CHALLENGE PARTNERS

VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP QUALITY ASSURANCE REVIEW

REVIEW REPORT FOR BRANDLES SCHOOL

Name of School:	Brandles School
Headteacher:	David Pearce
Hub:	Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire
School phase:	Secondary Special
MAT:	Larwood Academy Trust

Date of this Review:	19/05/2021
Overall Estimate at last QA Review	This is the first quality assurance review for the school
Grade at last Ofsted inspection:	Not applicable

Quality Assurance Review

The review team, comprising host school leaders and visiting reviewers, agree that evidence indicates these areas are evaluated as follows:

Leadership at all Levels	Not applicable
School Improvement Strategies	Not applicable
Approach to recovery and remote learning	Not applicable
Area of Excellence	Not applicable
Previously accredited valid Areas of Excellence	Not applicable

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Overall Peer Evaluation Estimate   Not applicable

Please note that a Challenge Partners Quality Assurance Review is not equivalent to an Ofsted inspection, and agreed peer evaluation estimates from the review are not equivalent to Ofsted judgements.

The peer evaluation estimate included on this report has been collectively agreed between the lead reviewer, review team and host school. The estimate is based on the evidence seen as part of the virtual Leadership Quality Assurance Review.

Whilst every effort has been made to triangulate the evidence presented during the review, it is important to note that the nature of working remotely means that the estimate given only encompasses that which is able to be explored virtually.

1. Context and character of the school

Brandles is a special school for 60 boys in Key Stages 3 and 4. Students have significant mental health issues, behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties. All students have education, health and care plans (EHCPs). Students' needs include autistic spectrum condition (ASC), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional demand avoidance, attachment disorder, pathological demand avoidance, obsessive compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The proportion of students who enter and leave the school at times other than those usually expected is high. The nature of the school means many students join after Year 7 and some as late as Year 11. Around half of the students admitted have a history of poor or lengthy non-attendance at previous schools. The majority have experienced fixed-term or permanent exclusion at previous schools. Students experience a higher-than-average level of deprivation.

Brandles joined the Larwood Trust in February 2020. Leaders are well supported by the Larwood Trust. The Trust has a good understanding of Brandles, as the schools worked effectively together before formal academisation in 2020. Almost all students join the school from Larwood. This increases stability for the student population. Children can join Larwood and continue to the end of Key Stage 4, benefiting from common, well-planned assessment and continuity of provision.

Currently, almost all of the Year 7 intake come from Larwood School. The processes of transition and assessment are improving resulting in an all through offer from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4.

Leaders are using the National Autism Society accreditation process and Autism Education Trust progression guidance, to develop skilled staff, supporting students in 'autism friendly' environments.

Students benefit from Brandles' strong community links. They make important contributions, giving back to society.

Brandles School promotes in students respect for their community, for their environment and for themselves. Each student is expected to be respectful, ready to learn and stay safe, so that students become a force for good in a rapidly changing world.

