

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head

Since 2017, David Bradbury. Educated at Campsmount School (now Campsmount Academy) in South Yorkshire and Keele University, where he read physics and then did an MSc. His first experience of teaching was as a part-time lecturer in physics and maths at a further education college in Newcastle-under-Lyme – he enjoyed it so much that he headed back to Keele to do his PGCE. His first post took him to Chase Terrace Academy in Staffordshire, followed by a three-year stint teaching science at Bangkok Patana School, an all-through British international school in Thailand. Back in the UK, he rose through the ranks to become assistant head at Alleyne's Academy in Staffordshire and then deputy head academic at South Hampstead High School GDST for seven years.

He knew of Portland Place before he took up the headship but when he visited for the first time he was struck by its 'lively, vibrant community' and its huge potential. 'I knew it was a school where you could make a mark,' he says. When he arrived there had been several heads in quick succession and he moved swiftly to 'steady the ship' and provide stability and reassurance. He was adamant from the start that Portland Place should remain non-selective but he has built a strong academic team and recognised the school's strengths in creativity and the arts. 'He's done a very good job,' a parent told us. 'He's firm but fair – very kind and approachable. He really listens and takes everything on board.' 'His ethos and knowledge of the children are amazing,' said another. 'He's incredibly thoughtful and really pushes forward for the children to leave Portland Place as rounded human beings.'

He teaches GCSE physics to year 10s and 11s at Portland Place's hybrid school and runs science practicals for year 10s in the main school. 'I had one year when I didn't teach and I missed it,' he says. His wife is a former teacher who works at the Museum of London. In his spare time he enjoys cooking (his signature dish is 'a proper Tex-Mex chilli'), playing in-person table-top games and travelling.

Entrance

Non-selective but children must be able to cope with the school's mainstream curriculum. The usual entry point is in year 7 but there's a one-form entry in year 6, designed for parents keen to avoid putting their children through the 11+ or those who have recently moved to the capital and don't want their offspring to move schools twice. The school expands to three forms in year 7 – applicants sit assessments in maths and English and have a 20-minute interview with the head. Year 8 to 10 entrants have assessments in maths, English and science.

Exit

There's no sixth form so at 16, pupils head to the likes of St Paul's, South Hampstead High, Highgate, The King Alfred School, Mill Hill, St Marylebone CE School, the London Screen Academy, Albemarle College, Ashbourne College and Fine Arts College in Hampstead. Many opt for DLD College, which, like Portland Place, is part of the Alpha Plus Group.

Latest results

In 2022, 33 per cent 9-7 at GCSE. In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 27 per cent 9-7 at GCSE.

Teaching and learning

A small, close-knit school with a nurturing environment, it's ideal for youngsters who might be daunted by larger, pushier schools. The head recalls a year 11 boy who progressed to the sixth form of one of London's top academic schools. 'When he joined us in year 7 he wouldn't have been emotionally ready for the school he's at now,' he says. 'But after five years with us he is thriving there.' Parents agree that bright pupils are challenged and stretched while the less academic receive plenty of support. 'The school sometimes has a reputation for not being so academic but when you look at the schools they get into for the sixth form it's clear that the academic side is really good,' said one.

Maximum classes sizes of 16 so teaching is very personalised. We joined a class of year 11 GCSE history pupils who were studying political and religious developments in Britain from 1629 to 1660. As the teenagers made notes in digital exercise books, their teacher encouraged them to paste in 'trigger' images, graphics and maps to help them revise. In science, year 7s were using litmus paper to test whether different substances were acidic or alkaline. The school has three science labs and most pupils take two sciences at GCSE (around eight a year, mostly those wanting to do sciences at A level, take three).

French and Spanish are taught as part of the main curriculum but the school offers after-school classes in Arabic, Japanese, Mandarin and Russian. 'When they speak another language at home they take the GCSE in year 9,' says the dynamic head of modern foreign languages. We watched a year 11 GCSE French class practise for their forthcoming oral exams by using virtual reality headsets to converse with native speakers. The initiative has been so successful that the school is starting to use the headsets in other subjects too. We were impressed by the Strive programme, which gives year 7 to 9 pupils ideas about how to expand their knowledge outside the classroom. In English, for instance, year 7s are encouraged to read books like *Northern Lights* by Phillip Pullman, visit the Wallace Collection and attend a live poetry reading.

