



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM CoE Award



School Name Aurora Meldreth Manor School
Fenny Lane
Meldreth
Royston
Hertfordshire
SG8 6LG

Head/Principal Ms Emily Willis

IQM Lead Ms Emily Willis

Date of Review 4th March 2024

Assessor Ms Hazel J Simmons

IQM Cluster Programme

Cluster Group MADIE B

Ambassador Angela Crimes – Teacher of SEND

Next Meeting 12th June 2024

Meeting Focus

Term	Date	Attendance
Summer 2022		
Autumn 2022		
Spring 2023		
Summer 2023	14 th June 2023	No
Autumn 2023	18 th October 2023	No
Spring 2024	14 th February 2024	Yes (at TGS)
Summer 2024	12 th June 2024	Yes (planned)

The Impact of the Cluster Group

Whilst the school did not manage to attend any cluster meetings before 14th February, the Head of School is committed to ensuring attendance at Cluster meetings. An IQM Ambassador has been appointed. The Ambassador who took part in the meeting at Thomas Gainsborough School felt it had been particularly useful. She enjoyed and gained from mixing with a large group of like-minded others to debate and discuss inclusive opportunities. She brought back to Aurora Meldreth Manor School an idea she saw comprising display-based learning journeys and has set about recreating these. She was intrigued by the strategies being used in the large mainstream nurture rooms and plans to revisit the meeting host school for a more in-depth evaluation of ideas that Aurora Meldreth Manor School could use.



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Evidence

Sources of Evidence:

- IQM Self Evaluation of targets
- School Development Plan (SDP)
- School website and policies
- Curriculum plans
- Development of Character Curriculum
- Learning walk
- Self-Evaluation Form (SEF)
- Class files/student soft and hard data
- Observation of break time including visits to the tuck shop
- Learning environment
- Parent feedback file
- Observation of morning hand-over routine from care staff and all-staff briefing

Meetings Held with:

- Head of School
- Assistant Head of School/Staff Mental Health Lead
- Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo)
- Students
- Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Higher-Level Teaching Assistant (HTLA)
- Class teachers
- Parents (via telephone conference)
- Chair of Governors (via Teams)

Summary of Targets from 2023-2024

Target 1:

To further develop the staff wellbeing programme.

Great strides have been taken towards this target, improving what is already an excellent package. The school leadership, along with the Governing board, recognise the importance of valuing staff, being seen to be valuing staff and supporting them beyond the school gates, with personal and health needs if required. It was acknowledged that, during and post-COVID, the number of staff experiencing mental health and circumstance concerns, attributable to non-work situations, increased, leading to management challenges around staff absence, attrition and resilience at work. A superior staff wellbeing offer was designed to create a happy workforce, placing equal weight on recognition and reward, which has created a feeling of family within the school and where staff state they feel supported and safe. This progressive approach aims to alleviate work-based stress, improve health-based attendance, and create an environment for students that is joyful and dependable.

The excellent wellbeing practice described in the initial IQM evaluation of the school continues and has been added to, as the Head of School, and group leadership, drive through new initiatives.

Health Assured is made available to all staff. This external partner provides telephone assistance 24/7, on every day of the year. They aim to 'give compassionate support to people, whatever challenges they face'. The investment aims to boost wellbeing and reduce absence, providing staff with the tools needed to stay mentally healthy. Additionally, staff are offered a scheme that provides optical examinations and free or discounted dental treatments.

Two Mental Health First Aiders have been professionally trained and are working on strategies to better support vulnerable staff and provide day-to-day assistance as needed. This could range from a listening ear regarding pressures at home or creating real solutions to alleviate workplace stress. Staff acknowledge that having the newly trained First Aiders meant they had people they could talk to if they needed to (although they were also keen to make it known that the Head of School's door was always open to them and that she took their feelings very seriously and was also always willing to share ideas and help. Staff met concurred that the key to the inclusive team culture was that, "if a problem emerges, leadership help us sort it out. They do not blame staff and they do not resent you going to them with problems".

Staff were keen to share their experiences of the wellbeing support provided by the school and unanimously agreed that, "the school is doing really well in looking after us". Staff appreciated the flat hierarchy, believing that it helped them feel included in all the school's endeavours and they felt truly valued and safe: "everyone has got everyone else's back, including senior leadership. Our ideas count."

The Assistant Headteacher, one of the newly trained Mental Health Leads can provide real, practical, and stress-relieving assistance to teachers, which is appreciated.



