

Portland College, Specialist School for Cognition and Learning

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108884
Local Authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	324857
Inspection dates	16–17 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Elaine Colquhoun

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 on roll	
School (total)	152
Sixth form	60
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Dorothy Elliott
Headteacher	Mrs Jennifer Chart CBE
Date of previous school inspection	14 March 2006
School address	Weymouth Road Chapelgarth Sunderland Tyne and Wear SR3 2NQ
Telephone number	0191 5536050
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one inspector seconded to Ofsted and one other additional inspector.

Description of the school

Portland College is a large special school serving the city of Sunderland. It gained Specialist status in 2007 for cognition and learning. The school provides for students with moderate, severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties and for those with autistic spectrum disorder. All of the students are disapplied from the National Curriculum assessment arrangements. There are few children who are looked after by the local authority or are from minority ethnic groups. Nearly half the students are entitled to free school meals. The school has gained numerous awards including Sportsmark, Artsmark, Healthy Schools and the Gold International Award.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Portland College is a good school with a number of outstanding features. Its innovative skills-based curriculum is very well matched to the needs and interests of individual students, who also receive the highest quality pastoral care and support. As a result, students make outstanding progress in their personal development and well-being.

The school has an extremely positive and supportive climate in which students feel safe, and learn and develop well. There are excellent relationships between students and with staff throughout the school. Students enjoy coming to school and grow in self-belief and independence. Parents confirm this, for example, using terms such as 'my son has blossomed since coming here.' The vast majority of responses to the parental questionnaires were overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the school. One parent said 'My son loves the school so much he wants to come more days than he is supposed to!'

Students' enjoyment of lessons is evident in their good behaviour and the enthusiasm they have for participating in the activities. Lessons are carefully planned, taking into account the needs of each student. Teachers use a good range of strategies which make learning interesting and keep students focused. As a result of this good teaching, achievement throughout the school is good. Students have high self-esteem and they actively engage with their work. However, in some lessons staff attention is more focused on some students than others. As a result, learning is not always consistent across a class.

Care, guidance and support for students are outstanding. Assessment of individual students is detailed and is used effectively to inform planning for them. Students have an outstanding knowledge or experience of how to stay safe, make healthy choices and become responsible young citizens. Work experience and community links are used effectively in preparing students for their future destinations on leaving school. Students gain work experience through opportunities in local business, charities, and in school, for example, working in the 'Portland Café'.

Leadership and management are good. Senior leaders successfully promote an environment in which all students feel safe and valued, and in which staff work hard to improve already good practice. This has created a vibrant and purposeful community. The contribution of the student voice to informing the future developments within the school and local community is good. For example, a group of students were recently involved in discussions of the planning of a community recreational area and successfully identified a number of health and safety issues. The middle leaders have a good understanding of what needs improvement in their areas. However, some aspects of whole school monitoring and analysis are still in development and are not yet sufficiently systematic. Some opportunities are missed in analysing assessment data across the school and sharing information about patterns in this data with all staff. As a result, available assessment data are not used consistently across the school to further raise achievement from good to outstanding. The school's self-evaluation judges its overall effectiveness, sixth form and the achievement as outstanding. Although these judgements do not match those of the inspection and are too generous, the school accurately identifies its strengths and weaknesses.

The school's specialist status has been used very effectively to enhance resources, for example, through additional computers, communication equipment and additional staff to further develop the students' language and communication skills. The school is very successful in developing

a wide range of partnerships including local industry and schools. As a result, there are more opportunities for students to experience work-placements and to mix with other adults and students from outside Portland College.

The school's contribution to community cohesion is good. The school is an integral part of the local community and links with external partners extend the impact of its work both nationally and internationally.

