

Portland Academy

Weymouth Road, Chapelgarth, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear SR3 2NQ

Inspection dates

21–22 June 2017

Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Some teaching, including in the sixth form, does not ensure that enough pupils make good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. In some lessons, pupils are given tasks that do not help them to learn well. Occasionally, some teaching time is lost due to pupils waiting either for other pupils to arrive or for support from staff.
- The most able pupils in key stage 4 and students in the sixth form are not challenged to achieve the highest level of qualifications they could. This includes English and mathematics, as well as other qualifications.
- Careers advice does not encourage pupils or their parents to think ambitiously about a range of possibilities for their future, including different types of employment.
- Some resources used to support pupils' and students' learning do not encourage them to develop interests that reflect their ages. This creates additional hurdles for pupils to overcome to be respected as adults within society.
- Sometimes, staff do not work out why pupils respond in the way they do in different situations. Records of some incidents miss some important details. Although pupils are well supported when distressed and behaving unsafely, work to support some pupils to learn how to manage their own responses is not fully effective.

The school has the following strengths

- Since the last inspection, trustees and leaders have transformed the way they lead and manage the school. Pupils are achieving better outcomes as a result of this determined drive for improvement.
- In September 2016, leaders bravely decided to introduce a new curriculum and a new approach to assessing pupils' learning. When teachers use the new approach, pupils learn well and make strong progress.
- Pupils make good progress in their personal development because staff know them well and support them skilfully. Some aspects of the work to keep pupils safe are exemplary.
- Staff have been energised by changes and developments at Portland Academy. They value the support and challenge they receive from leaders and recognise their work is making a positive difference to pupils' learning and well-being.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the effectiveness of teaching, including in the sixth form, so that pupils make more progress by ensuring that:
 - all teachers grasp how to use the school’s assessment system linked to the curriculum, to plan lessons that allow pupils to develop and use new knowledge, understanding and skills
 - teachers make sure that the most able pupils are challenged, so they achieve qualifications in English and mathematics and a range of other subjects at the highest level of which they are capable
 - teachers plan to use lesson time fully, so less time is wasted by pupils waiting for lessons to start or for individual attention
 - pupils’ interest in age-related activities is encouraged by the consistent use of age-appropriate materials and resources.
- Further improve pupils’ personal development and behaviour by:
 - consistently recording and analysing the details of staff actions to support pupils when their behaviour is unsafe, particularly when physical interventions are necessary
 - ensuring that staff develop their understanding of why some pupils react in the way they do at different times, and making sure that staff use their understanding to plan different ways for these pupils to learn to manage their own behaviour more successfully.
- Make certain that all pupils and students receive effective and impartial careers advice and guidance, to:
 - improve pupils’ and students’ ambition to aim for realistic employment as adults
 - ensure that pupils and students are supported, whenever possible, to make decisions about when they leave school and what courses and/or positive activities they move on to.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Trustees and leaders took decisive action in 2016 when they realised planned improvements were not leading to the ambitious and meaningful outcomes they want for their pupils. In September 2016, the new team introduced fundamental changes to all aspects of the school's work. The changes are making a positive difference to the pupils' experience of school and the outcomes they achieve. Leaders have a good understanding of what more needs to be done to ensure that all pupils get the full benefit of the new approaches to teaching and learning.
- Leaders initially set about to improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare. Leaders did this with steely determination. There is clarity about new staff roles, training and development activities and a different, assertive approach to how staff manage pupils' behaviour in lessons and around school. These strategies have led to positive changes. As a result, pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare are now good.
- Leaders' considerable investment in additional staff to support vulnerable pupils and their families, including those pupils who are looked after and pupils in need of help and protection, has reaped substantial rewards. Aspects of the school's work to safeguard pupils are exemplary. For example, the robust challenge to other services about the timeliness of the support pupils receive when a need is identified.
- Leaders recognised that teachers had been using the previous assessment system to plan lessons. Leaders' evaluation was that the resulting lesson content and pace did not inspire the pupils to learn. They also recognised that some of the previous assessments of pupils' learning were not accurate, because they did not take into account how well pupils could use their skills and knowledge in different situations. Leaders' response was a courageous decision to change the pupils' experience of learning in the school completely. As a result, where the changes have been fully implemented, pupils are enthusiastic about learning and are making strong gains in their education.
- The new curriculum engages pupils in learning. It includes a broad range of subjects alongside an appropriate focus on reading, writing and mathematics. Importantly, the assessment system is robust. Leaders keep a very close eye on how teachers check the progress pupils make. Tests and checks have shown up some gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding, particularly in how well pupils are able to use what they have learned in the classroom in different situations. The new approach, where it is fully understood and used by teachers, is increasing the rate of the progress pupils make. Leaders acknowledge that the new approach is not embedded across all classes.
- During a year of substantial changes, leaders have captured the staff's commitment. The overwhelming majority of staff feel well supported and enthusiastic about the positive impact the new approaches are having on pupils. Alongside formal professional development opportunities, staff appreciate updates during staff briefings. Snappy reminders about the accurate production of phonics (letters and the sounds they

