

What The Good Schools Guide says

PORTLAND PLACE HYBRID SCHOOL

Head

Since 2017, David Bradbury, who is head of both the day and hybrid school, and was previously deputy head of academics at South Hampstead High School GDST. We mistook his office for reception (we arrived at breaktime, when the entrance hall was packed with students chatting) but he didn't seem to mind – testament to his easy-going demeanour. Knows the students well – day and hybrid – and teaches GCSE physics to the latter, having studied the subject at undergraduate and master's level at Keele University, where he also did his PGCE. Also turns his hand to teaching other sciences and maths at times. A Yorkshireman, he started his career at Chase Terrace Academy in Staffordshire, followed by three years at Bangkok Patana School, a British international school in Thailand, before returning to Staffordshire to Alleyne's Academy where he became assistant head of academics.

Arrived at Portland Place to steady the ship, following a turbulent period of heads coming and going at a rate of knots. He has also managed to improve the school's academic success, while keeping it non-selective and unpressurised, as well as launching the first hybrid school in the UK, providing a combination of online and classroom learning. Hybrid students told us he is 'kind' and 'is always willing to listen'. Their parents say he is 'gentle and chilled' and that he 'inspires a sense that nothing is too much trouble'. One told us how her child had a panic attack when she first met him 'because she'd become so fearful of schools, and he was amazing, telling her, "Don't worry, I know how you feel and I promise we can make it right for you," and that was absolutely correct'. She, like many parents we spoke to, told us, 'I will forever feel grateful to him.' Lives in London with his wife, an ex-teacher who works at the Museum of London. In his spare time, he enjoys cryptic crosswords, cooking, archery and travel.

Since 2020, head of the hybrid school is Ambreen Baig, who was highly instrumental in its launch. Educated at a state school in Tottenham ('with a 17 per cent pass rate'), followed by an English degree at Queen Mary University, London, then a PGCE from the Institute of Education, London. Started teaching in state schools in Stockwell and Bow, followed by St Michael's Catholic Grammar School, Finchley, for 13 years, 'where I really learned my craft'. We've never heard so many parents say they want to clone a head: 'If you could make a thousand copies of her, she would transform education for all.'

Ms Baig is leaving in January 2024 to help Dukes Education set up other hybrid schools. Paul Jones, currently assistant head, will take over as interim head of hybrid. He knows the school well, having joined in 2000. Studied cultural studies and sociology at Leeds University, gaining his QTS on the job. 'I feel strongly that the standard education system is not flexible

enough for everyone – tech has allowed us to adapt it and it's been incredible to see what it's done for our hybrid students,' he told us.

Entrance

Non-selective – and although applicants must be able to cope with the mainstream curriculum, many arrive with significant gaps in their education (one recent joiner hadn't been in school for three years). Entry at any point between year 6 and the end of year 11, often mid-academic year, with most joining in the older years when more traditional schooling (whether state or independent) falls apart. One student arrived as late as the February before their GCSEs – they'd been studying the curriculum but could no longer cope at their previous school. Applicants and their parents are interviewed by the head of school and head of hybrid 'to ensure it's a good fit, not just convenient for the parent', and references are sought from previous school. Any offer is followed by assessments in maths and English (and science from year 8) 'so we can see where any gaps are and how to bridge them'. There are two annual open days for the hybrid school, and potential hybrid students can also attend main school open days.

Exit

So far, all hybrid students have gone on to study A levels at onsite sixth form schools and colleges including Highgate, Albermarle, King Alfred's, Hampstead Fine Arts College and Esher College. Not untypically, one boy arrived from a school with over 1,000 students, where he 'couldn't cope at all after lockdown', but after thriving at Portland Place (including on the football team and as a cross-country champion), he now feels 'ready to return to a large school environment'.

Latest results

In 2023 (the second GCSE cohort of hybrid students), 31 per cent 9-7 at GCSE.

Teaching and learning

As a cohort, the school's hybrid students do better academically than the day students. School attributes this to them making a positive choice to opt for the mix of online and in-person learning – they really want to do well but realise traditional schooling is not right for them. By nature, online students also tend to be focused, independent learners and, as a result, they progress quickly.

For three or four days a week, these students attend live lessons via Microsoft Teams from home (all are supplied with iPads but can use their own computers too), then they come into school for one or two days of practical lessons (music, drama, art, DT, science, enrichment, sport etc – plus some core subjects for GCSE students who aren't doing practical subjects) and to socialise. Very occasionally, students learn entirely online, but this is usually just a starting point for more anxious students (or for temporary learning needs, eg they had two students from Ukraine). Classes are capped at 16, but in younger years there can be as few as two or three per class. 'These small classes are great as there's nowhere to hide,' felt one parent. All tests are online for younger years, but in-school for mocks and real exams. Unlike in fully online schools, lessons are not recorded.

