



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM CoE Award



School Name: The Link School
Waverely Terrace
Pallion
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear SR4 6TA

Head/Principal: Donna Walker

IQM Lead: Donna Walker

Date of Review: 29th Nov 2022

Assessor: Emily Carr

IQM Cluster Programme

Cluster Group: Trail Blazers

Ambassador: Mrs Emily Carr

Next Meeting: 6th Mar 2022

Meeting Focus: Whole school attendance and strategies to improve; English and reading curriculum – meeting the needs of all children.

Cluster Attendance

Term	Date	Attendance
Spring 2022	24 th March 2022	Yes
Summer 2022	4 th July 2022	Yes
Autumn 2022	6 th October 2022	No

The Impact of the Cluster Group

The Link School are active participants in their Cluster Group, attending meetings both in-person and online in the past, using many of the related training within their own daily routines and sharing ideas with their own staff. The IQM Lead articulated how they are pleased to be part of the IQM Cluster and enjoy working collaboratively with other schools. They enjoy networking with colleagues across the education sector. The Headteacher encourages collaborative working and welcomes visitors from other settings to share good practice.



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The IQM lead was able to give examples of how the cluster meetings have impacted on their thinking and allowed colleagues to reflect on practice. They found the visit to Academy 360 useful, as they gained opportunities to look at other alternative providers who can support 'Hard to Reach' learners. Whilst at the cluster meeting at Breckon Hill Primary, they found learning about small group daily intervention useful and also the inclusive representation and diversity seen through displays and resources.

Sources of Evidence during IQM Review Day:

Over the one-day assessment the assessor evaluated the school's commitment to inclusion, and progress made against their action plan, through a wide range of written evidence, including:

- The school's Annual Review and Action Plan document
- School website
- School Facebook page
- School Instagram Page
- Ofsted reports
- Pupil progress information
- Pupil books
- Planning
- Pupil case studies
- Documents outlining progress against targets
- School analysis documents
- Reintegration survey feedback

The assessor also toured the two school sites, viewed displays, visited classes, and observed a mindfulness session.

Meetings held with:

- Headteacher and IQM Lead
- Head of School (KS4)
- Head of School (KS3)
- KS4 SENDCo – PSHE/NFCE/Wider World Lead
- KS3 SENDCo – PSHE Lead/Breathing Space
- HLTA Behaviour
- Citizenship Teacher
- Mindfulness Lead
- Mindfulness Practitioner
- Associate Professor from Sunderland University
- Vice Chair of Management Committee
- Pupils
- Support staff
- Teachers based at the Assessment Hubs



Summary of Targets from 2021-2022

Target 1

The post Covid 19 Recovery Curriculum will be built on the whole school REACH: Respect, Effort, Achieve, Communication, Happy and Healthy as a systematic, relationships-based approach to address individual gaps in learning and skills.

Since the last IQM visit, leaders have clearly invested in this key area of the school. Transitions into PRUs and alternative providers are often complex, involving dual registration, periods of non-attendance and meetings with a range of services and families. When evaluating pupils' attainment and progress, the school have considered the ways in which they have identified, assessed and met the needs of pupils and have evaluated the progress that pupils have made since they began to attend. 259 pupils attended the Link School during 2021-2022.

The school values of REACH (Respect, Effort, Achieve, Communication, Happy and Healthy) are the hallmarks of the school that underpin everything, including the whole school curriculum. The development of the curriculum has been a focus on the School Improvement Plan throughout the last academic year. Leaders are clear that they want their curriculum to be broad, balanced and aspirational and they have worked hard to achieve this goal.

The curriculum is organised in such a way that it provides children and young people with differentiated support and strategies to be successful in developing their own behaviour for learning.

The broad Link School curriculum provides a strong academic core of subjects underpinned by SMSC, fundamental British values, careers guidance, healthy living and well-being, preparation for the next stage, equality and diversity. This is a curriculum that has been well thought out and mapped to the needs of the children. This is a school that knows its community.

Staff at both sites talked with passion about the offer for pupils and how they have worked hard to ensure their school values are embedded in each curriculum area.

During the assessment day, it was apparent that the curriculum is a real strength of this school and that the quality of education children receive is of a high standard. The standardised planning, the use of progression grids in each curriculum area, alongside a committed and dedicated team, has meant that the curriculum is inspiring, engaging and ambitious. It is clear that this a progressive curriculum that allows staff to quickly identify any gaps in learning and supports pupils in making rapid progress.

