



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 Eric,

Thank you for registering for the Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Schools Award (ATSSA) at Gold Level, and for providing comprehensive evidence in support of your application. Thanks also for inviting me to conduct the verification visit for the Award. I should like to extend my thanks particularly to you, and also to other staff, for making the 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 develop a culture of compassion and nurture, and to become a truly attachment- and trauma-responsive setting. The Award is valid for two years and will run from July 2023 to July 2025, at which point you will be invited to renew your accreditation.

You have maintained and extended the ATSSA Bronze and Silver Standards, and you shared numerous examples of your attachment- and trauma-sensitive practice with your children and young people.

All six Gold criteria have been evidenced adequately, and in most cases, more than adequately. The evidence you have submitted comes from a variety of sources and of particular value have been my interviews today with a range of staff members. You provided me with much evidence to further support my own data gathered today and previously, and this has added depth and context to the completed Evidence Folder, which is rich and

detailed, providing comprehensive information in support of each of the criteria. I appreciate the hard work that you all, and particularly Eric, have invested in your evidence to really 'showcase' the work that you do at West Kirby School and College. It cannot have been an easy task, Eric, to pick up the work at such a late stage, and you have done an excellent job.

There are a number of significant points that are worthy of special mention:

- *Become a Beacon of Best Practice for other schools working towards Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Practice.* There is an extensive range of professional groups who benefit from your shared practice. For example, the school's Clinical Psychologist delivers training on attachment- and trauma-sensitive knowledge, strategies and skills to a wide range of organisations, including schools, charities, churches and parents. The school also participates in providing Initial Teacher Training placements for university students by providing mentoring for students who wish to gain experience within an SEN environment. Going forward, you show commitment to continuing to share your own vision with other schools who are striving for meaningful, multi-layered, whole-system wide trauma-responsive practice. This is a particular strength of the school.
- *Provide professional supervision for front line staff and SLT at least termly.* This area is currently under development and the process will continue to evolve over time. In the autumn, termly group supervision will be offered to TAs, teachers, Education Team Leaders and the SLT. The process has been successfully piloted and much thought has been given as to how supervision will best work. There is a strong belief in the absolute necessity of reflective practice, and there are already a number of supportive, reflective activities in place. All staff interviewed shared examples of the organisational understanding of, and response to, the psychological and emotional fall-out for staff working with children with complex trauma backgrounds. Currently, informal supervision is one of the many mechanisms which facilitate reflective practice, which in turn, impacts upon personal and professional well-being. Some of the benefits that were mentioned were a reduction in anxiety, improved well-being, good, constructive feedback and facilitating team cohesion. SLT has been responsive to the expressed opinions of staff in shaping the model of supervision. This has been highly effective and has changed the mindset of some people who felt resistant to the ideas of formal supervision. This is an area which I will be interested to see develop and I am certain

that it will provide a safe and confidential context to reflect upon important issues in relation to the emotional and psychological impact of the work, particularly in relation to safeguarding issues and the pastoral dimension of work with children, young people and their families.

- *Employ attachment- and trauma-informed recruitment, interview and induction processes.* The recruitment process is carried out in a thoughtful and meaningful way and sets the tone and gives an insight into the nature and ethos of the school community. I spoke to three recently recruited members of staff, who felt that the process, from recruitment to appointment and induction, was a positive one. They felt that the job description was clear, and that they were well prepared for the complex nature of the job. There was implicit reference to trauma-sensitive practice in the job specification, which indicated that this was an area of high importance in the school. At interview, the candidates felt well-listened to; the interviewers were warm and friendly, prompting and clarifying as necessary. The trauma-sensitive ethos of the school was communicated clearly during the interview. They were informed that they had been successful in a timely manner. The induction process was thorough, transparent and engaging, without being over-managed and the three members of staff felt welcomed and included from the start.
- *Reference attachment and trauma-informed practice in people's development plans, performance management, appraisals etc.* This is a particular strength of the school. Through the staff interviews today, and through evidence presented in the Evidence Folders, I was able to ascertain that it is a priority in the school for every member of staff to understand and respond to the children's needs, and this priority drives and informs CPD. Some members of staff have an attachment- and trauma-informed target and all staff have a personal target, identified by each individual staff member. One member of staff said that the performance management process is 'participatory, collaborative; something that is done with us, not to us ... It is always organic and dynamic.' The SLT invest in career development and training needs are given high priority. No shaming or critical practices are used, and all staff are treated with respect and valued for what they bring to the community. Strengths are identified and acknowledged. Discussions are transparent and honest and this contributes to an increasingly authentic and congruent school culture.

