

Poltair School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	112052
Local Authority	Cornwall
Inspection number	325519
Inspection dates	3–4 June 2009
Reporting inspector	David Townsend HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	817
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Diana Pride
Headteacher	Stephen Tong
Date of previous school inspection	7 June 2006
School address	Trevarthian Road St Austell PL25 4BZ
Telephone number	01726 874520
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors.

Description of the school

Poltair is a smaller than average school serving St Austell and its surrounding areas, where there are pockets of economic deprivation. Students' attainment on entry to school is typically well below average. A high number of students join or leave the school during the school year and in different year groups. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is above average. Most students are of White British heritage. Poltair School was designated a specialist sports college in 1997. The school has undergone a difficult transition period during which it was without a substantive headteacher. The new headteacher has been in post since April 2008. The school is currently undergoing a significant building programme.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Poltair is a satisfactory and improving school. It is emerging from a period of transition during which students' achievement was adversely affected. Since then, the incoming headteacher has worked quickly and effectively to strengthen leadership and to put in place more rigorous management systems. These have had a clear impact on improving classroom practices and outcomes for students. Teaching and learning are satisfactory and improving. Some teachers, but not yet all, are embracing the new approaches to involving students in their own learning. Leaders accept that they have not yet made enough progress in training colleagues and ensuring all staff are held to account for implementing the required improvements.

Achievement is now satisfactory and standards are gradually rising from well below to broadly average levels. This represents significant improvement in recent terms, especially given the high number of students joining or leaving the school each year. Achievement in Key Stage 3 is improving again. In Key Stage 4, there is now a rising trend in the number of students who are expected to achieve five good GCSE passes, including English and mathematics. Progress in other subjects is improving too and is often good. The previous underachievement in mathematics is being stemmed and in this subject and English, students are making steady progress. However, teaching is not yet consistently good enough in these two subjects to raise standards.

Personal development and well-being are good. Most students enjoy school and feel safe and well cared for. They appreciate the good curriculum, especially the extensive additional activities on offer as a result of the specialist sports college status. The behaviour seen during the inspection was consistently good and has improved, as has students' attendance and punctuality. There remains some continued poor behaviour by a minority of students. Most make a real contribution to the local community and demonstrate good levels of safety awareness and a commitment to healthy living.

The majority of parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire were very positive about the school and the quality of education and care provided. However, a significant minority of respondents raised concerns in relation to their children's achievement and well-being and the school's communication with them about this. The school does respond diligently to all issues that occur in relation to individual students and keeps careful records. It accepts, however, that its anti-bullying policy is not being promoted assiduously, and that parents are not yet fully involved in their children's learning. At present, systems for setting and reviewing learning targets with students and their parents are also too variable. For these reasons, care, guidance and support are satisfactory rather than good. However, the specialist work of student services in supporting more vulnerable young people, through their close links with external agencies, is very effective.

Recent improvements to students' achievement and attendance are the result of collaborative self-evaluation and well-chosen actions to improve students' progress-tracking and intervention systems. These gains, in a short period of time, have been hard won and significant and secured during a period in which the school has undergone a major building programme. Although there remains much to do, positive change is occurring rapidly now and the school has good capacity for further improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and achievement in English and mathematics.
- Share best practice so that the quality of all teaching improves to that of the best by ensuring middle leaders hold their teams to account for this.
- Further promote and monitor the school's anti-bullying policy and procedures, and improve communication with parents on this issue.
- Involve students and their parents more closely in academic progress reviews and improve approaches to target setting and feedback.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged to be satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Overall, students' achievement is satisfactory, including for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Standards, although below average, are improving after a recent period of difficulty for the school. By the end of Year 9, students reach below average standards in English, mathematics and science. This represents good progress from their well below average starting points. Too few students are reaching the higher levels in English and mathematics.

Achievement in Key Stage 4 has markedly improved in recent terms. In particular, the school has made significant progress in addressing last year's fall in GCSE results to well below average levels. Weak achievement in mathematics in Years 10 and 11 contributed to this fall. The school has responded decisively by sharpening systems for tracking students' progress in all subjects and ensuring teachers monitor it carefully. Such data have been used well to put in place a range of early intervention strategies to support at-risk students, including less confident, middle ability girls. In science and an increased number of other subjects, including physical education, progress has been good. Students are making steady progress towards the adequately challenging targets in English and mathematics this year. The percentage of students set to secure five good GCSE passes, including these subjects, is on track to rise to broadly average levels.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Most students enjoy their education, have good attitudes to learning and feel safe and well cared for. This is reflected in the above average levels of attendance and good punctuality. Some parents have expressed concerns about bullying and behaviour and these were investigated by inspectors. Most students are very clear that improvement has occurred. They agree that there is at least one adult with whom they feel confident to discuss personal concerns, and that reported incidents are always followed up. Students work safely with equipment in lessons and develop the skills to make safe and informed decisions of their own. Older students, particularly those on leadership courses, learn how to assess risks and take informed decisions in hazardous situations. Behaviour seen in lessons and around the school during the inspection was good. Exclusions have fallen below average but a minority of students do continue to exhibit poor behaviour.

Students know how democracy works because the elections for student council members involve canvassing, speech making and voting. However, the reasons for the decisions the council make are not always communicated to the tutor groups so some students feel that their requests have been ignored.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. Assemblies offer satisfactory opportunities for personal reflection. Students say that the Christmas and Easter services are inspiring, but they have not had the chance to visit any places of worship from other religions. Their knowledge of their local culture is good and they have some multicultural experiences through the links with Ethiopia and visiting musicians.