Another strength that was clear, was the positive impact that this has had on staff wellbeing and workload. Through having a clear school planning format and opportunities to plan and work together, staff commented that they feel that their workload is manageable. One teacher said, *'We are a proper team. Teamwork is strong and we all support each other.'*



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Leaders recognise that this is an on-going target; as the curriculum is taught it is adapted and altered to continually improve and meet the ever-changing needs of pupils and the community they serve.

Target 2

Enhance the current provision for the development and acquisition skills that produces responsible citizens who have increased their cultural capital in preparation for adult life.

During the assessment day, staff across the school articulated that cultural capital is a key driver when planning opportunities for pupils. Leaders are clear that Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) helps to give learners the knowledge, skills, values and understanding they need to lead confident, capable and caring lives and to become informed, active, responsible citizens. PSHE/ RSE plans to prepare learners with the skills they need to manage now and in the future.

The Y11 Citizenship teacher was inspiring in her dedication to ensuring she uses her curriculum area to teach pupils how to be good citizens. She looks for opportunities to use the learner's interests to engage them in their academic work. Having worked in a mainstream for many years, when asked why she was attracted to working at The Link School, she stated: *'You can feel how much everyone cares for the pupils, but also for each other. You get to know pupils and make them welcome and give them a future. It is all about the whole child.'* GCSE Citizenship is embedded into the KS4 curriculum. Last year, 79% achieved GCSE Grade 1-9 and 29% achieved a GCSE Grade 4-9.

At KS3, the PSHE Lead and Associate Senior Lead for Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) talked confidently about using the curriculum to develop pupils and ensure they make progress. The long-term overview is mapped out carefully to ensure pupils can develop in all key areas. He also talked about the opportunities on offer for staff and how their skills and abilities are recognised and nurtured by leaders.

The KS4 PSHE teacher has effectively planned the curriculum to allow students further opportunities to gain qualifications. In Y10, pupils can achieve a NCFE Level 1 Award in Mental Health Awareness and the NCFE Level 1 Award in Sexual Health Awareness. She also carefully plans a range of speakers to come in and speak to pupils about important topics such as County Lines and Knife Crime. These sessions have proved to be popular with positive feedback from pupils.

The RSE and Religious Education (RE) curriculum have been reviewed and experiences of other cultures are being embedded in the curriculum through the wider world curriculum and drop-down days linked to world-wide events and charity days. An example of this is the drop-down day on Buddhism that took place this term. The pupil case studies effectively illustrate that the RE days have been successful at engaging pupils. The school have also recently been awarded the LA Bronze Charter mark for RSHE and are aiming for silver next.



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Learners are encouraged to take part in a wide range of activities and experiences across the curriculum, contributing fully to the life of the school and local community. Staff are keen to ensure that pupils reflect on their experiences and understand how they are developing personally and socially, tackling many of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues that are part of growing up.

The KS4 Mindfulness Practitioner talked about how using opportunities outside of school, to get to know pupils and engage them, has been powerful. She talked about the recent trip to Durham, as part of the Breathing Space offer, and how this opened their eyes to new places and allowed them to gain cultural capital.

All learners spiritual, moral, social and cultural values are respected, and those whose values maybe different from the majority will always be shown great sensitivity.

Target 3

Leaders will ensure that emotional well - being of staff and learners will be further strengthened across the school.

The Link school has the needs of the 'whole' child at the centre of all they do. This is a school who is dedicated to ensuring children are safe and happy and that their needs are being met.

The school has a strong focus on emotional wellbeing and ensures that it is an important part of the Link School for both pupils and staff. Mindfulness and working together drive this across the school.

The Headteacher recognises that for the young people to be happy and succeed, the staff need to be happy and well supported. There are progression routes and opportunities for all staff. Succession planning is a key part of the Headteacher's vision for staff and she works hard to spot talent and provide opportunities for staff to develop their leadership skills. Throughout the day, all staff commented on how proud they are to be part of the Link School family and reflected on how the leaders of the school care for them and make this a happy place to work.

There is also a comprehensive wellbeing offer for staff. Staff benefit from this forward-thinking leadership team and are given opportunities to support their wellbeing from initiatives such as staff recognition reward scheme, joint PPA time to the offer of a Christmas shopping afternoon.

The school has an effective, hardworking and dedicated Safeguarding Team which allows for the most vulnerable pupils to be supported immediately and early intervention to take place. Pupils at The Link School talked with passion about their school and how it works to meet their needs.

It was clear, throughout the review day, that this target has been met and that the school will continue to meet the needs of all children as they are a nurturing school.