Governors are supportive and well informed and provide the school with good levels of challenge. The school has made good improvements since the time of the last inspection and delivers good value for money. Good leadership has, for example, resulted in innovative curriculum developments and higher attendance, demonstrating the school's good capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The effectiveness of the sixth form is good with several outstanding features. Students make good progress in their development of skills and knowledge. This results from the excellent curriculum, which provides students with a wealth of experiences that are very well tailored to their needs. Learning pathways take proper account of students' communication skills and behaviours in determining what learning situations might enable them to thrive. Students' personal development is exemplary. Behaviour is good. They have a keen awareness of how to keep healthy and how to look after themselves in any challenging situations. There are excellent social relations between students and with staff. Students greatly enjoy school life, particularly opportunities to take responsibility and show initiative. This is especially the case with work-placements, not least the chance to work in the school cafe. Students are well motivated by certification arrangements such as Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network, the Mayor's Award and the Duke of Edinburgh Award. Students have a good grasp of what lies ahead in their educational and other opportunities. Teaching is good and generally facilitates good progress for the majority in each lesson. Lessons are well planned and have a suitable balance of building up communication and other basic skills and promoting personal development. The sixth form is well led and managed. Students are exceptionally well looked after and the progress of individuals is monitored carefully.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the clarity of school wide data analysis and self-evaluation to ensure that variation in students' progress across the school is effectively identified and remedied.
- Ensure that students make consistently good or better progress in individual lessons.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Although students' learning difficulties mean that their attainment remains below that expected of mainstream students, they achieve well between Year 7 to Year 11 and in the sixth form, consequently they make good progress overall. Many students with a range of different needs make good progress, including those with moderate learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties and those students with highly complex needs. The students who are making slower progress receive good and well targeted support and because of this, they catch up and make gains at the same rate as the other students. Overall, students make particularly good progress

in learning the basic skills of communication, literacy and independence, which reflects the emphasis placed on these areas through the school's specialist status. Most students make equally good progress in meeting their challenging individual education plan (IEP) targets in basic skills and in personal development. This has a clear impact on their good overall achievement. Some students make outstanding progress in some lessons. By the time students leave the school in the sixth form, they achieve a good range of nationally recognised qualifications.

The progress students make varies within lessons. For example, within the same lesson the progress of different students can range from outstanding to satisfactory. Similarly, some students make outstanding progress in some lessons and only satisfactory progress in others. As a result of this variability, the inspection judges students' progress to be good overall rather than agreeing with the school's judgement of it as outstanding.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. They are mindful of the school's 'thought for the day'. Younger students learnt a great deal from a recent visit to Durham Cathedral. They have a clear grasp of right and wrong and how to get on with others. The wide range of opportunities from visits out of school expands their cultural awareness and their confidence in different social situations. Behaviour is good and, should any students be upset, there is sensitive and timely intervention. Students greatly enjoy all that they do at school. They love opportunities for physical activity and are very keen to eat healthily. Students appreciate that others may occasionally be unhappy, and they know how to respond. Attendance is excellent and the number of persistent poor attenders has fallen markedly since last year. Students make a good contribution to the life of the school community, for instance, through the school council, and more widely by contributions to charitable ventures such as the Shoe Box Appeal. They are well prepared for the later stages of education and make good gains in self-esteem and independence.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good throughout the school, including the sixth form. The school now provides for students with more moderate educational needs and teachers have adjusted their planning and teaching very effectively to take full account of the range of needs that the students present. In the best lessons, very good planning ensures that students are frequently engaged in active and collaborative tasks that capture their interest and attention. The assessment procedures help identify small steps of achievement and this enables teachers to tailor activities to meet the learning needs of individuals. Excellent guidance and good use of questioning and feedback engages students and extends their learning. The knowledgeable teaching assistants support teachers and students effectively. Teachers and staff manage behaviour well. They successfully maintain a purposeful learning environment through their expertise in creating clearly structured learning activities. These factors enable students to work with increased levels of concentration and help them to enjoy their lessons. However, sometimes staff attention is more focused on some students than others. As a result, learning is not always consistent across a class.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school provides an outstanding curriculum which meets the needs of all the students very effectively. An exemplary and innovative feature of the curriculum is the way it has been designed to personalise the activities for individual students. This enables learning to be well matched to the individual needs and aspirations of students. Curriculum enhancement through the use of a wide range of visits and visitors provides the opportunity to engage with the local and business community to encourage the development of life skills. For example, students visit the local shops to buy ingredients so that they can cook a meal and have worked on a factory assembly line on quality control. They have opportunities to go on residential visits both in the local area and abroad. There is a large array of enrichment activities on offer. The students enjoy a range of school clubs, for example, swimming, judo and massage, which are well attended. The curriculum successfully sets out to enable all students to develop confidence and responsibility and extend their knowledge and understanding of the world around them. This allows the students to make good progress and enjoy a real sense of success.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Parents recognise this, for example, in comments such as, 'it is a wonderful, caring place where my son feels valued and warmly included.' There is exceptionally careful attention to all aspects of safeguarding students, whether they are in school or on trips away. All information and incidents that might affect students' welfare are carefully recorded. There is frequent communication between the school and students' homes. Parents comments include 'parent/school contact is exceptional' and 'I am always kept informed and feel I can contact the school at any time'. Staff have a very clear picture of each student's needs and there is very effective liaison between staff to ensure that medical and educational provision is as timely and effective as possible. Students know what is being planned for them and have opportunity to express a view. They are very well prepared for moving on and all steps are taken to relieve any anxieties. There is every possible consideration where students are being moved and assisted or when matters of personal hygiene are being attended to. Staff are exceptionally sensitive to students' likes and dislikes. Records of the progress of individual students are generally clear and helpful. There is particularly detailed information on students' personal development, medical conditions and common behaviours and this is very helpful in guiding staff who work with them. There is strong encouragement for students to extend themselves, to try something new, and to engage in additional physical activity that is within their potential.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leaders have an outstanding vision for Portland College, which is being realised through effective distributed leadership and a school-wide commitment to raising standards. Innovation and creativity are encouraged and this is having a significant impact by improving the curriculum so that it closely matches the interests and needs of all the students. The specialist programme is well led and managed with senior and middle leaders working closely with governors to evaluate progress in this area and develop a vision for future developments.