Students very much enjoy the wide variety of sports on offer, which help them keep healthy. They know the importance of a good diet and appreciate the improvement in the canteen, but a small minority smoke on the school premises. They contribute well to the school and local community in many ways, for example as 'ambassadors' in Year 8, prefects, charity fundraisers and as team leaders helping out in local sports clubs. They have a satisfactory level of key skills. They develop very good enterprise and leadership skills and receive very good careers advice which gives them a solid basis for their continued education and later life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The monitoring of teaching and learning, although improved, is not yet sufficiently embedded to ensure that good and outstanding practice is spread and inconsistencies tackled. The better lessons are characterised by high expectations and students being very involved in their own learning and its assessment. Technology equipment is used confidently to motivate students. Teaching assistants are used well to support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The less effective lessons rely too much on teacher-led activities and lack pace. Consequently, on such occasions, students are not always sufficiently challenged and progress slows. Teachers' marking of work in some subjects is not sufficiently regular in nature, and does not indicate clearly how the students can improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum meets the needs of all students well. There are a variety of learning pathways available for those in Year 10 and 11. Many students, including the gifted and talented, have their own individual learning plans to ensure that their learning experiences are personalised to their needs and interests. As a response to the relatively low literacy levels of students when they start school, the 'accelerated reader programme' has been introduced and it particularly appeals to boys. Project work is also popular. For example, during the 'Democracy Day' event students meet with local politicians. A good emphasis is placed on personal, learning and thinking skills in the revised Year 7 curriculum. Students are encouraged to apply these skills in their learning in other subjects. The range and variety of extra-curricular activities, particularly those established by the school as a specialist sports college, make an effective contribution to the students' participation, enjoyment and achievement. The school is also part of a 14–19 consortium of local schools and a local college and will be in a position to offer two of the new Diplomas from September 2009.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Poltair School has very rigorous safeguarding procedures which are followed by all staff. Health and safety checks are carried out regularly and students are taught how to use equipment safely in practical lessons. High quality care is available to students with physical problems and staff ensure that medicines are kept safely. The highly effective student services centre makes best use of staff expertise and a very wide range of outside professionals to help students with emotional, behavioural, organisational or social worries. It has an open door policy for those with troubles.

Over time the school has made good progress in reducing the number of incidents of bullying, but it has not yet been eliminated. The staff team diligently follow up reported cases and the school's anti-bullying policy is considered a positive development by younger students in particular. However, the school recognises that it does not yet do enough to promote the policy and monitor the impact of a zero-tolerance approach.

Attendance is extremely well monitored and rates have improved. The recent use of text messaging, to alert parents that their children have not turned up for school, has been well received. Learning managers play an effective role in monitoring and supporting individual students at risk of non-attendance. They also find out from the academic tracking information or from tutors when a student is having problems with a subject and take decisive steps to put this right. The school offers effective and varied support for students who have additional learning needs. However, because the school's recording and target setting systems are variable, not all students know their targets or what they have to do to achieve them. Also, parents do not feel closely enough involved in these processes.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Despite only being in post for a relatively short time, the headteacher has quickly established a clear strategic direction for the school. Tracking and data procedures and systems provide transparency for all and are used effectively to highlight under-achievement and to identify areas for improvement. The school's self-evaluation process involves middle leaders and provides a clear and accurate account of its strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement. There is a common commitment amongst the staff to drive forward the pace of change and to improve the outcomes for all learners. Challenging targets are set but not always met. Specialist status in sport is a strong feature. Students benefit from the many and varied opportunities that are available both on site and as a consequence of good partnerships with other institutions.

Subject leaders have a clear understanding of their role and are fully involved in evaluating students' progress. They have ensured that the sharing of best practice has increased this in the last year. However, they are not rigorous enough in ensuring that all staff within their teams adopt and apply agreed policies consistently. Community cohesion is satisfactory. The school has carried out an audit of provision and monitored the good impact of its initiatives relating to the local community, although students' understanding of communities across the United Kingdom and abroad is not yet so well established. Governors serve the school well. They provide good support and challenge to the school and are closely involved in formulating its strategic direction.

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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
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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?	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3

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?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	2
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	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	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**

5 June 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Poltair School, St Austell PL25 4BZ

Thank you for the help you gave us with the recent inspection and for the polite and friendly way you received us. Our overall finding is that your school provides a satisfactory standard of education and that it is improving. Most of you told us that you enjoy coming to school and feel safe. The great majority of you have good attendance this year, behave well and are respectful towards others. We also liked:

- improvements that are emerging in the rate of progress you are making with your learning this year, especially in English and mathematics
- the way you lead healthy lifestyles and participate in the excellent range of sports and additional learning activities
- the focus on key learning skills in the new Year 7 curriculum and the extensive choice of subjects and courses available to older students
- the way the school tries to meet your individual learning needs.

However, there remains much to do to achieve the school's aims and address the concerns that some of you and your parents have been expressing. With this in mind, we have set out the following priority areas in which the school should seek to improve further.

- It must help more of you make good progress in each subject and reach higher standards, especially in English and mathematics.
- All teachers need to consistently involve you in your own learning, to challenge and support you and to make lessons lively and practical. Section heads need to check that this is the case.
- The school, with your help, needs to promote its anti-bullying policy more actively, check it is having maximum effect, and keep parents closely informed if any issues arise.
- Each of you and your parents need to be closely involved with your teachers in reviews of your academic progress, through effective target setting and marking.

We feel the school's leaders and governors have the skills to make your school even better in the future and we hope you will play your part in this. Thank you again for all your help in the inspection and we wish you every success for the future.

Yours faithfully

David Townsend

Her Majesty's Inspector