As with the day students, the hybrid learners told us they appreciate the school's 'nurturing focus' – many arrive feeling failed by their previous, often larger and pushier schools, and cite the teachers' 'kindness' and 'caring personalities' here as key to their learning. But it's no

walk in the park – students and parents feel the bright are stretched and that the less academic are well supported. ‘Our teaching staff know how to get those grade 9s, but the joy here is that we don’t have to do it by being overtly rigid and traditional,’ says head.

The curriculum (including French and Spanish in KS3) is identical to the day students’, but with blended learning groups up to year 9 (so, years 6 and 7 together, and 7 and 8 together, with year 7s split according to ability), while another difference is four lessons per day compared to six for day students (‘We don’t want to overload them with screen time and the complete focus you get in online learning means you can cover more content anyway’).

We joined hybrid students in a mix of online and in-person classes and found both lively and personalised. On-screen, a year 8 geography lesson on flooding was kept dynamic with visuals and quick-fire questions, along with lots of encouraging comments like, ‘Good detective work there, Amelia...’ Around half had their cameras on – school encourages it, but there are exceptions for some individuals (eg due to anxiety). Either way, they can still communicate using audio and chat box (whole class or student-to-teacher), and some collaborative work happens in breakout rooms. In-person, an English class saw GCSE students debating the question, What’s the problem with power in Macbeth? We noticed that even the most timid had a stab at answering. The school has three science labs and although no hybrid learners were doing practicals when we visited, they assured us there are many – ‘Much better than just watching the teacher do them online,’ felt one.

Teachers (most on staff, with some tutors brought in specifically for online teaching) are praised for being ‘engaging’, although one student said, ‘Like at any school, some are more so than others and there’s definitely more of a push on learning coming up to exams.’ One parent told us she overhears comments like, ‘Are you getting that, Ollie?’ which ‘is a nice reminder how bespoke the learning is’. Some minor grumbles among students that ‘free periods aren’t always distributed well – today I have three, and that’s on one of my days in school’ (school says GCSE students’ days in school are determined by their options but three free periods seems unlikely).

Learning support and SEN

Around 16 per cent are on the SEN register for the hybrid students (hybrid students are much more likely than day students to have anxiety issues). All must be able to cope with a mainstream curriculum, although some are supported with top-up learning (included in fees) from online booster groups and online resources such as Century Tech. The learning support department is run by four staff members, but most parents of hybrid learners with SEN told us said they’d had minimal contact with them and ‘didn’t mind at all’ that there are no one-to-one support sessions available: ‘The whole system just works for neurodiversity so we saw the SENCo right at the beginning, but that was really it.’ Only one of the school’s two buildings (GPS) has a lift, but if someone has mobility issues the school can move lessons to the ground floor. No EHCPs among the hybrid students.

The arts and extracurricular

Super facilities (and staff) for the creative arts – no wonder the hybrid students are tempted into school for them. We saw two such students working away on GCSE art projects during our visit – one talked us through her sketchbook, and you could really see the progression. Art and design are very popular with hybrid students, several telling us they found it ‘therapeutic’.

In the drama department, hybrid students were studying Billy Elliot. Some of the younger

ones recently joined in the whole school's Haunted House production, and some take part in class assemblies, although there's no obligation and the school is happy to make compromises, eg for a student to stand at the back (although one parent said she'd 'like to see more emphasis on individual contributions so they're not just tempted to lean on someone else in the group'). LAMDA on offer – some students come in especially for this. Parents say shows are 'spellbinding' and everyone appreciates the school bringing in professional choreographers.

Music, on curriculum from years 7-9, is 'just amazing', say parents. As with the day students, all year 7s are offered Symphonfree, giving them a free musical instrument and lessons for a year. These lessons, and paid-for lessons for other students, can be taken online. Some hybrid students belong to the orchestra and choir, and there are also ensembles and a rock band. One girl (very shy but a fabulous musician) has performed in every talent show because they let her sit at the piano with her back to the audience.

The school devotes Wednesday afternoons to enrichment, with activities (horse-riding, canoeing, photography, mad scientist, robotics etc) changing every half-term. Hybrid students attending two days on site have access to this, alongside any clubs running on other days they come in (at lunchtimes and after school). All school trips are open to hybrid students, who reeled off recent visits to eg Tate Modern, London Zoo and a BMW factory (for business studies), while others were excited about an upcoming trip to Epping Forest.

Sport

You'd think sport would be a non-starter here – outside space is lacking and student numbers are small. But the school has its own dance studio and fitness room, while nearby Regent's Park plays host to football, rugby, netball, tennis, cricket. Hybrid students in KS3 have access to two hours of this a week on the day they are on site, while KS4 can choose PE GCSE. All also have access to the sports that form part of the enrichment programme, as well as school sports teams and fixtures – and there is pretty good take-up for this. 'I find the sport is a great way to link up with the day students,' one student told us. Older hybrid students get free local gym membership.

