

School inspection report

3 to 5 February 2026

Plymouth College

Ford Park

Plymouth

PL4 6RN

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Leaders understand their responsibilities and have the knowledge and skills to meet them effectively. Governors provide appropriate support and challenge. Policies and procedures reflect the school's ethos and promote the wellbeing of pupils, so that the Standards and the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools (NMS) are consistently met.
2. The curriculum meets the needs of all pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and those who speak English as an additional language (EAL). The curriculum for children in the early years covers all the required areas. Older pupils benefit from a broad range of subjects and academic routes, including a programme for high-performing athletes. Pupils enjoy the extra-curricular opportunities that enrich school life and develop the skills of day pupils and boarders alike.
3. Teachers plan lessons well, drawing on their firm subject knowledge and using a range of effective strategies to engage pupils' interest. They provide sensitive and helpful support to pupils who have SEND, using strategies specific to the individual pupil.
4. Pupils who speak EAL are supported effectively in class. Dedicated lessons in EAL are provided for those in the older years, so that their comprehension skills and language acquisition support their learning and prepare them well for appropriate examinations.
5. Relationships between teachers and pupils are typically positive. Teachers generally manage classroom behaviour well. However, not all staff communicate consistently high behavioural expectations. The majority of pupils are responsible and respectful learners who make good progress and attain at appropriate levels in public examinations.
6. Leaders emphasise the importance of respect and kindness in the behaviour policy and respond appropriately when expectations are not met. Teachers form positive relationships with pupils, and their encouragement helps pupils to grow in self-confidence and self-esteem.
7. The programmes for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and relationships and sex education (RSE) are suitable. However, they are not universally effective, so that there have been incidents of disrespectful language and attitudes among pupils. Leaders do not rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of PSHE and behaviour management. Bullying incidents are rare and are managed effectively by staff.
8. Attendance and admissions procedures meet requirements, and suitable action is taken should attendance levels cause concern. Levels of staff supervision are appropriate. Health and safety procedures, including those for the prevention of fire, are rigorous. Prompt action is taken when necessary. Boarding houses provide comfortable and well-maintained accommodation.
9. The curriculum encourages pupils to consider global issues and to understand the core values and institutions that underpin a just society. Pupils learn the importance of respecting the human rights of all.
10. A suitable careers programme provides helpful and unbiased advice for pupils on a range of routes for the next stage of their education or employment. In PSHE lessons, pupils develop a useful awareness of financial matters, preparing them well for adult life.

11. Leaders have ensured that there is a robust culture of safeguarding within the school, with all staff trained to understand their responsibilities. The safeguarding team takes prompt action in response to safeguarding concerns.
12. Safeguarding records are thorough and stored confidentially. Safer recruitment measures are rigorously enforced, so that all required checks are completed before an individual is allowed to start work at the school.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- strengthen their oversight of the content and implementation of personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and the behaviour policy to ensure that they support pupils' personal development as effectively as possible
- strengthen the teaching and assessment of PSHE to ensure that all pupils develop mature and respectful attitudes to relationships
- ensure that staff set consistently high behavioural expectations so that the behaviour of all pupils aligns with the school's ethos.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