represent) and use of sign language, as well as safeguarding responsibilities, keep staff up to speed with key aspects of their work.

- The small number of parents who responded to Parent View were positive about the difference the new leaders are making to every aspect of the school's work.

Governance of the school

- Trustees have a robust and accurate system for checking that leaders are delivering the trust's agreed priorities. Evidence of detailed reviews, involving experienced and skilled trustees as well as external advisers, confirms that the trust has a good grip on the school's progress. Minutes of meetings indicate that trustees' challenge and support are balanced appropriately. Their self-evaluation of the school matches inspection findings.
- Trustees ensure that the pupil premium and catch-up funding are used appropriately. Consequently, there is very little difference between the progress and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and others. Similarly, trustees and leaders monitor the use of additional funding that some pupils receive because of the complexity of their special educational needs and/or disabilities. Effective use of specific funds ensures that pupils with a wide range of needs benefit equitably from all the school has to offer.
- Trustees' policies set out clearly the standards expected of different staff at different stages of their careers. Trustees also scrutinise pay recommendations to ensure that they are linked appropriately to the standards they expect.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The dedicated safeguarding lead, ably supported and supervised by the trust-wide safeguarding leader, ensures that all staff share a deep commitment to keep pupils as safe as possible. Pupils' records are detailed and well organised, so leaders can track the effectiveness of different actions taken, as well as ensure that other services are working in a timely way to support pupils.
- Staff are well trained and, importantly, remember their training, so they know what to do about different concerns. For example, every member of staff asked knew without hesitation to take concerns about another member of staff directly to the head of the academy.
- Pupils said, and indicated by their responses to staff, that they feel safe in school. The few incidents of bullying are dealt with effectively. Crucially, leaders ensure that different planned activities help pupils to develop ways of managing friendships well.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Teaching requires improvement because, in different year groups and for pupils with different needs, too many lessons are not planned to move pupils on from what they know, understand or can do, in an appropriate sequence. Some teachers are struggling to get to grips with the new curriculum and assessment system that leaders have

recently introduced. The high level of variability in teaching results in some pupils, including the most able, only making slow progress in reading, writing and mathematics.

- Some pupils' development of writing skills is hampered by some teaching that restricts pupils' opportunities to write independently or, in a few examples, to write from left to right. In some lessons, pupils lose some learning time because of a few pupils' late arrival or ineffective strategies to move pupils on from their chosen activity. Some pupils' English and mathematics books show that easy work is repeated unnecessarily.
- Work in some pupils' books and activities in lessons indicate that teachers plan to use resources designed for very young children. This does not encourage either the pupils or other people they meet to have due respect for their age and maturation. As a result, some pupils are not encouraged to develop age-related interests.
- Some teachers and teaching assistants are very quick to give pupils the answers to questions. This restricts pupils' opportunities to absorb the information they are given and think about the answers for themselves.
- Inspectors saw the positive affect on learning where teachers have grasped the new curriculum and assessment system. In these lessons, work is well matched to pupils' individual needs. Teachers and teaching assistants work seamlessly together to ensure that little time is lost as they support pupils to engage in learning. The work that is set captures the interest of pupils. Teachers are confident to raise the level of challenge when they know pupils have understood and can use a newly acquired skill. Strong examples of challenge to the most able included pupils developing scientific enquiry skills by designing different tests.
- Teaching, learning and assessment for pupils who have profound and multiple learning difficulties are good. Staff plan activities built on their detailed knowledge of each pupil. They allow pupils time to respond to different stimuli and so pupils consolidate their emerging skills. For example, by the careful positioning of switch devices, pupils developed some independent communication.
- The recently introduced phonics scheme is improving the teaching of reading. It is backed up by thorough training, weekly refreshers that amuse staff and clear displays around school. Equally, leaders' additional investment in speech and language therapy ensures that teachers are well supported to develop pupils' communication skills as well as pupils benefiting from individual therapy sessions.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. The curriculum and wide range of enrichment activities ensure that pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is secure. There are many opportunities for pupils to understand about the rule of law and to develop respect and understanding for people from different backgrounds.