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For example, any teacher feeling pressure associated with planning or reporting can request (and are encouraged to do so) additional time to ensure they can give their absolute best to students. This philosophy towards teacher workload is refreshing and is reaping rewards, facilitating teaching quality and teacher resilience. The school leadership also fastidiously ensures all teachers take their Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time.

The Assistant Headteacher is about to embark on other training initiatives including certification in counselling to provide even more depth to the wellbeing offered in school and a qualification aimed at helping 5 to 18-year-olds.

The increase in student numbers has provided the opportunity to increase staffing capacity in critical roles. A qualified HTLA now provides expert cover as required. SENCo capacity has been increased by the recruitment of an Assistant SENCo and additional safeguarding capacity has been put in place.

Staff are given access to a reward and benefits online package that enables the school to efficiently and effectively celebrate staff successes and highlight individuals who exemplify the school's values. This culture of appreciation was mentioned enthusiastically by staff, as they explained how they received and earned points, by being nominated by leadership and their peers, to receive special acknowledgement. The points can then be spent and staff can select from a broad portfolio of gifts. As importantly, staff inclusivity and motivation are amplified by the weekly nomination process. In this way, staff who may not occupy the limelight, are recognised by their peers and it was reported that nominees get 'an extra spring in their step' as they accept mini prizes each week and are entered into a prize for vouchers.

To ensure staff satisfaction is optimised and as part of the consultative philosophy, a half-termly staff survey (work buzz quiz) is conducted.

A calendar of social events is organised by staff, for staff, supported by leadership. On the day of the assessment, a fun, classical Indian dance class was being run after school. Staff, who represent a diverse range of identities, expressed their delight in being able to share experiences from their heritage by leading these events.

Advances in the staff induction programme are having a positive impact on all staff. Extra time is now given to new staff in their first week to provide a comprehensive induction. This means they enter the classroom with greater confidence (and ability) and the staff working alongside them are relieved in large part from the on-the-job training traditionally deployed.

The Chair of Governors feels that Aurora Meldreth Manor School, "is an absolute definition of inclusion". He was keen to point out the, "huge amount of work being done on wellbeing" and "the positive impact" it is having, as discussed in monthly Governor meetings. Whilst acknowledging the importance of significant groupwide staff benefits, such as the Aurora's Christmas Hamper gift to all staff, he recognised that locally, staff much appreciated events, such as the locally organised Random Acts of Kindness Day.

Target 2:

To put in place a half-termly safeguarding analysis.

Safeguarding has been considered in the round and preventative measures have also been put in place, which have required additional staff training. Given the physical challenges faced by many students, manual handling skills, concerning standing frames and personal care, physio routines, medical treatments and specialist feeding routines are essential. The school has upskilled many more staff in these areas and plans to train the entire workforce, thereby ensuring that an appropriately qualified adult is always available and that the burden for facilitating these important needs does not rest on a few shoulders.

Some students in the school experience high anxiety on occasion and intervention by adults is required to keep the student, staff and property safe. The school has invested in PRICE training for everyone so that, when they are supporting distressed students, they are equipped with a full range of strategies. School leadership is committed to avoiding restraint whenever humanly possible. Instead, they place a significant emphasis on the importance of a person-centred approach, which aims to understand and meet the needs of individuals before difficulties arise, equipping staff to recognise early behavioural signals to de-escalate situations. Staff reported that, as a result of the training they receive and peer support, “everyone is safe here”.

There are situations in a school serving students with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) and mental health challenges when difficult situations arise. The Head of School reported and this was endorsed by staff, that they use an inclusive ‘team-around-the-child’ approach so that many views and ideas for resolution are discussed to achieve best outcomes: no single person carries the full responsibility by themselves and students receive the best possible solutions.

Unsurprisingly, because of an increase in student numbers and a significant shift from residential to day students, the number of reported, potential, concerns around transport and out-of-school situations have increased. To optimise safeguarding and family assurance, a behaviour specialist has been recruited. They analyse potential concern information and expediently provide classroom staff (and often parents) with helpful strategies, risk assessments and considered behaviour-support plans. They then review these regularly, consulting with the team around the student and revising as required.

Two further Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) have been fully trained and the school is currently seeking to appoint an additional member of staff to lead the DSL activity across the school and provide reports and analysis to weekly safeguarding meetings.

Whilst conducting the learning walk, several examples of staff expertly and patiently using all manner of positive distraction and movement-based de-escalation techniques were seen, which enabled students to reengage quickly and happily.

