

Inspection of a school judged good for overall effectiveness before September 2024: Portland Academy

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

Inspection dates:

18 and 19 February 2025

Outcome

Evidence gathered during this ungraded (section 8) inspection suggests that the school's work may have improved significantly across all areas since the previous inspection. The school's next inspection will be a graded inspection.

The headteacher of this school is Stephen Murphy. This school is part of The Ascent Academies' Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Rachel Hargreaves, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Lynn Watson.

What is it like to attend this school?

Portland Academy is a happy school, where pupils and staff flourish. Pupils' education is mapped out meticulously by highly skilled professionals. Staff pay close attention to the targets set in pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans. They use these plans to provide pupils with a highly considered and personalised educational experience. Pupils achieve exceptionally well in this safe and nurturing environment.

Pupils excel in their personal development. Staff expertly match teaching to pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Pupils become increasingly confident, resilient and independent over time. Warm and respectful relationships underpin the school's thriving culture. Pupils show great empathy for one another and prompt friends if they struggle to communicate. Pupils also patiently wait while others take their turn. Staff deliberately teach and model these important social skills. This impacts strongly on pupils' well-being throughout the school.

Pupils' preparation for adulthood begins from Year 7 onwards. Pupils learn to interact with others in a range of different situations. Students in the sixth form experience an excellent and diverse work experience programme. If they are not ready to access the community, there are opportunities within school. For example, pupils work in the school café. They also run a second-hand clothing shop called 'Port Mall'.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

The school has incredibly high expectations for its pupils. Staff are never complacent and strive for the highest standards. They constantly seek improvements in the best interests of pupils. Staff ensure the school's bespoke pathway curriculum is broad, balanced and meets pupils' needs highly effectively. There is a strong emphasis on communication. For example, staff use consistent objects of reference to help pupils to communicate throughout school. This aids pupils' understanding, independence and progression through the curriculum extremely well. Staff are trained expertly to use communication tools and other interventions. This includes in specialist areas such as intensive interaction and attention autism. Teachers model expectations clearly to pupils. They also use verbal and physical cues. As a result, pupils' focus and interaction in lessons are highly impressive.

Pupils love to read and listen to stories staff share. A well-considered reading curriculum ensures all pupils experience the wonder of books. For those pupils ready for phonics, this has a positive impact. Over time, pupils become fluent readers and are proud to share this skill. Where reading strategies do not work for pupils, staff act quickly. Careful adaptations ensure the curriculum meets pupils' unique needs. Students in the sixth form develop their functional literacy skills very well. They learn how to read recipes, shopping lists, timetables and more. This successfully prepares them for the wider world.

Pupils learn how to stay safe in an age-appropriate way. The high-quality curriculum and teaching help pupils to develop a deep body of knowledge. For example, students in the sixth form learn about safe intimate relationships. They also learn about the effects of alcohol and drugs. Students can confidently discuss how these topics affect each other. Their ability to make connections in their learning over time is impressive. Safety is also linked to the excellent careers programme. Pupils learn about jobs and take part in real-life scenarios. Health and safety is an important part of this learning. For example, pupils learn about food hygiene when preparing food for others.

Most pupils describe the school as a 'fun' place to be. They enjoy attending after-school clubs, such as dance, cookery and swimming. Each year, pupils also plan 'Port Fest'. This is a summer event for the whole community hosted at the school. They also enjoy a comprehensive and sequenced outdoor learning programme. Pupils in all years develop important social skills through their forest school lessons. They also focus on their physical and mental health. Many students in the sixth form take part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Due to thoughtful adaptations, impressive numbers of students go on to achieve the gold standard.

The school has sustained and improved its performance effectively since the last inspection. Innovative approaches to pupils' education are extremely impactful. For example, every pupil has learning ladders. These documents create a bridge between pupils' EHC plan and the ambitious curriculum. Every pupil has a bespoke pathway that supports their small steps in learning highly effectively.

Staff enjoy working at the school. They value that their training impacts directly on pupils' high outcomes. Staff also share their workload across the school and the trust. This contributes to their high levels of well-being. Parents and carers are proud of the school. They say their children are in safe hands. Trustees and trust leaders support the school well. Everyone is committed to pupils with SEND. They ensure there are no barriers to pupils' success.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Background

Until September 2024, on a graded (section 5) inspection we gave schools an overall effectiveness grade, in addition to the key and provision judgements. Overall effectiveness grades given before September 2024 will continue to be visible on school inspection reports and on Ofsted's website. From September 2024, graded inspections will not include an overall effectiveness grade. This school was, before September 2024, judged to be good for its overall effectiveness.

We have now inspected the school to determine whether it has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at that previous inspection. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school's work has improved significantly or that it may not be as strong as it was at the last inspection, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection. A graded inspection is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good for overall effectiveness in November 2019.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the definition of children in need of help and protection; pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's pupil premium funding (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked-after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	138526
Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	10346450
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	208
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	73
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Lynn Watson
CEO of the trust	Rachel Hargreaves
Headteacher	Stephen Murphy
Website	www.ascenttrust.org/portland
Dates of previous inspection	26 and 27 November 2019, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of The Ascent Academies' Trust.
- The school currently uses one unregistered alternative provision.
- The school caters for pupils with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties. All pupils have an EHC plan.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher over the course of the inspection. The lead inspector also met with executive leaders within the trust, including the CEO.
- Inspectors visited a sample of lessons, spoke to some pupils about their learning, listened to pupils read and visited extra-curricular activities.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The inspectors met with groups of pupils and staff formally throughout the inspection and spoke with them at social times and in lessons.
- A range of school documents was reviewed, including the school's self-evaluation and the school improvement plan.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. Inspectors also considered the responses to Ofsted's online surveys for staff.

Inspection team

Hannah Millett, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

David Penny

Ofsted Inspector

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