 curriculum focuses appropriately on preparing pupils for the next stage of their education, employment or training. Pupils follow individual learning pathways, suited to their needs and interests. Pupils are able to study for a range of GCSE qualifications, including English and mathematics, science, art and information and communication technology. They are also able to gain BTEC National Diplomas and functional skills qualifications. Some pupils attend alternative provision where they follow courses that are more suited to their needs. A group of Year 10 pupils talked animatedly about their weekly work experience opportunity at the local farm, where they gain valuable skills that help prepare them for future employment.
- The introduction of the forest school is capturing pupils' imaginations. You and your staff have seen the positive impact of this activity on pupils' improved self-confidence, team-building skills and engagement in their learning.
- The school has an excellent track record in making sure that pupils move on to

suitable destinations after leaving school. Nearly all pupils go to college to participate in courses in which they have developed an interest and a prior qualification, but at a higher level; sometimes the equivalent of an A level. Leaders have worked closely with colleges to make sure that pupils are well prepared and sufficiently challenged and, as a result, most pupils remain at college for the length of their course.

- The school makes good use of a number of alternative providers for a small number of its pupils. While attending alternative provision, pupils gain additional qualifications in subjects such as creative media, music, IT programming, and health and social care, at levels matched to their abilities. Leaders have developed good working relationships with these providers, and make sure that appropriate safeguarding checks and procedures for reporting concerns are in place. Your staff make six-weekly visits to these providers, checking on pupils' progress and behaviour at the setting. Pupils' attendance at alternative provision is checked on a daily basis.
- All staff are trained to carry out physical interventions, or safe holds, where necessary. Rigorous systems are in place for monitoring the use of these interventions. Leaders emphasise the need for de-escalation, and that safe holds should only be used as a last resort. All holds are recorded clearly, and staff participate in a daily de-brief about incidents. You make sure that governors are provided with detailed information about incidents in school and the use of safe holds. Governors are not afraid to challenge leaders about all aspects of behaviour management, holding leaders to account.
- The school's use of calm rooms is appropriate. Pupils are able to take themselves to these rooms if they require some quiet time, away from their group. Leaders make sure that the use of these rooms is monitored and analysed. Although the school's behaviour policy refers to the use of internal seclusion, this is used very rarely. Leaders and governors are currently reviewing the behaviour policy to ensure that it reflects current practice.
- Leaders and staff address absence issues robustly, and it is clear that staff know pupils and families extremely well. You are not afraid to take legal action where attendance is a concern. Leaders' careful analysis of attendance shows that the majority of pupils attend for at least 90% of the time.
- The school has an excellent working relationship with the local authority. The local authority facilitates termly external advisory support for the school and regular reviews of teaching and learning. The local authority adviser meets with the headteacher on a monthly basis. As a result, local authority officers have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. They recognise the need to redevelop the funding model for this type of school and this is in its final stages of completion.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school implements a systematic approach to developing reading and writing skills, especially for older pupils, and provides opportunities and areas in the

school that enable pupils to develop a love of reading

- the length of the school day is reviewed so that learning time is maximised
- they maintain their robust approach to addressing pupils' absence and raising pupils' attendance.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Deb Jenkins

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

I met with you and senior leaders to discuss progress since the last inspection and to review your self-evaluation and school improvement documents. We agreed key lines of enquiry. To explore these areas further, inspectors: met with you and other senior leaders, the family support team, two members of the governing body and a representative group of staff; met with the school business manager to review the school's single central record of recruitment and vetting checks; met with the school's local authority adviser; visited one of the alternative providers, Created Academy; spoke to pupils informally about their learning and their experience of school; considered 13 responses to the online staff questionnaire; visited lessons across all key stages and looked at work in pupils' books (some visits were accompanied by senior leaders); and scrutinised a range of school documents, including safeguarding documents, child protection files and referrals, risk assessments, behaviour records, physical intervention and attendance records.

There were insufficient responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online parent questionnaire, but inspectors considered the small number of free-text comments submitted by parents.