Target 3:

To look at the challenge in English and the possibility of having a rolling theme.

Naturally, English and reading are important at Aurora Meldreth Manor School but given the needs of students, the subject is expanded to include communication, whatever mode that might be.

The school recognises that effective communication enables students to socialise, convey their emotions and needs, express themselves and learn. It is vital to help students develop positive relationships, regulate their behaviour and become good citizens, able to navigate the world around them. For many students, being able to read public signage and safety advisories is a prerequisite to enable them to securely navigate the community.

Working closely with the expert, in-house Speech and Language Therapy team, every student has a bespoke communications development programme that guides them towards being able to listen effectively, express themselves and be understood by others.

Many students are taught to use MAKATON sign language to express their needs and wishes and Picture Exchange systems are widely used, as well as Objects of Reference techniques. In a class observed during the assessment, teachers expertly and sensitively used video alongside voice recording switches and touch to allow students with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) to enjoy and participate in learning about oral hygiene, patiently drawing out student participation.

The school appreciates that many of its students benefit from the repetition of communication skills and language and it seeks to ensure this by embedding vocabulary acquisition and communication skills across the whole curriculum making them an integral part of every subject and lesson, from hydrotherapy sessions to science lessons.

Reading for some students means developing an enjoyment of being read to and the library sections of the school provide students with a breadth of engaging literature to self-select from. Staff are not constrained to traditional reading practice but do whatever is most likely to engage students and create progress. This was seen during the assessment to include reading to students while walking outside.

The Head of School explained that, "the key is finding out the optimum way to communicate with each child; it is about individuality. For example, one child has his neck lanyard of symbols he uses because that is what motivates him."

For students who can access formal reading methods, the Little Wardle phonics programme is used by younger students plus the school has invested in Read Write Inc as a more age-appropriate phonics system for older students and is currently rolling this out. The school is enthusiastic about ensuring personalisation is provided across the cognitive range and that able readers, who can access formal qualifications, are assisted to do so. Thus, a basket of assessment tools is used to ensure all skills and needs are recognised. For the more cognitively able students, BKSb is deployed to benchmark and follow progress via a range of assessments based on real-life, practical situations.



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The school has recently been accredited as an exam centre for Functional Skills and, from September 2024, students will be able to take exams in the familiar and calm surroundings of Meldreth Manor, which is important to enable students to maximise their potential to obtain formal qualifications.

Target 4:

To further strengthen evidence of student and parent voice.

Aurora Meldreth Manor School has continued to work hard to build positive relations with all stakeholders. Parents acknowledge that they receive an extremely high level of on-demand attention from school staff. Regular surveys indicate that parents value and appreciate the care and dedication of staff. Parents are delighted by the school's use of Tapestry to provide them with a regular photographic insight into their child's school life along with a termly school activity and progress report. The school appreciates that visual evidence is particularly important to parents of non-verbal children.

The close relationship between home and school is promoted by a daily diary, which carries messages between settings regarding what has gone well, or less well and important practical details regarding eating, toileting and medication. A weekly newsletter is sent to parents with a round-up of the previous week and information about what is coming up, along with signposting other SEND information and events parents might find useful.

Parents who met with the IQM Assessor were positively glowing about the school. One parent expressed feeling, "very privileged" that their son had a place in what they considered to be, "an amazing facility." Aside from the grounds and space, parents spoke about the, "deeply knowledgeable staff" who were very approachable. They feel, particularly under the current Head of School's tenure, encouraged to get involved with the school and one parent was emphatic in her assertion that she feels, "massively included". Parent feedback during the inspection was overwhelmingly positive, describing the team as, "absolutely brilliant" and their children as, "very happy".

Parents' evenings are held and staff are provided to take care of younger siblings so that parents and staff can have uninterrupted, quality discussions, which is much appreciated. The school is sensitive to the fact that some parents are unable to attend in person, due to the distances involved or other commitments, and so offers Teams on-line meetings as an alternative.

Parents are offered workshops (in person and online) on subjects such as sleep, sensory activities and eating and drinking, all presented by the school therapy team.

Half-termly surveys are distributed to parents and the school leadership is using the feedback in their future strategy considerations. Student surveys are made as inclusive as possible with variations created to facilitate need including making surveys tactile for the visually impaired, reproducing in symbol format or on voice switches.

A discussion was held with students, who were polite, pleased to be consulted and expressed that they felt happy and safe and the school, "was great!" Students enjoy being rewarded with stars for exemplifying the school's values and completing their work.