Flagship Project 2022-2023

Project title: Reintegration and Wellbeing Support for all

Project Vision:

The Headteacher and IQM lead has identified three target areas, linked to the school vision and development plan, to ensure learners have clear pathway for their future and wellbeing at the core of all they do.

The target areas are as follows:

- To develop a reintegration support package with Together for Children/SEND to support learners with reintegration into mainstream or specialist provision.
- To ensure that emotional well-being of learners is further strengthened across the school through the planning, delivery, and evaluation of Breathing Space programme.
- To enhance the opportunities for children and young people to share their experience of exclusion from school through the 'Pull up a chair and listen'

Intended Outcomes:

- All pupils will make an effective transition into mainstream or specialist provision.
- Enhanced opportunities will be available for children and young people to access mindfulness and engagement activities across the school, after school and during the holidays.
- Pupil experiences, and current research on school exclusions, will be used to contribute to the delivery of a unique conference with children and young people at the heart of discussions. Their agenda, their voices.

Tasks will include but are not limited to:

- Review 3-year trends of reintegration outcomes, identify what is working well and identify next steps.
- Meet with Together for Children Strategic SEND lead and Strategic Education Lead and share findings – highlight the AP/SEND needs and look at the possibility of gaining funding to trial a reintegration programme targeted at mainstream reintegration.
- Recruit and appoint a reintegration officer and evaluate impact.
- Further develop the induction/training package.



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- Further develop and embed the Breathing Space Project in school, to support learners and their families with emotional well-being and improving relationships within the household and school.
- Take part in steering group to further support DfE funding opportunities.
- Enhance the opportunities for mindfulness engagement outside of the school day and holidays.
- Meet 'Pull Up a Chair and listen' stakeholders to identify project aims, based on the success of #SeeMe.
- Engage with 'Pull up a Chair' pupil voice activities in school (groups from all key stages).
- Plan and lead some workshops at Child Led Conference.
- Evaluate and impact of the conference and share with the university research group.

The Flagship project is aligned with the School Development Plan and will support the leaders in achieving their vision for developing clear links and expertise between mainstream and alternative provision and ensuring children are educated effectively and in a setting that is right for them.

Overview

The Link School is an inclusive school with the children at the centre of all they do. There are two schools; The Link School, Springwell Dene which works with learners across Key Stage 1, 2 and 3 and The Link School, Pallion, which provides education for learners at Key Stage 4. In addition, they also run two Assessment Hubs at Hudson Road Primary School and Oxclose Academy where staff support schools across Sunderland to ensure that all children and young people have access to the right provision to meet their own individual needs. The Assessment Hubs are a huge success and the two teachers who lead them are knowledgeable and focussed on ensuring their pupils have the right plan in place for their future. The Link School is an LA Maintained school with a supportive team in the LA who believe in the work they do. Children enjoy being part of this school and the whole school community are passionate and proud of their school and the work they do.

The strong leadership of the Headteacher, and her accessibility and her commitment to inclusion and improving the opportunities for all children, is a strength of the school. Leaders have worked hard to create an ambitious culture within the school. All staff have high expectations of pupils' behaviour and their academic outcomes. Senior leaders are focused on raising pupils' aspirations and ensuring their future employability. Their vision to engage, educate and support some of Sunderland's most vulnerable pupils, whether on roll or in mainstream schools, is lived and breathed by each staff member. Senior Leaders describe how all children at each site are valued and are supported in lessons so that they can all achieve their best. The Headteacher



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described how inclusion and the school values of REACH (Respect, Effort, Achieve, Communication, Healthy and Happy) underpins all they do. They are in the process of further developing and embedding their 4 pillars of aspiration, knowledge, resilience and relationships, which will sit alongside the school values. The leadership team at The Link School are ambitious, driven and committed to breaking down barriers. There is a strong and stable staff team who have all bought into the school vision. The curriculum is broad and balanced. Curriculum progression has been a key focus and school priority throughout the academic year. The school have worked hard to recruit subject specialists, and this has had a positive impact across each curriculum areas. Pupils' can leave The Link School with a wide range of qualifications and a core set of GCSEs (students can leave with up to 7 GCSEs). In Y10 and Y11, pupils can pick from a set of option subjects. Another key aspect to the curriculum is the offer of vocational placements, at registered providers, for KS4 pupils. The Head of School at KS4 carefully picks placements that suit the interests and career choices of pupils and ensures each provider is quality assured.