13. Governors and school leaders ensure that the school's aims and ethos are well publicised and that these are reflected in strategic decision-making. Leaders ensure that the pupils' wellbeing is actively promoted. They provide resources and teaching that encourage pupils' high aspirations while teaching them the importance of integrity and resilience.
14. Leaders undertake effective self-evaluation in relation to their strategic aims. They ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all groups of pupils, including pupils who have SEND or speak EAL. They conduct surveys to gather the views of pupils and boarders and take these into account in their decision-making.
15. Governors ensure that leaders are well trained and have the knowledge they need to discharge their responsibilities effectively. They receive regular reports from school leaders. Governors question leaders on the content of these reports, providing assurance that leaders' decisions are in line with the school's ethos.
16. Leaders and governors have set in place policies and procedures that meet the requirements of the Standards and of the NMS. Policies emphasise the school's values of respect and kindness. Leaders ensure that the policies are well known and that staff understand and implement them effectively overall. However, leaders have not always been stringent in questioning why incidents of unacceptable attitudes persist in the senior school despite the policies and the PSHE programme.
17. Leaders manage the identification and mitigation of risk astutely. This has led, for example, to a restructuring of the school's links with professional sports clubs. Leaders monitor the impact of demanding training routines on high-performing athletes and ensure that appropriate measures are put in place as necessary to support their physical and mental wellbeing.
18. Leaders have established positive links with local agencies, including social services and health professionals, for the benefit of the pupils. They draw on external experts to extend their own training and ensure that their knowledge and skills are refreshed. Leaders provide the local authority with attendance data and the required financial information relating to pupils who are funded by the authority, including those who have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).
19. All required information is available, either on the school's website or provided directly to parents on request. This includes information on how to contact the chair of the local advisory board of governors and the proprietors. Parents are given regular and useful information on their child's progress in written reports and in meetings with teachers.
20. Leaders manage complaints appropriately and in line with the suitable complaints policy. A record of complaints is maintained and stored confidentially. There is a separate procedure for boarders to make a complaint, with any boarding complaints recorded separately.
21. There is a suitable accessibility plan, covering a three-year span and identifying measures to improve access to the curriculum and the premises, such as access to buildings via portable ramps. The requirements of the Equality Act 2010 are met.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance

22. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

23. The curriculum is broad and appropriate for the ages and needs of the pupils, including those who have SEND or speak EAL. The programme for children in the early years covers all the specified areas of the statutory framework. The programme for older pupils provides a wide range of subject areas beyond a core of English, mathematics and sciences, and includes humanities and creative subjects. The curriculum is enriched by opportunities to study classical, technological and business subjects. A dedicated high-performance sports programme helps elite athletes to develop their sporting skills alongside their academic studies.
24. Practitioners in the early years plan lessons that draw on the interests of the children. Role-play areas encourage the children to pursue their interests and engage in both independent and teacher-led activities. Children in the early years develop their communication skills in purposeful conversation with their teachers. They retell stories and sing along with nursery rhymes enthusiastically. Skilful teaching helps their understanding of the relationship between letters and the sounds that they make. Children in Reception develop their early reading and language skills in phonics lessons and learn to read and write short sentences. Pupils in the prep school read and write with increasing confidence, using subject-specific terms appropriately. Those in the senior school have mature communication skills and can express themselves orally and in writing with assurance.
25. Numeracy skills develop well in the early years, and children in Reception can count up to ten confidently. Pupils in the prep school develop their understanding and confidence in numeracy well. Older pupils apply their skills with assurance in mathematics lessons and other subjects, for example when analysing data in chemistry, geography and business studies. Pupils' understanding of information and communication technology (ICT) is developed through dedicated lessons and activities.
26. The needs of pupils who have SEND are identified on joining the school. Teachers alert the learning support department when concerns arise about pupils' academic performance. Learning support staff work with pupils, and parents as appropriate, to identify the strategies that will best support pupils' learning. As a result, pupils who have SEND progress well from their starting points. Leaders have created a specific area of the school where key pastoral and support staff are based. This facilitates communication between these staff, so that co-ordinated emotional and academic support is set in place for pupils who have SEND.
27. Pupils who speak EAL are supported in class when required. For example, they are given appropriate resources, such as lists explaining keywords for topics or bilingual dictionaries. Those in Years 10 and 11 follow a separate English course, preparing them for specific examinations in EAL. Pupils make good progress in developing their fluency in English.
28. Teachers have good subject knowledge and plan lessons methodically. They check pupils' prior learning before introducing new work. They provide a range of activities to engage pupils' interest, give clear explanations and use questioning that encourages pupils to think more deeply. Teachers know their pupils well and typically adapt work to meet their needs. They support pupils who have lower prior attainment sensitively, for example by breaking tasks down into manageable chunks. On occasion, in lessons below the sixth form, there is insufficient challenge for pupils who have higher prior attainment.