The senior leadership is highly effective in creating the excellent supportive climate promoted in the school. This has made students feel very secure and underpins their good progress. The quality of professional training is good and is suitably focused on raising standards. Senior leaders monitor the curriculum effectively and play a significant role in maintaining good standards of teaching and learning. However, some opportunities for monitoring the progress of groups of students are missed and analysis of whole school assessment does not sufficiently inform staff of the rates of progress that students make.

Middle leaders have a clear view in how to develop their departments. The school has successfully addressed the areas identified for development in the previous inspection. It has also made significant improvements in some key areas, especially the curriculum. It has therefore good capacity to improve further. Parents have an overwhelmingly positive view of the school and it has a very good reputation within the local community. Governors are actively and productively involved in the life of the school. They are very supportive and provide a good level of challenge to leaders. Senior leaders have put in place effective arrangements for the promotion of community cohesion. They have evaluated the success of initiatives including; students' contribution to the school and local community, for example, the running of the school café and in raising funds for charity. Visits and contact with other countries are well developed and students have visited Holland, Turkey, Latvia and Scotland and receive a wide range of visitors.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2	

¹Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

18 June 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Portland College, Specialist School for Cognition and Learning, Sunderland, SR3 2NQ

On behalf of the inspection team, I would like to thank you very much for making us feel so welcome when we visited your school. We enjoyed talking to you. I thought you might like to know what we thought about your school. This is a good school with some outstanding features. These are its strengths.

- The school is a happy place to be and you enjoy being there.
- You work hard and are making good progress in your work.
- You do outstandingly well in your personal development and your behaviour is good.
- The curriculum has been specially developed by the school to meet your individual needs and is outstanding.
- You enjoy the many activities the school provides, including the school clubs.
- You are extremely well looked after and staff do their best to make sure your lessons are interesting and fun.
- The school is well led and managed.

The headteacher and the senior team know how to improve the school. We have asked them to focus on improving.

- The way that they look at the information they have about how well you are doing so that they can help you improve further.
- To improve the lessons so that more students make the same good or better progress more of the time.

You can help them by continuing to do your best and making the most of all the opportunities the school provides for you. Thank you again for being so helpful and friendly. We wish you every success.

Yours sincerely

Elaine Colquhoun

Lead inspector (on behalf of the team)