2.1 Leadership at all Levels - What went well

- The senior leadership team (SLT) have a clear vison based on respect and contribution, which they articulate and lead by example. They are well supported by the Chief Executive Officer of the Larwood Trust.
- A key feature of the Brandles offer is to work with the student and their family, to build holistic family support and skills, resulting in increased confidence and resilience for students. Partnership with employers, colleges, schools and the local community is strong.
- The SLT have a hands-on approach, with relatively heavy teaching loads. The headteacher greets students each morning and fulfils many everyday functions. The SLT, in consultation with the Trust, are developing a new leadership structure to create a tier of middle leaders and increase opportunities for teachers and learning support assistants (LSAs) to contribute further to school improvement.
- Leaders at all levels benefit from a strong commitment to personal and professional development. Leaders complete national professional qualifications. There are numerous examples of progression from LSA to unqualified and qualified teacher status.
- Students benefit from an innovative, well-planned curriculum, which builds on the Brandles hierarchy, to ensure that students are ready to learn and contribute to society. In later years at Brandles, students make accelerated academic progress, and many achieve vocational qualifications and GCSEs. The curriculum has a strong commitment to spiritual and moral development. Students' behaviour and conduct are well understood. Leaders are introducing the new learning skills curriculum (LSC) in Year 7, based on developing oracy, self-regulation and meta-cognition.
- The well thought-out programme of careers and work-related learning starts in Year 7. The college link tutor visits the school weekly to build knowledge of and relationships with students. Work experience and work-related learning use the on-site vocational learning facilities, including painting, decorating, building, and carefully planned off-site work experience. After leaving school, students are supported for up to two years.
- Community engagement is a major feature of school life. The extensive range of activities include, the Duke of Edinburgh Bronze and Silver Awards, bushcraft, visits to care homes, volunteering in charity shops and litter picking.
- Staff well-being is a strong aspect of Brandles. No emails are sent between 5.30pm and 7.30am. Staff have access to external support, including at the 'butterfly rooms', and the 'education support trust'. Staff value that they can use their skills and passions to support students. For example, staff run martial arts, yoga and bicycle repair clubs.

- Personalised education and therapeutic support for students, with wide-ranging family support, lead to dramatic improvements in well-being. Students access a wide range of new experiences. Monday morning is carefully planned so that any trauma or 'weekend baggage' can be 'unpacked,' to enable students to learn. More vulnerable students enjoy nurture lunch club. Students learn to use safe spaces and access 'safe staff.'

2.2 Leadership at all Levels - Even better if…

…sensory occupational therapy knowledge were fully embedded in the staff teams to further improve students' sensory regulation due to the continued increase in students with ASC.

…leaders ensured that once the assessment methods for 'softer skills' are further developed for the LSC, they explored how this methodology could be embedded across the school.

…leaders built capacity and opportunity to implement a coaching model for professional development, allowing for expertise to be distributed and the habitual modelling of best practice.

3.1 School improvement strategies and the extent to which these address the needs of different groups of learners, especially disadvantaged pupils and those with additional needs- What went well

- Self-evaluation is comprehensive and accurate, reflecting the school's journey of continuous improvement. School development is thoughtful and comprehensive, with clear priorities.
- Monitoring and quality assurance procedures are rigorous. Senior leaders conduct weekly drop-ins to classes, evaluating teaching and learning and providing constructive, developmental feedback.
- Leaders deliver well-planned induction, training and support for new staff. LSAs interviewed were passionate about their roles. They felt well supported and encouraged to use their interests and passions to develop their skills and knowledge. An LSA said she felt privileged to work at the school.
- Students who need alternative provision access a variety of settings, including 'learning to listen,' 'waste not want not,' and 'creatives.' Some students access a hybrid alternative provision and school placement, to better meet their needs.
- Staff at all levels understand and value the staffing and provision changes, which are building capacity for career progression, as well as improving provision.
- Behaviour is understood to be about communication or unmet needs. The Brandles therapeutic curriculum helps students to develop improved communication, thinking skills, and self-esteem.

- When the recent curriculum changes were implemented, including 30-minute lessons and a more therapeutic approach, there was a significant impact on behaviour. In the month before their inception there were 17 restrictive interventions. In the four months afterwards, there were 10 in total. This is complemented by a reward system where students earn points to exchange for approved items and access levels of responsibility, which come with privileges. For example, a student on level 3 is able to go offsite, with parental permission and relevant risk assessment, for a meal at the local supermarket café independently.
- There is a culture of 'swapping out' by staff at all levels, when the member of staff may be 'becoming part of the problem.'
- Brandles staff build strong, trusting relationships with families. Pastoral staff accompany some students to medical appointments and engage with parents on supporting their child's learning and improving parenting skills.
- Parents interviewed felt that the support from the school was outstanding. They said that Brandles was seen as an extension of their family and their child felt accepted for the first time. Transition into school worked for the whole family. The education support worker and pastoral team were approachable and solution - focused. During remote learning, some insults were exchanged in the online chat. School staff responded swiftly and fairly to deal with the issue and effect restoration.
- Students value their relationships with staff. They explained how staff helped them and that they felt cared for. Students valued having fun with teachers and LSAs, the variety of clubs, the reward system and the support from the school during Covid restrictions. One student showed great pride in their progress towards the Duke of Edinburgh Silver Award and their amazing progress towards qualifications, including GCSEs and BTECS. Students said that they now swear less, have more opportunities, are more confident and better equipped to talk about things. One student said, 'Brandles has really changed my life'.