- *Provide an attachment- and trauma-informed and -responsive physical environment, not only in pupil areas, but throughout the entire school site, including staff and public areas.*

There is a strong focus on the physical environment at West Kirby School and College, with the safety and comfort of all being a priority. Leaders recognise the importance of a comfortable sensory and physical environment, so the setting is well ventilated, well lit, with comfortable spaces and availability of food and drink. Reception staff and the physical reception area are warm and welcoming. Leaders understand about felt psychological and emotional safety, so there are spaces for staff to share together and also, quiet spaces where staff can work alone, or simply relax and reflect. The staff room is welcoming, comfortably furnished and well-resourced. The physical environment is organised in such a way that children, visitors and staff experience felt safety within the school.

- *Strive to ensure that all meetings and communication systems between all participants and stakeholders employ the principles of multileveled safety.* Communication systems are transparent and easy to access. All staff interviewed said that they feel well-informed and receive regular information and briefings. It is clear that at all times, great care is taken to ensure that communications throughout the system are positive and inclusive. Compelling evidence was shared relating to the many and varied communications systems, which are invaluable. Leaders and managers are flexible about the approach to deadlines and ensure that staff are empowered to have a good home/work balance. There is a clear and shared understanding of the purpose, focus and aims of staff/team meetings and the agenda is shared in a timely manner. You work hard to develop strong, trusting partnerships with families and communities based on open communication. Communications with parents and carers are addressed sensitively and thoughtfully, ensuring that parents are 'kept in the loop' whether or not they live with their child, and when painful or challenging issues are raised, school staff are supportive and empathic, striving to make a safe space for difficult conversations.

Whilst there can be no doubt that excellent practice is a whole-team achievement, it is also only fair to say that the most significant factor in achieving the ATSSA Gold Award is the inspirational, strong, and visionary leadership of the Headteacher and the SLT.

This is just a brief snapshot of the evidence I gathered today and previously through virtual visits and reading the evidence in your Gold Folder. It would be impossible to communicate

adequately in this letter the breadth and richness of your practice. In short, West Kirby School and College is a trauma-informed and trauma-responsive organisation, which prioritises improving systems and practices, making them healthier, more relational and interpersonal, more cohesive, more integrated, more reflective, and more interconnected, not only focusing on the pupil population, but by ensuring that trauma-informed knowledge, narratives, language, values, principles, assumptions and processes are embedded deep into the culture of the whole school; and are owned, moulded and maintained by everyone who is a part, regardless of role or status.

What really shone through in today's verification is that an attachment- and trauma-sensitive approach is becoming increasingly interwoven into strategy, policy and practice. It is no longer a 'tick box' of things to do, but a rich tapestry which is organic and dynamic, responding to the needs of the whole school population.

Next steps will include maintaining current levels of practice and increasingly being a beacon of best practice to other schools. This will entail a recognition of the different, even competing narratives and priorities of educators and parents from other schools, and next steps should include working towards streamlining and/or accommodating priorities, agendas and narratives. It will also require facilitating future-thinking and developing a shared vision through mutual respect, active listening and an acceptance of the messiness and complexity of the journey. The development of supervision practices will also be an area of focus. I hope to continue to support you going forward.

I hope that you will celebrate your achievement with pupils, staff, families, governors and other stakeholders to celebrate the school's commitment to its children, young people and whole community, successfully removing barriers to learning and participation in the life of the school. I have felt particularly privileged to share your journey and am delighted make the Gold Award to you, our first Gold School on the Wirral. Tony and Bridie add their congratulations to mine.

Yours sincerely,

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

Bridie White LLB