29. Relationships between teachers and pupils are positive, so that the classroom atmosphere is usually focused and conducive to learning. Teachers generally manage classroom behaviour well, although the disrespectful and inattentive behaviour of a small number of pupils in the senior school is not always challenged.
30. Most pupils are keen to learn. They approach lessons in a well-organised and responsible way, take pride in their work and ask thoughtful questions. They make good progress as a result of the teaching that they receive.
31. There are clear systems for tracking pupils' progress. Teachers provide useful feedback in writing or in conversation to guide pupils to further improve their work. Leaders monitor the information provided by regular assessments and use this data to identify pupils who are underperforming. Suitable supportive measures are then put in place. All pupils, including children in the early years, make good progress. At public examination level, pupils attain results in line with national averages. They typically go on to achieve places at universities in this country or overseas.
32. A broad range of extra-curricular activities provides day pupils and boarders with experiences that enrich their school lives and develop their skills. Pupils engage enthusiastically in the activities offered, enjoying board games and creative crafts such as knitting. They develop their performance skills and self-confidence in staging concerts and musicals.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation

- 33. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

34. Leaders promote an ethos in which integrity, respect and kindness are expected of all members of the school community. The RSE programme in the early years and in the prep teaches children and pupils to manage their emotions and to understand the importance of being kind friends to others. Pupils understand the importance of co-operating and sharing with each other. The vast majority of older pupils understand the importance of respect and kindness in creating a welcoming, harmonious community.
35. Teachers encourage pupils to discover and develop their own talents. Teachers' praise and encouragement help pupils to reflect positively on their personal progress in their academic, creative and sporting endeavours. Success in these areas encourages pupils' self-knowledge and self-esteem.
36. The PSHE and RSE programme includes topics on respect and the importance of sensitivity to others. However, PSHE is not taught in a carefully sequenced way, within planned and timetabled lessons, and the assessment of pupils' understanding does not rigorously identify any gaps in pupils' learning. Topics such as misogyny are not directly addressed in the prep school. They are alluded to in topics in the senior school PSHE lessons but not directly until Year 10. As a result, the programme is not fully effective for a few pupils whose behaviour at times exhibits misogynistic and disrespectful attitudes that are out of step with the school's ethos.
37. The sex education component of the RSE programme gives pupils the information they need at age-appropriate points. Pupils understand how their emotions and bodies change as they mature. They learn about contraception, sexual health and the importance of consent in relationships.
38. Pupils understand the behaviour policy, which is based on respect and responsibility. They know the sanctions this sets out and see them as reasonable. Leaders maintain records of breaches of the policy and the actions taken in response. However, for a small number of older pupils, these sanctions are not entirely successful in ensuring that pupils understand what is expected of their behaviour. Leaders are successful in making sure that pupils of all ages understand that bullying in any form, including via social media, is unacceptable.
39. Religious studies (RS) lessons, supported by trips to diverse places of worship, help pupils to develop their awareness of a spiritual dimension of life. Their aesthetic awareness is evident in the high quality of their music-making, their artwork and drama. Pupils' moral and ethical awareness is sharpened in lessons which use opportunities to discuss issues such as the ethics of intensive farming or the causes of criminality.
40. Pupils' physical education (PE) is given a high priority. Children in the early years develop their motor skills in PE lessons, in outdoor areas and through using climbing and balancing equipment in the playground. A wide range of sports is available for pupils, including football, rugby, netball, hockey and cricket. After-school and weekend activities give all pupils and boarders extensive access to physical activity. Pupils learn the importance of exercise for their physical and mental wellbeing, as well as developing their agility and teamwork skills. The high-performance sports programme provides coaching that enables elite athletes to reach advanced standards. Pupils benefit from the links leaders have created with professional organisations in the area, providing access to further

professional coaching and experiences. Pupils show considerable determination and resilience in their commitment to sports.