Student voice could be seen throughout the school via every child's poster on their classroom wall that advised staff how they preferred to learn and be helped and what situations they found challenging: their needs were the school's priority.



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Agreed Targets for 2024-2025

Target 1

To deliver accredited Functional Skills examination programmes ready for students to take exams in September 2024.

Comments

The actions planned are highly relevant and, if implemented, will deliver the targeted outcome.

Target 2

To improve the wellbeing of staff and support mental health across the school.

Comments

The actions to succeed in this aim are sensible and practical, broken into suitable steps. December 2024 is the target timeframe.

Target 3

To fully embed student houses and establish student leaders to improve student voice.

Comments

Well-defined steps for what should be an extremely exciting and including a project for students. Target date of September 2024.

Target 4

To implement a spiral curriculum across all subject areas including careers and Further Education (FE) to ensure the continuation of a bespoke curriculum as the school expands.

Comments

Clear components with completion targets for individual steps ranging from July 2024 to February 2025.



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Overview

Aurora Meldreth Manor School is an independent Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision for students aged six to nineteen years of age with profound physical needs, visual impairments, epilepsy and learning difficulties including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and global development delay. Of the 46 students currently on roll, 22 are Looked After Children (LAC) and nine are recorded as Children in Need (CiN) and nine as having English as an Additional Language (EAL). The school serves 18 local authorities.

The school is part of the Aurora group that manages 18 special schools across the United Kingdom. Whilst able to operate autonomously to a large degree, flexibly responding to the regional needs of local authorities, students and families, the school benefits from the support and expertise of the group, which is significant.

The school has undergone a great deal of change in the last year. Not only has there been a change of Head of School but student numbers in the school have increased and will be up by 24% (to fifty students) requiring commensurate additional classrooms, by September 2024. Places are planned to rise throughout the 2024/25 academic year, enabling the school to accommodate a total of eighty students. The school is responding to the urgent need for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) placements, illustrated by an increase of 134% in referrals from local authorities, which is an all-year-round activity in a special school.

Cultural, ethnic and religious diversity is a rich seam in the school, provided by the students themselves, with 60% of students registered as non-white British. Similarly, the staff profile is cosmopolitan which brings a range of skills and experiences into the school every day, thereby guaranteeing an inclusive culture that embraces all races and creeds. The school makes good use of the multicultural knowledge amongst the staff, who are extremely willing to share information and experiences from their own cultures with students, enriching the learning experience for all in the school community.

Class sizes remain small, at approximately five students per group, so that the various sensory needs can be best met. Students are broadly clustered in key stages, and within those, grouped into classes that best suit their needs. This enables, for example, students who can use their voices to verbally express their opinions and engage in discussions with peers to share a class. Similarly, in classes comprising non-verbal children, communication via a method that suits them is deployed to maximise their engagement. Additionally, a few classes cater specifically for PMLD students who require significant additional facilities and teaching provision. However, the school is keen to give all pupils many opportunities to come together and participate in assemblies and special events.

Post-16 students follow a Preparing for Adulthood curriculum. A key component of the curriculum is the development of life skills. The offer is enriched by the inclusion of the Talentino careers programme. Designed specifically for young people with learning difficulties and additional needs, it supports staff in their endeavours to inspire and prepare young people with SEND for the world beyond education. As part of the



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Talentino enterprise programme, students are encouraged to create business plans, realise those plans and sell their output to staff and visitors. In addition, all students can study for two AQA Unit Awards every term. Designed to build student confidence and celebrate smaller steps success, students can build a portfolio of certificates for each completed unit, including work skills certification.

Enterprise is encouraged at every stage in a student's school career. In reception, hand-crafted soap, manufactured by students, was on display. A newly opened tuck shop facility offered a small range of healthy drinks and snacks, made by students, and sold by students to their peers using real money. This simple initiative brilliantly incorporates catering skills with numeracy, communication, customer service and responsibility, as well as healthy eating.

As was noted in the previous IQM assessment report, the range of unusual and impactful learning opportunities offered to students is impressive. Students who wish can participate in public swimming sessions and even access a local golf course. Many students can go horse riding and take part in animal care certification, via the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA). Aside from the therapeutic value, such opportunities reveal what might be hidden talents: last year, a student reached the Riding for the Disabled national championships and won his class. His confidence was matched by the pride and motivation engendered by his peers and staff.

Recently, the school has become a Duke of Edinburgh Award centre and will be rolling out this distinguished and values-driven programme to students during the next 12 months, which is a tremendously exciting new venture.

