

**Westminster Education Forum Keynote Seminar - Policy Priorities for School Sports in England – participation, quality and the role of schools in encouraging physical activity (article submission)**

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**Article reference topics:**

- **Improving participation, accessibility and diversity in school sports**
- **The role of schools in promoting physical literacy, healthy eating and exercise**
- **Raising the quality of PE provision in schools – funding, coaching and supporting teachers**

There would be little resistance to the suggestion that in terms of ensuring improved health outcomes and lifelong physical activity participation, 'getting things right' must start from an early age. Of course there is much to be said for the parental role and responsibility in helping shape healthy eating habits and active lifestyles in their children; indeed, choices they make will undoubtedly determine future behaviours. However, schools have a huge part to play, so, what is happening?

Having worked with primary and secondary schools, prep schools, within Further Education, Sixth Form and an Independent School, I feel that subject to the right conditions, all provide an excellent environment to foster development of young people through physical activity. However, numerous barriers prevent this in reality and rather than improving the situation, we have perhaps, been taking a backwards step. The private school model, in many examples at least, is arguably one we should be learning from, but the numerous positives such institutions can offer are often unachievable in the state sector, particularly at primary age. This must not continue to be the case.

In my opinion, there are a number of key factors that contribute to a successful school physical programme and while **some** are easier to achieve in the state sector, the private school environment often allows for all to be realised.

Firstly, it starts from the top; if the Head and Senior Management believe in the power of sport and activity, this makes all the difference. Secondly, you need passionate, enthusiastic and appropriately trained staff. Thirdly, the mindset that dedication and hard work can help to develop talents; this suggests anyone can achieve anything. Being creative and flexible in planning and programming allows for a real 'sport for all' approach and helps everyone to find something they enjoy and are good at. Thus the ability and freedom to design the curriculum/co-curriculum without restriction, enables so much to happen.

Finally, the school needs a shared and holistic commitment to their targeted outcomes, particularly in terms of how they perceive, measure and promote success. If the messages and pride are focused on winning and the top team only, what does this say about everyone else and the other achievements that should be celebrated. Wouldn't it be lovely for young people to comment on how well their team played rather than the result? Or for the success to be that everyone took part in the fun run or could swim 25m? Or the statistic noted that every pupil was taking part in regular sport/activity through choice and not compulsion? A strong ethos with such goals could do wonders for making young people feel valued and motivated to remain active.

Ultimately, what needs to be addressed, is how can all this be achieved? Greater funding must be provided to support schools in being able to run high quality programmes. Better training provision is required for teachers and volunteers that gets them to an appropriate standard and really equips them to deliver, progress and review sport/activity provision. This may be particularly relevant to the primary school environment where PE specialism is often extremely limited or non-existent. Too many courses, particularly postgraduate, give such a minimal amount of time to physical education and physical literacy training; we are doing our young people a major injustice when lifelong activity habits

are considered so important. More time allocated for sport/activity, combined with less rigidity in the PE curriculum programmes to empower schools, would also be extremely beneficial, notwithstanding the need for greater time allocation to be given to teachers to develop the high quality programme our young people should experience.

If we could get this right, managing an effective programme of activity, fitness and health assessment and measurement of young people would then be achievable. Surely this is far better than recording BMI and telling a child they are overweight for their age? This is potentially one of the most damaging statistics that can have long term negative detriment. Monitoring regularly is not to say children should be experiencing further tests and exams, or being ranked and benchmarked physically. More that their activity, fitness and health (useful measures) can be monitored in an objective and useful way, where comparison is only with themselves; this way everyone can benefit.