

Portal House School

Sea Street, St Margaret's-at-Cliffe, Dover, Kent, CT15 6SS

Inspection dates 4–5 June 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of students		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Achievement of students		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and students

This is a good school.

- The headteacher, school leaders and governors have worked hard to eliminate weak teaching and support outstanding behaviour.
- Students have made good progress in all subjects, including communication, English and mathematics. The school enters all its students for a good range of GCSEs and so they are well prepared for the future.
- Students supported by additional funding achieve as well, or better, than their peers and have made exceptional progress in reading.
- Reading is taught extremely well across the school. Students with gaps in their education when they join the school become fluent readers in a short space of time.
- Leaders of subjects continually check the quality of teaching to ensure that teachers and teaching assistants have the knowledge and skills to perform their role. This leads to consistently good teaching and learning in all year groups for most students.
- Records of students' progress are robust and accurate.
- Students say they are safe in school. Attendance has steadily improved in the last three years and is now average.
- The social and communication skills of students with complex needs, including autism, are rapidly improving. This is because teachers, parents and external agencies are working together effectively to support them.
- Students' behaviour is exceptionally well managed. As a result, students with complex behaviour difficulties are making outstanding progress in improving their behaviour.
- Students' social, moral, cultural and spiritual skills and understanding are developed effectively in all lessons and assemblies. These aspects are the focus of the school's future planning. Consequently, students respect each other and adults, and develop outstandingly positive attitudes to their learning.
- Governors understand how well the school is doing. They use effective strategies to make sure they know how students are performing.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

Teaching is not yet outstanding because a few more-able students are not making enough progress and expectations of what they can achieve are too low.

- More-able students are not always given enough opportunities to practise their writing or problem-solving skills in mathematics.
- Regular checks of the quality of teaching are not yet leading to improved progress for more-able students.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 10 parts of lessons jointly with the headteacher and deputy headteacher. They also visited classrooms to observe planned 'tutor time' sessions and discussed the school's curriculum with senior and middle leaders.
- The lead inspector had meetings with the Chair of the Governing Body and vice chair, as well as two representatives from the local authority.
- Further meetings were held with teaching assistants, therapists and support staff.
- There were no responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. The lead inspector held telephone interviews with five parents and considered the school's survey of parents in the last three years. The lead inspector also took account of the opinions of the 26 staff who completed the Ofsted staff questionnaire.
- The inspection team observed students' behaviour in lessons and in the playground, had discussions with them and listened to them read.
- Inspectors analysed the school's information on attainment and progress. They looked closely at documentation relating to safeguarding, the school's evaluation of its performance, its future plans, attendance and behaviour. They also looked at the school's website.