- After-school clubs and clubs at breaktime and lunchtime provide opportunities for different groups of pupils to play and socialise together. Lunchtimes are a good example of highly effective support being given for pupils' personal development. There is a strong mix of independence and skilful care, with regularly updated feeding regimes for those pupils who need that level of support.
- The medical needs of pupils are well catered for. Staff are confident in the training provided by the school nurse to complete non-oral feeding and medication routines.
- Great care is taken to ensure that potential risky situations are managed safely without restricting pupils' independence. For example, pupils' arrivals and departures by a host of minibuses and taxis are managed expertly, with great clarity about different staff roles and responsibilities. Carefully pitched support ensures that pupils who can find their way into school independently do so safely.
- Road safety and travel training programmes are delivered effectively, resulting in a small number of sixth formers travelling to school on public transport independently.
- Leaders are acutely aware of the gap in providing good-quality careers advice and impartial guidance to all pupils. Pupils currently learn about a range of different jobs. However, they are not given clear guidance about what they need to achieve in order to be realistic in their aspirations to particular roles. Neither are pupils supported to think about options after Year 11, other than staying on in the school's sixth form.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Most pupils are polite and considerate young people. Skilful and nurturing staff, who consistently model thoughtful and respectful behaviour, provide good support to individual pupils. As a result, there are few interruptions to lessons when pupils are distracted by poor behaviour.
- Attendance fluctuates just below the average for all schools. Leaders continue to increase the range of strategies used to engage parents in the importance of regular attendance. Consequently, some pupils' attendance has improved by over 10%.
- Leaders invest in occupational therapy to assess identified pupils' sensory needs and to train staff in different strategies to support individual pupils. This work has proved successful for many pupils, as they learn to regulate their emotions and are able to engage in learning.
- All pupils who experience challenges in their behaviour have detailed support plans and risk assessments. The plans ensure that they are supported safely by well-trained staff if physical interventions are needed to keep everyone safe. Appropriate records are kept of all incidents. However, some of the most difficult incidents are not recorded in sufficient detail for leaders to be able to analyse the effectiveness of staff responses.
- Behaviour support plans detail well-thought-out strategies for staff to use when they need to support pupils who may become aggressive. However, some pupils' plans do not indicate why they react in the way they do. The absence of understanding the reason why the behaviours occur limits the effectiveness of the staff's work to change pupils' behaviour over time.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Leaders' information indicates that in 2015/16, a healthy proportion of pupils made progress at least in line with pupils who have similar special educational needs and/or disabilities in other schools, when compared with information collected through a commercial product. However, leaders also recognise that there were some inaccuracies and inconsistencies in teachers' assessments. Insufficient evidence was seen to confirm leaders' information about the progress of pupils in the past.
- Leaders' appropriate decision to introduce an assessment system closely linked to the new curriculum is beginning to generate tangible evidence that pupils are making progress from their different starting points. However, linked to the inconsistencies in teaching, evidence in pupils' workbooks and teachers' assessment information indicate that most pupils do not make good progress in reading, writing and mathematics.
- The most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, are not sufficiently challenged to make the progress of which they are capable. Currently, pupils in key stage 4 and students in the sixth form have limited opportunities to achieve qualifications that represent strong progress over their secondary education.
- Leaders introduced a new reading scheme in January 2017. The early results of this are very promising, with many pupils making rapid gains in their recognition of different phonic combinations. They are also improving their reading skills.
- Pupils and sixth-form students who have profound and multiple learning difficulties, including complex healthcare needs and physical disabilities, make small steps of progress comparable with other pupils with similar starting points. There is close work with medical staff, physiotherapists, speech and language, and occupational therapists. This ensures that pupils' and students' physical comfort and health needs are met and supports the progress this group of pupils and students make.
- Most pupils make strong progress in their personal development. For example, most pupils who have autistic spectrum conditions make strong gains in their social communication and their ability to self-regulate their emotions.
- The overwhelming majority of pupils leave school at 19 and move on to positive destinations, including further specialist education. However, limitations in careers advice and impartial guidance mean that pupils do not get the support they need to identify and work towards achieving their own ambitions.