Ethos and heritage

Founded in 1996 as a smaller, more caring alternative to the larger academic powerhouses in the capital, Portland Place School decided to expand its offering into the online schooling market in September 2020 on the back of its highly successful handling of learning during the pandemic. Starting with just two students, applications flooded in almost instantly: 'We very quickly realised there was a massive group of families slipping through the net because their children didn't want to go back to school.' Families we spoke to had all but given up: 'We felt desperate, but this option gave us a second chance.' 'We still can't believe he's back in school.' Now they talk of their children 'thriving' and 'confident – I never thought I'd see the day'.

There's a reasonably even split between students who come in one or two days, although at KS3 it tends to be one, and in year 11 it's usually two. Students told us they 'really treasure these days' and that they feel 'a part of the school community, it's definitely not like two separate schools'. It helps that they wear the uniform in school (but not for online lessons when T-shirts and hoodies dominate). 'I thought I'd really struggle to make friends, but I settled easily – everyone is really friendly,' said one.

The school – recently bought from Alpha Plus by Inspired Education – is located across two

buildings, a few minutes' walk from each other, in an upscale area of Marylebone. The main building, known as PPS, is a grand, five-storey house with a large, light library on the ground floor and classrooms above. The rest of the school operates from a building in Great Portland Street, known as GPS.

A few of the hybrid students choose to eat lunch in the main canteen on their days in school. The rest (year 10 and 11 only) head up to the likes of Sainsbury's or Nando's nearby or (most, 'because it feels a safe space') eat with the head of hybrid school and their peers in a dedicated classroom.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Pastoral care runs through the veins of this school. It is compassionate to the core, with excellent, quite informal, relationships between staff and pupils. The hybrid students say they have no qualms about talking to their form tutor (whom they see daily as part of a vertical tutor group) and head of hybrid 'about absolutely anything'. There are also coaches and counsellors, which one student said she got access to 'within just two weeks – I was waiting a year and a half at my last school!' Wellbeing features in the termly PHSE day (online or in school, at the student's discretion). Parents say there's a 'very open dialogue with families' and that 'you're informed immediately if your child doesn't turn up to class'.

Like any school, you get friendship fallouts, though less so with hybrid students simply because they don't see so much of each other. And what you don't get (lucky teachers!) are disciplinary issues, again because these students have chosen to come here and really want to make it work. 'Not doing homework is about as bad as it gets,' confirms head – and even then, it's dealt with pastorally (perhaps too much, felt one parent, who says the sheer volume of unfinished work can 'soon escalate'). Some students feel the school could be 'stricter about disruption in the corridors – it can feel a bit overwhelming'.

Pupils and parents

The largest group of students are those for whom traditional schooling hasn't worked – for some, it's just too big and noisy; for others, they've experienced bullying or friendship issues. In some cases, they have already become school refusers. The second biggest group are those who enjoy online learning but don't want to do it full time. The third group – the smallest – are young athletes or children involved in professional performing arts whose schooling needs to fit around their training schedules. A very few are day students who transferred over to the hybrid model, but more common is the other way round – hybrid students reaching a point where they switch to being day students.

Whatever their story – and everyone has one here – the students share a charming manner and come across as reflective, focused and, above all, relieved to be here: 'I never thought any school could be different, but this one really is.' Parents describe them as 'quite a quirky lot' and it's clear that many are shy, some painfully so, but 'everyone accepts that', shrugged one. All agree that 'being organised and on time' is a helpful attribute.

Geographically, hybrid students come from further afield than day students, up to the fringes of London and sometimes beyond, eg Surrey. They told us they're happy to make the longer journey (sometimes up to two hours) because it's only for a day or two a week. With a number of tube stations and bus stops close by, there are certainly no complaints of poor transport links.

Parents have a WhatsApp chat, 'but I wouldn't say we are particularly engaged with it,' said

one. 'Some of us see each other at the school gates and performances and events, but it's a pleasant nod, that's about it.'

Money matters

Academic scholarships awarded at the head's discretion, with 10 per cent fee remission. Means-tested bursaries, for those joining in year 7, offer up to 50 per cent off fees.

The last word

This school's hybrid model is truly inspiring and ideal for students who favour online learning from the comfort of their own home, but with an element of social interaction and in-person learning for more practical subjects. Given the rocketing numbers of students crying out for a different way of learning, we are frankly amazed more schools don't offer it – but then again, it can only really work where there's a genuinely child-centred, unpressurised and caring ethos, which is where Portland Place comes into its own. We love it when schools think outside the box – and this one has done so magnificently.