Inspection team

Justina Ilochi, Lead inspector

Additional inspector

Elizabeth Cornish

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Portal House School is a special school that caters for secondary-aged students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. A significant proportion of students have underlying complex mental and learning needs, including autism.
- All students have a statement of special education needs.
- The Chair of the Governing Body and the vice chair were appointed this year.
- More than half of students did not join the school in Year 7. A significant proportion of students have gaps in their education because they had not attended school for six months to two years prior to their entry to the school.
- Although designated as mixed, this school has not had girls on its roll in the last five years.
- Almost all students are from White British backgrounds.
- More than twice the proportion of students compared to the national average are supported by the pupil premium. This is additional government funding for children who are looked after or who are known to be eligible for free school meals. A significant number of students are looked after by the local authority.
- The school does not use alternative provision.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the progress of more-able students by ensuring that:
 - demanding and challenging end of key stage targets are set for them as soon as they join the school
 - they have more frequent opportunities to practise their writing skills across a wide range of topics
 - teachers allow sufficient opportunities during mathematics lessons for students to solve problems.
- Further improve leadership and management by ensuring that the good systems for checking the quality of teaching, particularly the review of students' work, have the impact they should on the progress of more able students.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher, supported well by senior and middle leaders and experienced governors, has eliminated weak teaching and encouraged outstanding behaviour. This has ensured rapid improvement to the progress of students in all year groups this year.
- At the time of the inspection, all students in Year 11 were present for their GCSE examinations; last year, almost half of students were absent.
- The school has clear and transparent systems for checking staff performance that are linked closely to salary, training and students' progress. All staff, both teaching and non-teaching, know that they can be rewarded for working hard and achieving results.
- The ethos around the school is warm and welcoming, staff are well motivated and the quality of teaching is consistently good.
- The school engages effectively with parents by asking for information and sharing with them the best strategies for teaching their children. Parents spoke about how well they were informed of the school's actions to improve the behaviour of their children.
- Leaders' checks on teaching are regular and provide accurate and useful feedback to teachers to help them improve their practice further. They do not, however, take enough account of the progress of more-able students, or identify which students could achieve more.
- Middle leaders make a strong contribution to the improvements in the school. The headteacher has ensured that all teaching staff who are on higher salaries have additional responsibilities and that they lead on various aspects of the school's work. This has led to the development of strong teams responsible for significant improvements in the behaviour of students with underlying complex needs. This year, students with social and emotional difficulties, including autism, made outstanding progress in developing their social skills because they benefited from one-to-one attention from the nurture team and therapists.
- The school is involved deeply in sharing best practice with schools within its local community as well as further afield. In the last year staff have led training on strategies to improve the performance of students with complex behavioural difficulties.
- Leaders keep robust records on a wide range of information about students, including their attainment and progress in all subjects. This has helped the school to plan one-to-one, small-group and a whole-school focus on specific areas of learning to meet students' needs particularly in reading. For example, the school has used its additional funding for Year 7 students to support their reading when they join the school. As a consequence, almost all students are fluent readers. They make exceptional progress in their reading, and gaps with their mainstream peers are closing rapidly.
- The school ensures that all students are entered for GCSEs in a wide range of subjects, including English and mathematics. Students are given good advice and guided well from Year 9 onwards so that they make good choices for their next steps in education, training or employment. This year all Year 11 students were accepted on courses to continue their education in local colleges.
- Staff have developed a well-planned calendar that includes activities throughout the year. These support the improvement of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural skills. Displays in classrooms and corridors show that students take part in fundraising events for charity and enjoy trips, clubs and societies. They are well prepared for life in modern Britain.
- The school works closely with external agencies such as Child and Mental Health Services and the police, to ensure that all students are safe. This supports the school's effective equal opportunities policies well, by ensuring that all students have outstanding opportunities to thrive no matter their complex behaviour needs.
- School leaders ensure that the additional funding provided for most of its students is managed well and the impact checked often. For example, leaders have used student premium funding over the last three years to employ specialist staff to focus on reading and the development of communication and social skills. Consequently, disadvantaged students have made progress which is similar to, or better than, other students in English and mathematics.
- All staff have high expectations of the behaviour of students in the school and they make sure students are motivated to reach the very challenging behaviour targets set for them. As a result, the behaviour of students improves rapidly as they pass through the school and is outstanding.
- The local authority has carried out several short visits to review the school's systems and processes. More recently they have provided useful support for the school's future planning by helping to strengthen its self-evaluation and recording keeping. This has ensured that the school has remained consistently good.
- Effective safeguarding procedures meet statutory requirements. School leaders check safeguarding

arrangements often and report to the governing body.

■ The governance of the school:

■ The governing body both supports and challenges school leaders well. The Chair and vice chair understand the school's strengths and weaknesses. Governors are experienced and well trained. They know the key aspects of their role and make sure they receive enough information on the quality of teaching and its impact on students' progress to make secure judgements. They give appropriate attention to academic performance and the behaviour of students. They have supported and contributed to the headteacher's clear procedures for checking the performance of teachers by approving salary increases for deserving staff. They visit the school often and observe its activities first-hand to ensure money is well spent. Governors know that additional funding is making a difference to identified students because they check the performance of students regularly.

The behaviour and safety of students are outstanding

Behaviour

- The behaviour of students is outstanding. Students behave extremely well in the classrooms and around the school. This is because all staff and students are committed to using strategies to reward improving behaviour that were developed over the last three years. As a result, students make exceptional progress in changing their behaviour.
- Students' relationships with adults and each other in and out of lessons are cordial; they respond extremely well and show their keenness to learn all the time. Students appreciate the opportunities they are given to show off their outstanding behaviour as 'senior students' and to take responsibility for their behaviour. This has contributed to the rapid progress they are making.
- The school has ensured that all students work in classrooms where the atmosphere is calm and purposeful so they can develop their social skills. For example, students, particularly those who are autistic and have other complex medical needs, learn together in special classrooms, supporting the development of outstanding social and emotional skills. Consequently, their behaviour is outstanding.
- Students learn about other cultures and faiths during their weekly assemblies. They grow in their personal skills and are extremely well prepared for the next stages in their education. Displays of their work in classrooms and around the school confirm this.
- Processes for recording and checking the behaviour of students are robust and followed consistently by all staff. Reports on individual students show that serious incidents have reduced drastically since the previous inspection.