41. The premises and accommodation are well maintained. Regular checks on premises and equipment ensure that measures to protect the health and safety of pupils are thorough and effective. Procedures to minimise the risk of fire are meticulous and regular evacuation drills are carried out, including during boarding time.
42. There are appropriate numbers of staff on duty to supervise pupils in breaktimes and during evening activities. Children in the early years are well supervised and are always within sight and hearing of adults.
43. Daily attendance registers are maintained accurately and as required. Leaders follow up any concerns about attendance promptly. There are suitable systems to ensure that boarding staff know the whereabouts of boarders in the evenings. Procedures for informing the local authority of pupils joining or leaving the school outside standard transition times are followed assiduously.
44. Appropriate numbers of staff are trained in first aid. Paediatric first aid training for staff in the early years includes awareness of the risk of choking in children. Procedures for the administration of first aid or medication for pupils and for the care of boarders' general health needs, as well as for those who are sick or injured, are rigorous.
45. Boarding houses are clean and well maintained, with comfortable bedrooms and pleasant areas for boarders to socialise. There are residential staff on duty should boarders need help with their homework or support during the night.
46. Sixth-form prefects are trained in their duties and in safeguarding. Boarding prefects support house staff in the smooth running of the house, working under staff guidance.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

- 47. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

48. The curriculum raises pupils' awareness of the wider world and of global issues such as the impact of natural disasters on societies. Pupils learn about social changes and reflect on historical injustices such as the discrimination faced by the Windrush generation of immigrants.
49. Children in the early years and pupils in the prep school learn to value and respect each other's different abilities and learn how to be a good friend. PSHE lessons encourage pupils' understanding that British society is underpinned by the values of respect and the rejection of discrimination on the grounds of faith, ethnicity or sexual identity. Pupils learn that people have equal human rights and that these are protected in law.
50. Pupils develop a basic understanding of social structures such as the national health service (NHS), the military and Parliament. They learn that respect for the law is essential for a society to function properly. They experience democracy in action in school. Children in the early years vote for activities and choose the theme that underpins their learning. Pupils vote to elect class representatives for the school council. They see the value of this elected forum in the changes brought about as leaders respond to pupils' requests.
51. The careers programme is aligned with accepted best practice as expressed in the Gatsby benchmarks for careers education. Children in the early years spend an 'aspirations day' dressed as someone in a career they admire. In PSHE lessons, pupils in the senior school use online resources to consider which potential careers best fit with their own interests and to choose appropriate GCSE and A-level subjects. Careers advice becomes more focused and intense for sixth-form pupils, with activities including a careers event attended by speakers from a range of professions. Careers guidance provides unbiased information on different routes for higher education, apprenticeship schemes or moving straight into employment.
52. Children in the early years learn how money works in practical activities such as shopping for items needed by residents in a local assisted living facility. In the prep school, pupils learn about monetary value and the difference between needs and wants in making decisions about spending their pocket money. Subjects such as business studies and economics reinforce older pupils' financial understanding. Preparation for higher education in the sixth form includes learning about taxation, student loans and how to manage a bank account.
53. Activities in lessons and in boarding reflect the school's aim of encouraging responsibility. Staff in the early years classes appoint a child each day as a health and safety monitor, who counts children to check all are present and have their water bottles. Prep pupils act as members of the school council and take part in clubs such as the eco-committee. Older pupils take on roles such as prefects, boarding prefects, heads of sports or houses. The experience of boarding helps pupils to develop their independence, self-reliance and personal organisation. Such experiences provide pupils with skills in supporting and representing others, in preparation for adult life.
54. Involvement in The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme (DofE) or in the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) further builds pupils' sense of responsibility and helps them to develop commitment to service. At present, pupils have some engagement in charitable activities that are decided by school leaders. Pupils' activities have included organising cake sales and a jumble sale. Some pupils in the sixth form

have undertaken individual fundraising activities. Pupil leaders in the sixth form are seeking to engage the wider school community in choosing charitable causes and suggesting means to support them.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

55. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

56. There is a robust culture of safeguarding in the school. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding are suitably trained for their role and are proactive in taking advantage of training opportunities offered by the local safeguarding partnership to enhance their awareness of contextual risks. The safeguarding team provides regular safeguarding training to all members of staff at the start of each school year and at regular points throughout the year. They also train prefects in the sixth form in safeguarding, to support them in their peer-mentoring roles. Staff with boarding responsibilities are trained to be aware of their extra levels of responsibility in caring for boarders.
57. All staff understand that safeguarding is a shared responsibility. They know pupils well and are swift to notice changes in behaviour or appearance. They understand the importance of recording and passing on concerns to the safeguarding team. Staff know that if they are worried about the possibility that insufficient action has been taken in response to a serious concern about a pupil's safety, they should approach local safeguarding agencies directly. Staff are confident to make a report should their own or a colleague's behaviour raise questions of professional boundaries. However, they are not always clear to whom they should report such low-level concerns.
58. Safeguarding leaders meet weekly to discuss emerging issues. They liaise with teachers with specific pastoral responsibilities so that there is a co-ordinated response should a change in a pupil's attainment or behaviour raise concerns about their wellbeing. Logs of confidential safeguarding matters are kept electronically and securely. They note details of concerns and the actions taken, with the rationale for these. Leaders liaise effectively with external agencies including social services and the police as necessary to support the safety of pupils.
59. All required safer recruitment checks are conducted before adults start working at the school. These checks are recorded as required in a suitable single central record of appointments (SCR).
60. Governors maintain appropriate oversight of safeguarding and safer recruitment procedures, including through regular meetings with the safeguarding team. They monitor the accuracy of the SCR and formally scrutinise the safeguarding policy and procedures annually. Governors review the effectiveness of the internet filtering and monitoring system.
61. Pupils are well educated in how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet. They know the names of the members of the safeguarding team and also that they can go to any adult they trust should they be worried. They are confident that staff will listen to them and provide support should they voice any safeguarding concerns.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

- 62. All the relevant Standards are met.**

School details

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| School | Plymouth College |
| Department for Education number | 879/6004 |
| Address | Plymouth College Ford Park Plymouth Devon PL4 6RN |
| Phone number | 01752 505100 |
| Email address | mail@plymouthcollege.com |
| Website | www.plymouthcollege.com |
| Proprietor | Plymouth Education Ltd |
| Chair | Mr Nicholas Grenfell-Marten |
| Headteacher | Mr Peter Watts |
| Age range | 3 to 18 |
| Number of pupils | 490 |
| Number of boarding pupils | 71 |
| Date of previous inspection | 8 to 9 March 2023 |

Information about the school

63. Plymouth College is an independent co-educational day and boarding school situated in Plymouth. It comprises an early years provision, a prep school and a senior school. The current headteacher took up his position in September 2024. In July 2025, the school joined the Galaxy Global Education Group, which is responsible for the governance of the school, supported by an advisory board. The chair of the governing board was appointed at the same time.
64. Boarding is available for pupils from the age of 11 years. The boarding houses, one for female pupils and one for male pupils, are on the main school site.
65. There are 21 children in early years, comprising one Nursery class and one Reception class.
66. The school has identified 90 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. Six pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
67. The school has identified English as an additional language for 50 pupils.
68. The school states its aims are to produce knowledgeable, caring and confident individuals who are prepared to become independent and self-sufficient citizens, ready to contribute to society. It states that the personal qualities it intends pupils to develop are aspiration, integrity, and resilience, alongside a commitment to service and to treating others with kindness and respect.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

3 to 5 February 2026

69. A team of six inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

70. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair of the advisory board
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- visits to boarding houses accompanied by pupils and staff
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

71. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

CAP House, 9-12 Long Lane, London, EC1A 9HA

For more information, please visit isi.net