There's lots of emphasis on reading, with a weekly 60-minute library session for younger pupils, author visits and reading initiatives galore. All tastes catered for – from Arthur Ransome to Anthony Horowitz. The school supplies iPads to younger pupils but during the GCSE years most bring their own devices. Students email teachers if they need help. 'The teaching here is very good,' one told us. 'They make lessons fun and interactive.'

Learning support and SEN

The school can support children with mild to moderate learning needs but they must be able to work in a mainstream environment. Some attend the timetabled Learning Lab – either for specific learning difficulties like dyslexia or dyspraxia or for help with spatial reasoning, literacy and numeracy. The SEND team has four members (including a dedicated EAL teacher). Around 20 per cent of pupils are bilingual, with some international families in London on multi-year postings. 'For someone who is coming new into the British education system or who needs more dedicated support, the size of the school is perfect,' a parent

told us. The parents of a dyslexic pupil praised the school to the rafters for the support she's had. 'She has come on in leaps and bounds,' they said. 'Her confidence is through the roof. It's wonderful to see.'

The arts and extracurricular

The creative arts department, comprising art, design, drama and music, is a real powerhouse – a haven of creativity. Teachers are dynamic and enthusiastic and the head of design, who recently returned to Portland Place after a spell at a large academy, described the school as 'a rare gem'. 'Creativity and innovation are encouraged here,' he told us. 'It's about pupils using their hands and their imaginations. As a teacher it's glorious.'

The school makes huge efforts to get pupils on board musically – they offer Symphonfree to all year 7s, giving them a free musical instrument and lessons for a year. Music is a compulsory subject in years 6 to 9. During our visit a class of year 8s were studying the Lord of the Rings film score, learning chord sequences and creating their own mixes. Two-thirds have instrumental lessons and there's a variety of groups, from orchestra and school choir to a rock band and even a ukulele ensemble. The chamber choir recently won a national a cappella singing competition.

Drama for all, with every year group treading the boards and helping backstage in the annual show. At the time of our visit pupils had just staged Grease in the JW3 centre in north London, complete with props and costumes borrowed from the National Theatre. Fourteen or so take GCSE drama every year. The art department is on the top floor, with views of the BT Tower (great for learning about perspective). Lots of budding artists and good numbers of GCSE entrants (eight in the main school and five in the hybrid school at the time of our visit). The school makes the most of its central location, with trips to places like Tate Modern and the British Museum, as well as a street art walking tour of Shoreditch and a field trip to Epping Forest. 'It's really important that my daughter should engage with life in central London and take advantage of all that's around her,' said a parent. 'It's a massive draw.'

Wednesday afternoons are devoted to enrichment, with everyone off timetable to pursue activities like photography, yoga and meditation, climbing at a climbing wall in Vauxhall, horse riding in Hyde Park and mountain-biking at the Lee Valley VeloPark in Stratford. Other extracurricular activities, clubs and DoFE take place during the lunch hour and after school.

Sport

For a school with next to no outside space of its own – and with numbers that might make fielding teams for the plethora of sporting activities on offer a struggle – Portland Place does remarkably well at sport. The school has its own dance studio, fitness room and table-tennis tables but it helps, of course, that Regent's Park is on the doorstep. 'It's like our back garden,' said one pupil appreciatively.

Some form of sport happens three or four times a week, depending on the year group, with swimming up to year 10. As well as football, rugby, netball, tennis, cricket and rounders in Regent's Park, the school uses a variety of top-notch sporting facilities – including the Seymour Leisure Centre and the Parliament Hill Athletics Track. Portland Place prides itself on its inclusivity and fields teams against independent and state schools across London every week. A pupil recently became the national ISA 100 metres champion while another is

winning contemporary dance competitions at national level. A former student plays for Premier League club Wolverhampton Wanderers.