16 to 19 study programmes

Requires improvement

- Teaching in the sixth form is too variable. Some work is not planned to meet the students' needs, nor encourage the most able students to achieve as well as they could. As a result, outcomes for sixth-form students are not good.
- There is no systematic approach to build on English and mathematics entry level qualifications achieved in Year 11 over the three years of the sixth form. Leaders have convincing plans in place to rectify this situation. Effective examples of teaching linking the practical use of mathematics and literacy skills to life skills are emerging, for

example in food and nutrition lessons. Similarly, students run their weekly tuck shop, giving opportunities for them to apply their learning about the value and use of money.

- Gaps in careers education and impartial advice and guidance continue into the sixth form. However, students visit a range of potential post-19 colleges and a range of people in different job roles visit the school to talk about their work. School- and community-based work experience is established. For some students, their work experience opportunities match their emerging ambition, for example when working with cars. Students with complex needs have opportunities to complete routine tasks and jobs around school with support. This supports their personal development and self-esteem, as well as their ability to regulate their emotions in different environments within school.
- Students spoke confidently about how much they enjoy optional subjects, including drama and media work. They feel safe and learn how to keep themselves safe. They are proud of their video about e-safety, posted on You Tube. They expressed a strong sense of valuing each other's differences. This includes understanding that some students can get angry as they struggle when things change. They appreciate how staff intervene to keep them all safe.
- As with most other members of the leadership team, the sixth-form leader started in September 2016. Gaps in the study programmes were quickly recognised and plans were established to develop the curriculum and assessment system in line with the secondary department in school. Themed projects that link English and mathematics skills with independence skills and employability skills are in place. However, these are being taught with varying levels of effectiveness. Leaders, well supported by the trust, are sharply aware of what needs to improve.

School details

Unique reference number	138526
Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	10023821

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	159
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	52
Appropriate authority	The academy trust
Chair	Nick Hurn
Head of academy	Sharon Common
Executive headteacher	Carolyn Dunn
Telephone number	01915 536 050
Website	www.portlandcollege.org
Email address	portland@ascenttrust.org
Date of previous inspection	21–22 January 2015

Information about this school

- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.
- The school complies with Department for Education guidance on what academies should publish.

- This average-sized special school makes provision for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties and pupils who have autistic spectrum conditions.
- Most pupils are from White British backgrounds. There is an increasing proportion of pupils from a range of other ethnic groups and an increasing proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language.
- Just over half of the pupils are disadvantaged. This is a higher than average proportion. A small number of pupils are children looked after.
- The head of the academy joined the school in September 2016. The executive headteacher, a longstanding headteacher within the trust, started working in the school in April 2016. A fifth of the teachers joined the school in September 2016.
- The school does not use alternative providers.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited a range of lessons for varying lengths of time. Three joint visits with senior leaders took place. During visits, inspectors talked with pupils and reviewed work in their books. Inspectors also reviewed in detail the education, health and care plans, books and assessment records relating to a sample of pupils.
- Inspectors met with groups of pupils from key stage 3 and 4 and the sixth form as well as observing pupils at breaktime and lunchtime.
- Meetings were held with senior and middle leaders from both the school and the trust to discuss all aspects of the school's work. A meeting was held with the trustees including the chair of trustees and the chief executive of the trust.
- A meeting was held with a group of teaching assistants and the views of 23 staff who responded to Ofsted's online staff survey were taken into account.
- Ten parents responded to Parent View, (Ofsted's online survey for parents), these and the seven free-text responses were taken into account.
- A wide range of documents and records were considered, including those relating to the school's arrangements for safeguarding.

Inspection team

Susan Hayter, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Zoe Westley	Ofsted Inspector
Catherine Garton	Ofsted Inspector

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