

Contribution to the Sector

Nicola Fisher

What the Judges Said

This person does not just do a job, she has an impact on her surroundings and others in the school. Someone who is not in leadership, not a super head, nor a member of trust staff, this person is an ordinary person doing their job, but in a way that means others are learning from her.

Context

The Barlow RC High School is a secondary school that works in an extremely challenging context. Although from the 'outside' we are situated in the leafy Didsbury, 44% of our students are classed as 'disadvantaged' which is almost double the National Average. Our profile shows that students come from areas with the highest social deprivation in Manchester. Despite this, we are committed to removing barriers to learning for all our students, so they can reach their full potential and be the best that they can be. Our mission is: "If you believe you can achieve". We live our mission out each day in our school so we can improve the life chances of all our pupils.

This mission shines through in the way our SEND Department looks after SEND pupils with a range of needs. The SEND register at The Barlow is made up of 153 pupils, which is above the national average. 24 of our pupils are designated as having complex needs and receive additional funding from the LA. Again, this is significantly above the national average. 62% of our SEND cohort are classed as Pupil Premium, meaning that they have double the barriers to overcome. Our SEND pupils are our inspiration and we strive, in everything we do for them, to give them the best opportunities in life that we can. We are massively proud of them and all of the work we do for them, in order to allow them to be important contributors to society as they grow older.

Entry

How do they go above and beyond the expectations?

Nik is a TA4 and the work she does changes lives. Nik leads Hive 2, our support base for pupils with additional learning needs, physical difficulties and speech, language and communication needs such as autism spectrum condition. Within our

Hive 2 provision, SEND pupils are given 1-1 and small group support with Nik, in order to help them access the mainstream curriculum and build positive relationships with more success and with less anxiety. Some of the interventions Nik leads include: additional literacy and numeracy, including independent living skills such as budgeting, completing a passport or driving license application form and how to use money accurately in a shop, fine motor skills work, social stories, Lego Therapy, comic strip stories, keyworker mentoring and Speech and Language Therapy support. Nik is ELKAN trained, having completed this qualification in her own time.

In Hive 2, we have our 'Blue Room', a sensory room where pupils who feel overwhelmed by the demands of mainstream schooling can go to find peace and calm. This was an idea developed by Nik, with support from TAs, who gave up their holiday time, to come into school and decorate the room so that it could be ready for our most vulnerable pupils. Nik bought or donated much of the equipment in the room herself. This sums Nik up: She inspired other staff members with the vision that she had of outstanding SEND provision for our most vulnerable pupils. The pupils love the space and are proud to have it. When they've had their time in the 'blue room', Nik is always there to listen and guide. She is an absolute lifeline for a number of highly vulnerable pupils.

Nik has introduced our VIP Club in school, which is a lunchtime PE group that Nik oversees for pupils who really struggle to access PE due to their anxiety around the subject. These children, thanks to Nik are facing their fears, building their resilience, making new friends and learning to love PE. Nik rarely gets a lunchtime due to running clubs such as this, yet she never complains. She knows pupils need her and so she is determined to be there!

Thanks to Nik's experience and outstanding practice as a TA, we have been able to open our doors to pupils who usually would attend specialist provision. This has meant that parents who desperately wanted to send their children to a mainstream provision have been able to have their wishes met. Nik came to The Barlow from a Resource Provision and she has brought a wealth of experience and knowledge of working with ASC pupils with her. She not only uses this knowledge on a day-to-day basis herself, but she has shared this knowledge across the department and the school. Nik's work has changed the school life of a significant number of SEND pupils and we are very proud of the amazing work that she does within Hive 2. Hive 2, thanks to Nik, has transformed the lives of a number of pupils, who were previously unable to cope with the demands of mainstream, but with Nik's support and guidance, they are happy and making progress.

Nik is an amazing asset to The Barlow – she has worked as a TA for many years now, going above and beyond what could ever be asked or expected of her. We would love for her to gain the recognition she so deserves by winning this award!

How is their work is innovative?

Nik is constantly reviewing the practice within our Hive 2, whether that be the interventions we offer to our pupils or the curriculum diet they receive (she is looking to bring in new subjects such as BTEC Home Cooking, which is amazing for our lowest ability learners and gives them independent living skills). She is constantly reading around the subject of SEND, keeping up to date with the latest thinking with regards to SEND. Through transition and building relationships with parents and pupils, Nik is able to find out what works for our most vulnerable and, no matter how challenging, she finds a way to deliver personalised support in Hive 2 for pupils. These pupils, thanks to Nik's work, are able to access and thrive in a mainstream provision where potentially, they might not have been able to, without Nik's dedication.

Just an overview of her innovative work is:

The VIP Club – designed to encourage anxious pupils, particularly those with autism, to attend PE. She spends every Wednesday lunchtime leading a PE session with them and some of our PE prefects. Pupils love it and are beginning to attend some mainstream lessons... and love the subject!

Our sensory room – designed by Nik to support our pupils with autism. This is a quiet and calm space with a range of sensory items that are designed to calm anxious pupils. This includes: sensory lights, water tubes and fishes, different sensory wall coverings for pupils to touch, worry monsters. These combined help pupils to feel safe and secure.

Sensory boxes – Nik has helped our pupils with autism to make their own personalised sensory boxes that are able to calm them when they are distressed. She maintains these so they are on hand when pupils need them most.

Weighting – Nik has researched and organised a range of weighted items that are used to help ground pupils with autism, particularly if they are overwhelmed or unable to cope. These have had a significant impact on pupils' wellbeing.

How is this work sustained over at least two years?

Nik embodies everything that our school is about. She is an outstanding TA. She is hardworking, dedicated, enthusiastic, tenacious and absolutely committed to the SEND children in her care. The difference she makes to the lives of our most vulnerable pupils is immeasurable and we are absolutely honoured, and our SEND pupils, so lucky, to have her as part of our school community. Nik leads the other TAs (we have 13 of them in total, so it is a big team) as a role model on how to treat others and how to really cater for the needs of our most complex pupils. Nik doesn't shy away from a difficult conversation with the team and takes her leadership role extremely seriously. In a professional and supportive way, she challenges members of the SEND team to make sure that the provision on offer for our pupils is the absolute best it can be. No matter what time of the day it is, how busy she is or what might have already been asked of her that day, Nik is always available to our pupils and they absolutely think the world of her – as do their parents!

Over the last 2 years we have had an increase in the number of pupils with autism and very complex learning needs we have had join our school and a significant increase in the number of pupils who attend our mainstream setting but essentially, would also be at home in a specialist setting. Nik has taken this in her stride – I have watched (and learned) as she has built relationships with pupils with more complex needs than any of us are used to working with. When some of these pupils have become overwhelmed and very distressed or unable to verbalise their feelings to us, Nik has stepped in and reassured, calmed and supported them, so that they can communicate with her. She has developed our blue room, our sensory room, for our pupils with autism. She gave up her own time to do this and spent her own money, along with other members of the team, who she had inspired with her vision, to make this room a safe space for our children.

The proof of Nik's sustained impact...

- Pupils who would normally be in a specialist setting are settled and making progress at The Barlow!
- Increased numbers of SEND pupils have requested pupils next academic year (over 20% of the applications are from SEND pupils)!
- Improving external SEND data in the last 2 years!
- An Ofsted inspection which previously highlighted SEND as a significant concern, sang our praises in 2019!
- The staff and parental testimonials that are attached!