3.2 School improvement strategies and the extent to which these address the needs of different groups of learners, especially disadvantaged pupils and those with additional needs - Even better if…

…the detailed self-evaluation form plan gave a more concise overview of the strengths and needs of the school, so that leaders at all levels could better articulate their overall priorities and take the next steps in school development.

…best practice in using 'zones of regulation' and a restorative approach were shared and habitually applied across the school, so that the students fully reflected on and better understood their feelings and emotions.

…additional breakout spaces, both indoors and outdoors were improved to promote safety, student self-regulation and the capacity for targeted interventions.

…systems and processes were put in place to enable students to consistently and frequently mentor their peers, to model their leadership and relevant skills, to raise aspirations and maximise potential for all.

4.1   Approach to recovery and remote learning - What went well

- Leaders used their deep knowledge of families to assess risk using a RAG rating system. Families in need of greater support received additional contact from school staff. The most vulnerable students attended school or were transported by school staff to alternative provision. Staff at all levels made regular contact with families on pastoral and academic matters. Families received a weekly pastoral e-mail. Leaders used information from CPOMs and Behaviour Watch to promote safety and well-being.
- The Brandles community, including parents, donated to a food bank. Food was delivered to families in need. A grant, obtained by the trust, was used to deliver vouchers to families in need.
- Annual reviews and child in need meetings were successfully delivered using online platforms, making reviews more accessible.
- Staff well-being was always considered. Staff who experienced hardship due to partners and family members losing income, had access to emotional support and in some cases, to the food bank.
- The remote learning handbook is an excellent resource, supporting and informing staff to deliver safe, high quality learning. Tutors used their deep knowledge of students to provide remote, paper based, hybrid and parent-led learning.
- Some remote learning was delivered as live sessions, alongside high-quality recorded material. For example, the mathematics lead developed a mathematics group online, with assignments, recorded material with teacher voiceover and motivational posts. Students responded almost immediately to teacher feedback.
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire data showed that 'Prosocial' behaviour initially deteriorated after the first lockdown. However, from September 2020 to March 2021, there has been a remarkable improvement across the school.
- Attendance has improved beyond the school target attendance, a figure above most comparable schools. On first day back after the third lockdown, attendance was 100%.
- Attainment gaps for students have mostly closed. Assessment and mock examination data show that three students are likely to attain GCSE grade 6s in PE and art, the highest ever grades attained at Brandles.

4.2 Approach to recovery and remote learning - Even better if…

…leaders explored the continuation of their successful practice in remote and hybrid learning, to better meet the needs of harder to engage students.

5. What additional support would the school like from the Challenge Partners network, either locally or nationally?

Leaders have not identified any particular area of additional support they need. They know how to obtain information and support as and when it is required.

This visit will support the school's continuing improvement. The main findings may be shared within the school's hub in order that it can inform future activities. Schools can also access the School Support Directory, the Challenge Partners online tool that enables schools to connect with other schools in your hub and across the national network of schools.

Schools can also attend Sharing Leading Practice events where schools showcase excellent and/or innovative practice. Sharing Leading Practice events allow school leaders with specific improvement needs to visit a school or attend an online webinar hosted by a school, with outstanding provision in that area.

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