The Chair of Governors spoke enthusiastically about the positive impact made by measures introduced by the Head of School. He described recent innovations and changes as, "a huge journey, designed to meet the needs of the new cohort and changing student profile". He commended the leadership and the school for being, "amazing" in the way that they set out to meet those needs, stating, "it had been heartwarming to watch." He specifically noted that he felt one of the greatest impacts made in the past 12 months was the Head of School's determination to get students out into the community and bring the community into the school, building acceptance and inclusivity for all.

The Chair of Governors, in discussion regarding the school's ambition to revise the English curriculum in school, explained how he had seen a positive move forward in developing a love of reading for all via the expansion of personal reading spaces. He also noted that the Head of School continued to drive this topic with requests for additional funding to invest in more reading resources for students!

As a member of the Aurora group of schools, staff benefit from a fantastic benefits package. The group recognises that staff welfare is exceedingly important, aside from the high cost of high attrition and sickness absence. Aurora Meldreth Manor staff now have access to Health Assured, an organisation which gives them free or discounted dental treatment and free eye tests. In addition, there is a confidential telephone support helpline for staff to discuss stress or mental health challenges, related to either work or home life. Recognising the important part that all staff play in their organisation, the group also gifted each member of staff with a Christmas Hamper. This,

alongside the extensive efforts to create positive work being rolled out by the school, has successfully created a palpably happy environment.

Recent staff surveys were reviewed during the assessment visit and they contain a wealth of positive statements such as, leadership is, “open, transparent and willing to listen” and, “we are not just here for the children but also for families”.

Aurora Meldreth Manor has a fantastic and large site, equipped with a wide array of facilities designed to provide therapeutic interventions and help students engage and self-manage the regulation of their emotions. Moreover, parts of the outdoor space are deployed as key learning development areas. Facilities include raised planters, polytunnels for vegetable propagation, a Forest School zone and an outdoor gymnasium. Most classrooms also have direct access to their own outside spaces.

A team of specialist staff including physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, occupational and music therapists and nurses, work alongside classroom staff providing a holistic programme for students. Residential care staff attend school meetings every morning and provide verbal reports regarding issues arising and medical matters, including the mental wellness of students, enabling school staff to plan each day to be as productive and comfortable for students as possible.

The school has invested time in developing its spiral curriculum, to suit the small steps of learning favoured by its students. The Meldreth Manor Spiral comprise three pathways: Engaging, Developing and Secure and students can move between pathways if their progress determines this would be advantageous. Whilst it is based on the National Curriculum, it is highly adapted to suit the school's students and significantly enhanced by weaving in personalised aims drawn from students' Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Using a shared Teams platform, teachers work collaboratively to continuously develop subject areas. In this way, topics and vocabulary are constantly refreshed, allowing information to be reinforced and embedded and a deeper understanding gained about what works for Meldreth Manor students.

Laced throughout the academic study is the school's bespoke, 'character development curriculum' that incorporates the explicit teaching of self-reliance and self-regulation. The school is committed to teaching skills for character development to ensure that all young people have the resilience to take on life's challenges, have confidence and achieve dreams, feel comfortable in their skin and advocate for themselves when it comes to life's big decisions, such as, “where will I live?”

The curriculum is published and moderated by school leadership and regular training ensures staff are fully able to confidently implement the plans.

The school's willingness and drive to research widely and then find ways to transpose, link and embrace new ideas into their plans is admirable. However, it is the acute personalisation of every detail of each student's physical need, timetable, output expectations and emotional need that is most impressive, from class files to wall posters explaining, 'how to help me' and including graphic Learning Journeys, which plot a child's progress across the year.



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The Head of School describes the role of the school as, “not just educating but advocating for students to maximise their adult life chances”.

Meldreth Manor School provides an outstanding, caring and inclusive environment for students, where the personalised approach has a huge impact on their progress and wellbeing. The Self Evaluation Report shared reflects the high quality of rigorous evaluation that exists. It is highly detailed and reflects the school as seen by the assessor.

I am firmly of the opinion that the school fully meets the standard required by the Inclusion Quality Mark to maintain its status as a Centre of Excellence. I therefore recommend that the school retains its Centre of Excellence status and is reviewed again in 12 months. The next review will look closely at how the school has interacted with its Inclusion Cluster and promoted continuing outreach. Evidence of Cluster working will underpin the capacity for the school to maintain its Centre of Excellence status.

Assessor: Ms Hazel J Simmons

Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:

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