Safety

- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is outstanding. Parents, students and staff agree that this is true. Bullying, including cyberbullying and all forms of discrimination, is challenged and never tolerated. Students recognise that there are consequences for negative behaviour and they know that school leaders take prompt action to keep them safe.
- Students' attendance has improved rapidly since the previous inspection and is now broadly average. This is because of the school's effort to work closely with parents and outside agencies to reduce students' absence.
- The school's daily timetable offers three useful planned 'tutor times'. These sessions give students ample opportunities to discuss their concerns with teachers and other adults in a safe environment. Consequently, students develop exceptional self-confidence and self-esteem and they learn to make the right choices about their safety.
- Students eat breakfast together when they arrive and talk to each other and adults about the school day ahead. Staff use this time to find out and deal with students' needs when they arrive. This alerts the school to any issues of safety that might emerge during the day and helps all students who have complex behavioural, emotional and social difficulties to settle quickly for the day ahead.

The quality of teaching is good

- The quality of teaching is consistently good in all year groups. The school has ensured that class teams, made up of teachers and teaching assistants, use information gathered about individual students to support their learning effectively. Students' attitudes to their lessons are therefore outstanding and they make good progress overall in all subjects; progress in reading is particularly strong.
- Teachers and teaching assistants are well trained and adept at modifying teaching strategies to meet the

needs of students. They develop strong relationships with students and use good questioning skills to encourage them to interact, think and reason well. As a result, students' communication skills are developing rapidly and have a positive impact on their writing skills, which are improving from low starting points.

- Transition between key stages is seamless because of the way leaders of subjects have focused on the curriculum and assessment of their subjects. They have high expectations of what students can achieve and ensure exciting and interesting learning opportunities lead to good achievement for most students.
- The school engages effectively with parents. They record and use what they learn about students to plan activities that match their learning ability. For example, the learning of students with gaps in their reading skills is exceptional. They are extremely well prepared to take their next steps in education. Students' reading achievement records, as well as their English work books, confirm this.
- The quality of teaching of mathematics and writing is good but not yet outstanding because the activities for more-able students do not always maximise their learning. For example, teachers do not give more-able students enough opportunities to practise their writing and problem-solving skills in mathematics. This has had an impact on achievement of a few more-able students, particularly in Key Stage 4. They are unable to reach the highest grades at GCSE, including in English and mathematics.
- The school's focus on checking the quality of teaching through regular 'work scrutiny' has improved teachers' marking seen in students' books. Students know about the good progress they are making and what they can do to improve their work without help.

The achievement of students is good

- Students in Key Stages 3 and 4 and in all year groups achieve well as a result of consistently good quality teaching. They overcome gaps in their learning.
- Students who struggled with reading prior to entry to the school are making outstanding progress and becoming fluent readers. This is because good systems are in place to check students' starting points accurately when they join the school. They are taught phonics (the links between sounds and letters) skills if necessary. The school sets aside time each day to develop students' love of reading.
- Students in Key Stage 4 are also making good progress in most subjects. They have seized every opportunity to obtain GCSEs and equivalent Level 2 qualifications in a range of subjects, such as information and communication technology, science, food technology, design and technology, art, physical education, religious education, English and mathematics. This prepares them well for their next steps in education and training, and for apprenticeships.
- Students make good progress in their social and communication skills in all subjects. They are routinely encouraged to speak up and express their views because teachers recognise that students require these skills. As a consequence, students with underlying complex needs, such as autism, thrive and make good progress socially.
- Disadvantaged students make similar or better progress compared to other students in the school. The additional funding set aside for them is used appropriately to ensure that the one-to-one and small-group teaching they need supports their learning well. Last year students who are looked after by the local authority made similar good progress to their peers in the school. Parents and carers interviewed by the lead inspector confirmed this view.
- Students in Year 11 and Year 9 are not set challenging and demanding academic end-of-key-stage targets in most subjects, especially English and mathematics. As a result, a few more-able students do not obtain the expected five GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics that match their ability. More-able students who spoke to the lead inspector commented that sometimes work in lessons was too easy for them.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its students' needs. This ensures that students are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its students' needs. Students are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its students an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	119062
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	449482

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community special
Age range of students	11–16
Gender of students	Mixed
Number of students on the school roll	54
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Philip Rankin
Headteacher	Rose Bradley
Date of previous school inspection	1–2 December 2011
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