Ethos and heritage

A comparatively new kid on the block compared to more established rivals, Portland Place was founded in 1996 as an alternative to larger, very exam-focused independent schools in London and is part of Alpha Plus, London's largest private education company. It's housed in two buildings in an elegant part of Marylebone – halfway between the charms of Regent's Park and the hustle and bustle of Oxford Circus, with embassies and professional institutions as near neighbours. The main building – known as PPS – is an imposing five-storey house just up the road from the BBC's Broadcasting House, with a light, airy library on the ground floor and classrooms above (you need to be fit to climb all those stairs). The rest of the school operates out of a building in Great Portland Street, known as GPS. Only one of the school's two buildings (GPS) has a lift but if someone breaks a leg and can't get upstairs the school will move lessons to the ground floor.

The school's distinctive ethos is to be small, caring and inspirational. It's genuinely innovative too – alongside the main school it pioneered a hybrid school in 2020 to offer a mix of online and on-site learning. 'As far as I'm aware it's unique in terms of mainstream schools,' says the head. The hybrid school offers two alternatives – one where pupils learn online most of the week and attend Portland Place in person one or two days a week and the other where pupils learn online five days a week. They all come in for school trips, mocks and real exams. 'They are very much part of the school community,' we were told. The hybrid school now has 50 pupils, most from London and a few from further afield. Some are anxious about attending school after the pandemic, some have medical needs and a few are school refusers. During lockdown two brothers from Ukraine joined the hybrid school for two terms.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

The school has a purposeful and friendly working atmosphere, with good relationships between staff and pupils. Slightly informal but it feels comfortable and natural, with staff going the extra mile to understand each child. Everyone seems to know each other – the beauty of a smallish school. Pupils are clear about where to go if they need help, whether it's their form tutor (in most cases they keep the same tutor right the way through the school), head of year or the front office. There are two counsellors on hand to support students and staff and wellbeing is part of the PHSCE curriculum, delivered by form tutors twice a week. Behaviour overall is 'very good', says the head – 'although I'm not going to say I've got 230 angels'. Anyone caught vaping or bringing vapes into school is suspended and the school takes a zero-tolerance policy to drugs.

Pupils wear an unfussy navy uniform, with a choice of trousers and skirts for all. When the head did a post-pandemic uniform survey he wondered if pupils might want to get rid of it but they didn't. Quite the reverse, they wanted blazers to feature the PPS emblem. 'Having a uniform makes everyone the same,' said one boy. When it comes to hair and nails, there's a certain amount of leeway. 'You can have coloured hair and nails,' a pupil told us approvingly. The school welcomes pupils' ideas – there's a school council with two reps per year group and a suggestions box (made by a pupil) in reception.

As students progress up the school they get more freedom. Years 10 and 11 are allowed to pop out to the nearby Sainsbury's and Pret at lunchtime. Lunch is served in a bright canteen, with long tables and zingy green and yellow chairs; most have school dinners cooked by the chef and his team but a few bring packed lunches. Younger ones moving between the school's two buildings are always accompanied by a member of staff but from year 9 onwards they are trusted to walk by themselves in this genteel part of town.

Pupils and parents

Currently the pupil cohort is 60:40 boys to girls, but the ratio in years 6 and 7 is 50:50. Lively newsletter – The Weekly Buzz – keeps everyone informed about upcoming events, the school lunch menu, parents' evenings and sports fixtures. Pupils seem genuinely sad when it's time to leave. 'Most of the kids love it,' a parent told us. 'The teachers are so caring and the kids absolutely love them.'

Pupils come from around 20 London boroughs and most travel to school by public transport. Some walk from their homes in Marylebone and Fitzrovia while others use the tube (Great Portland Street, Regent's Park, Oxford Circus and Warren Street tube stations are close by), travelling from west and east across London.

Money matters

As part of the Alpha Plus Group, Portland Place has the back-up of a well-resourced operation. A limited number of creative arts and sports scholarships are available at year 7 and year 9 entry, worth up to 10 per cent of the fees. Bursaries are available through the Gold Standard Charitable Trust.

The last word

A small, nurturing school in the heart of London with a distinctive ethos. Ideal for lively and engaged youngsters, it's a godsend for parents looking for an unpressurised environment that offers inspirational teaching and great opportunities for all.