



## **Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Schools Award (ATSSA)**

*A framework of support and understanding for schools and other educational establishments within which children and young people who have experienced adversity, can heal, thrive, play, and learn.*

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Dear Sian and John,

Thank you for registering for the Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Schools Award (ATSSA) at Silver Level, and for providing comprehensive evidence in support of your application.

Thanks also for inviting me to conduct the verification for the Award today. I should like to extend my thanks to you and other staff for making the virtual visit so purposeful and enjoyable.

I should like to warmly congratulate you and your staff on achieving the Award, which is an external sign of recognition of your commitment to the steps you have taken at West Kirby School and College to further develop a culture of compassion and nurture. This, as you well know, plays a pivotal role in getting your pupils into a state of 'learning readiness', and beyond to being able to settle to learn and, eventually, to become fully engaged with learning. The Award is valid for two years and will run from May 2021 to May 2023.

All criteria have been evidenced adequately, and in most cases, more than adequately. The evidence you have submitted comes from a variety of sources from extracts and examples of key documents and policies provided by you; from pupils' work products; from comprehensive case studies; from interviews with staff, including you and other members

of the team. You provided me with much evidence to further support my own data gathered today, and this has added depth and context to the completed Evidence Folders.

Your completed Evidence Folders are rich and detailed, providing comprehensive information in support of each of the criteria, and I appreciate the hard work that you all, and particularly John, have invested in your evidence to really 'showcase' the work that you do at West Kirby School and College.

There are many significant points that are worthy of special mention, and I shall outline some of them below.

- The personalised, individual approach to all pupils is evidenced through numerous practices, including induction and information gathering, ongoing formal and informal assessment and observation, and reflective dialogue and practice. Knowledge of each pupil's needs across the developmental spectrum underpins relationships, interactions and planning, and you, along with other members of staff, provided particularly powerful evidence of this. This is a particular strength of the school, and I was really impressed by the many mechanisms you have in place to ensure that planning and support are fluid and organic, rather than static and inflexible.
- Your own commitment to developing a culture of attachment and trauma sensitivity has been demonstrated through a high investment in CPD for all staff, and a willingness to make significant changes. The passion of the Leadership Team has led to a shared vision of how to deliver the best experiences and outcomes for all the pupils. Staff members are trained to a very high standard and show comprehensive understanding of child development, attachment and trauma related issues. Many members of staff are trained in a range of therapeutic approaches, and this is of great benefit to children and their families.
- You have a range of strategies in place for supporting parents in understanding child development and attachment relationships. These strategies are largely informal in nature, and particularly engage parents who may find it difficult to trust service providers, including educators. You demonstrated a depth of understanding and empathy about why some families may be described as 'hard to reach', recognising that their relationship to 'help' may not have always have been positive in the past. Evidence about the support you offer to

children and families was compelling and moving. You demonstrate deep compassion in relation to the daily struggles that families face. This is a particular strength of the school.

- Knowledge of each pupil's needs across the developmental spectrum underpins relationships, interactions and planning. Further, in terms of your holistic approach to meeting children and young people's needs across the developmental domains, everyone interviewed today shared a richness and depth of understanding and practice, particularly relating to sensory and emotional assessment and provision. There is a plethora of strategies used both inside and outside the classroom, including embedded sensory snacks, visuals, communication aids, sensory circuits, social stories and other, informal regulation strategies, such as a warm drink, jumper on or off, kicking a ball. The case studies shared by Rachael, Christine and Liz really brought the evidence to life, and showed a deep level of curiosity about how best to meet the needs of the pupils, and ensure that they enjoy school and can fully engage with learning and relationships. This is a particular strength of the school.
- Children are protected from, and given significant support with potentially explosive situations. Christine shared lots of examples about triggers and recognising when a child is becoming dysregulated. She gave a wide range of examples of grounding strategies and spoke of the importance of having a deep knowledge of each child as an individual. Liz explained how the Nurture Group is also providing a safe space for those particularly vulnerable pupils, and supporting the development of a healthier self-esteem and secure relationships with adults. She shared a moving and illuminating case study about the experience of one particular pupil.
- All staff interviewed demonstrated an embedded understanding of the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics and gave multiple examples of how they recognise survival behaviours and respond sensitively, addressing physiological and emotional needs before trying to engage cognition, using the Regulate, Relate, Reason pathway. I really liked the idea of the Life-Space Interview, shared by Christine, which demonstrated that once a pupil reaches the point where they can reason, it is vitally important to focus on the child themselves initially, rather than asking how others feel, and giving the child opportunities to practise new behaviours in a safe environment. This is a particular strength of the school.

- Attention to staff mental health and well-being is high on the agenda of the leadership team, and staff access informal support from an 'open door' informal approach, through to being offered clinical and non-clinical supervision. There is a strong focus on the physical environment, with the safety and comfort of all being a priority. I was particularly interested to hear from Luke about the development of staff areas, including a Well-Being Room, which provides a real buffer to the emotional and psychological impact of the work. All staff interviewed expressed high levels of job satisfaction, said they felt appreciated and listened to. One member of staff said that she had "... never felt as well-supported and valued" as she does at West Kirby School and College.
- There is a shared belief that relationship-based practice provides the foundation for progress across the developmental domains. Rachael talked a lot about building trust through emotional and physical availability, recognising that this is a long process for some children, because many of the adults they have encountered in the past simply have not been trustworthy. She went on to describe the journey of one pupil, who has had negative experiences of education in the past, and the impact this has had upon the pupil, particularly in relation to trusting and forming relationships with adults. Rachel's account of how she has built a relationship with this particular child, and how she has facilitated the child's relationships with other members of staff was inspirational and moving.

It is impossible to encapsulate the ethos of your provision through reference to the Award criteria. West Kirby School and College is attachment- and trauma-responsive, with systems, practices, values and principles that are infused with sensitivity to trauma; thus, therapy is not something that the school simply *provides*, rather, the environment itself and the relationships therein are therapeutic. Trauma sensitivity is embedded across the setting, and relationships are central to practice. The evidence provided today really highlighted this, and my feeling was that attachment- and trauma-sensitivity is organic, constantly evolving and developing.

In conclusion, all staff, led by a strong and visionary leadership team, take responsibility for providing a threat-free, safe environment around the children, where adults are in charge and take full responsibility for what happens, including connection, attunement, boundaries

and navigation. This frees up the children from the overwhelming burden of having to keep themselves physically and emotionally safe.

I hope that you will celebrate your achievement with pupils, staff, parents, governors and other stakeholders to celebrate the school's commitment to embracing inclusion at its best, successfully removing barriers to learning and participation in the life of the school. I feel particularly privileged to share your journey and I am delighted and excited about supporting you through the next steps towards ATSSA Gold: Attachment Committed Level, and I shall be in touch with you in September to get the ball rolling.

Tony and Bridie add their congratulations to mine, and like me, are particularly thrilled that we have made the Silver Award, which has been achieved during a particularly challenging time.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jennifer A Nock, CPsychol, AFBPsS, PhD, BSc (Hons)

Bridie White LLB MA