Leaders identified that further work was needed to improve the standard of pupils' reading and to ensure they read for pleasure. Many pupils enter the school with reading ages well below their chronological ages. The leadership team are all clear that reading is fundamental to the success of their next stage in education, training and employment and have therefore given priority to this curriculum area. Two staff now have TLRs to lead on reading and a staff member is trained in the teaching of phonics. The value the school place on reading is evident as soon as you enter each site, as staff have created a 'Book Swap' zone in the entranceways. This encourages students (and staff and visitors) to look through books and find one that engages them. During break times, children are able to access magazines and newspapers. Library sessions are also on offer during lesson time.

The learning environment at each site is finished to a high standard. Displays of pupils' work are evident in each classroom and in corridor spaces. Pupils are celebrated at every opportunity. An atmosphere of positivity, love and high expectations permeates the school. There is a family feel. Pupils, as a matter of course, present their work neatly in their workbooks. They demonstrate pride in their work. Work seen across the school was of a high standard and pupils are engaging and responding to feedback. Due to the personalised support in lessons, students are making great academic progress during their time at The Link School. Children are succeeding and achieving. Relationships across the whole school community are embedded and nurtured. Leaders realise that relationships are key to successful outcomes. This is a school where all relationships matter. Link School pupils grow in confidence and self-esteem because of the hard work of all staff. Leaders are never complacent and regularly consult teachers, parents, and pupils about how to further improve and develop. This is done through activities such as pupil voice sessions, questionnaires, or one to one chats. The Link School is a reflective school.



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Mental health and wellbeing needs are taken seriously by the school, and the school have a dedicated safeguarding team who ensure there is a strong targeted support package for those children who need it. The school have recently recruited an Early Help Worker as part of their team, this has proved successful in ensuring pupil's get support required as quickly as possible. The school know early intervention is crucial and therefore this was a key role for their team. Pupils also benefit from a Play Therapist and counsellors. Staff wellbeing is also a high priority and there is a strong offer of support for all staff. Leaders have an overview of where support may be needed and consideration is given to workload. Support for staff and pupil wellbeing is an integral part of the school ethos.

A real strength of the school is the mindfulness offer. Mindfulness helps The Link School community to feel safe not only in their learning environment but within themselves. This is shown as students become more aware of their emotions, social and family interactions, positive problem solving, growth mind-set and their overall wellbeing.

Throughout the assessment day pupil's behaviour was positive. At KS4, staff were skilled at working with pupils to engage them in completing a mock exam. Although some pupils were reluctant to go into class, the effective relationships staff have with the learners ensured each student did as asked. Pupils in the KS3 mindfulness session were engaged, reflective and focussed. They were able to articulate how being at this school has helped them and talked about their future pathways with passion. The Mindfulness Lead is passionate, dedicated and knowledgeable. She talked confidently about the different techniques she has used to support students in learning how to regulate and manage their emotions. The school works effectively with parents. The school continue to have strong links with the local community and there are a range of opportunities for pupils to extend their learning and develop their character. The Breathing Space project gives pupils the opportunity to engage in extra-curricular activities that allow them to develop their social skills. It also develops their cultural capital.

The school is active in the community, supporting a wide range of schools and academies, and therefore learners. In the assessment day the Vice Chair of the Management Committee and an Associate Professor from Sunderland University talked about the impact of the work of the school. The Associate Professor stated, *'This school does amazing work and they have an amazing leader. It is a beacon of good practice'*. The Vice Chair went on to say that staff at The Link *'make a difference to the lives of children'* and how the project they have been involved in is having an impact at a national level, with Ofsted and DfE speaking to them. The school have been part of a project since 2015, with Sunderland University, looking at SEN across the city and children presenting with having social, emotional and mental health need. As part of this ongoing collaboration, pupils have had the opportunity to have a voice and be part of a series of powerful films which make children visible and give the viewer an insight into their world – a lived experience. This project is allowing children's needs to be met and is all about creating a holistic approach to education.



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Leaders at The Link School are clear about the vision and next steps for the school. They are a reflective team who ensure all staff are included, valued and buy into the school vision. This is an outward facing school who share best practice and are keen to learn from others.

It is clear from the review process that the team at The Link School continue to be fully committed to inclusive practice and they successfully demonstrated the positive impact of their work towards the IQM Centre of Excellence targets over the past 12 months. They have proved their expertise over the years of IQM accreditation and they have the passion and capacity to continue to drive the inclusion agenda in their own school and beyond.

Therefore, having discussed the progress made since the last IQM review and the school's plans for the future, I am of the opinion that the school should continue to hold Centre of Excellence status and be reviewed again in 12 months' time.

Assessor: Emily Carr

Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:

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Joe McCann MBA NPQH
Director of Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd