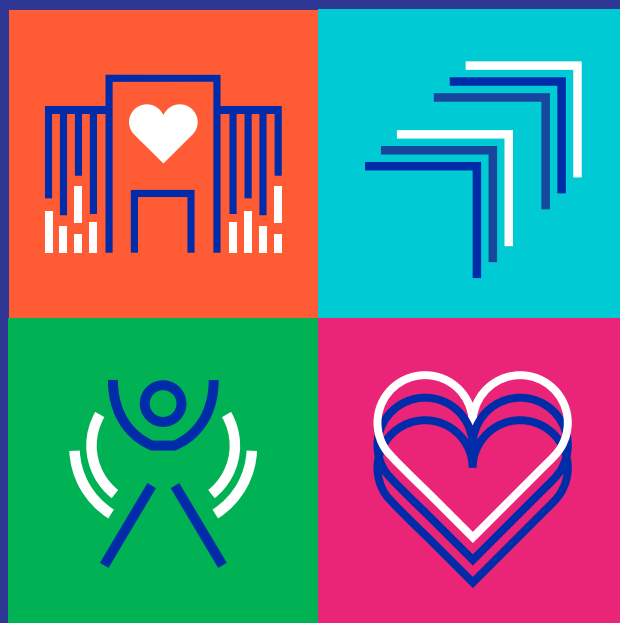


Addressing the Disadvantage Gap through Well Schools





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By strategically placing the physical and mental wellbeing of staff and students at the heart of their culture, Well Schools are creating a movement of high performing, healthy and happy schools.

The Contribution of PE School Sport and Physical Activity (PESSPA) to a Well School, Sheffield Hallam University (2026)



INTRODUCTION

This report is based on research conducted by Sheffield Hallam University, on behalf of the Youth Sport Trust - **The Contribution of PE School Sport and Physical Activity (PESSPA) to a Well School.**

It sets out the evidence-based approaches that schools are taking, using the Well Schools Framework, to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils by placing 'the physical' at the heart of their culture and ethos, alongside other steps to success that create happy, healthy, engaged learners.

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MoveWell.
LiveWell.*



THE DISADVANTAGE GAP IN EDUCATION

The UK education system is currently navigating a period of profound complexity. Pupils living in the most deprived communities experience significantly lower attendance and reduced attainment compared to their peers in more affluent communities and there are multiple inequalities and challenges impacting the culture and leadership of our schools.



The relationship between attendance and attainment is well-established. Pupils with lower attendance are significantly less likely to achieve expected standards at Key Stage 2 or strong passes in English and mathematics at Key Stage 4 (Department for Education, 2025, The link between attendance and attainment in an assessment year).

Low income and inequality are barriers to a positive school experience, impairing a child's cognitive development, concentration, and emotional regulation; the very "readiness to learn" required for academic success.

Furthermore, for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners and those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), these challenges rarely occur in isolation; they intersect in ways that intensify their impact and depress attainment across every key stage.



A child that doesn't belong is the biggest challenge to their school experience.

Sian Hall, Head of School,
St Breock Primary School

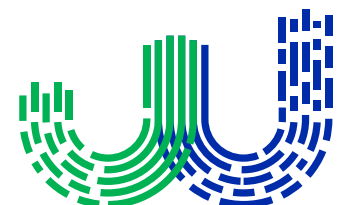
School life has emerged as the most significant area of dissatisfaction for children and young people in the UK (The Children's Society, 2025, The Good Childhood Report).

Happiness with school and schoolwork has plummeted to record lows, with approximately one in nine children reporting they are unhappy with school.

This decline is particularly sharp regarding schoolwork, which young people now rank as the aspect of life they are least happy with.

The data suggests a troubling trend where school has shifted from a place of growth to a primary source of distress, with over 15% of 10 to 15 year-olds expressing active unhappiness with their sense of belonging in school.

This is a shift for this generation, and we need to find new ways to tackle this.



THE REMOVAL OF MOVEMENT FROM SCHOOL LIFE

There were approximately 45,000 fewer hours of PE taught in state-funded secondary schools in 2024/25 compared to the 2011/12 academic year, a decline of over 12% (PE & School Sport: The Annual Report, 2025, Youth Sport Trust).

This erosion of curriculum time is compounded by a shrinking workforce with the number of dedicated PE teachers falling from 26,005 in 2011/12 to 24,228 in 2023 (Youth Sport Trust / Savanta, 2026, The Class of 2035: 2025 edition).

The crisis is particularly acute in secondary education, where 4,000 hours of PE were stripped away in the last year alone, with one in five students reporting that their scheduled PE lessons were frequently cancelled due to staff shortages or lack of facilities (Youth Sport Trust / Savanta, 2026, The Class of 2035: 2025 edition).

The marginalisation of physical activity is driven by prioritising core academic subjects over PE, sport, and play. Youth Sport Trust data reveals a stark disparity: while PE hours have plummeted, teaching time for Maths and English has increased by 13% and 10% respectively since 2012 (Department for Education, 2025. School Workforce in England, Reporting Year 2024).

This has been exacerbated by schools shrinking lunchtimes and breaktimes with 23 mins per day, removed for outdoor play and a reduction of extracurricular sport and physical activity by 50% since the Covid pandemic and approximately 20% of pupils doing no enrichment at all (Raising the Nation Play Commission, 2025, Everything to Play For A Plan to Ensure Every Child in England Can Play)

The system has squeezed some of the fundamental pillars for success, health, and happiness out of the curriculum. As well as the joy!

Physical activity (PA) levels among children and young people remain a significant concern, despite recent modest improvements.

Just 49% of children aged 5 to 16 are meeting the Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) guideline of an average of 60 or more minutes of moderate-intensity activity per day, meaning more than half of all children in England are not sufficiently active (Sport England, 2025, Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic Year 2024-25).



Inequalities in participation remain pronounced, with children from Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority backgrounds and those experiencing multiple characteristics of disadvantage the least likely to be active, with only 40% of children with two or more characteristics of inequality meeting the recommended levels (Sport England, 2025, Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic Year 2024-25).

These disparities mirror broader patterns of social disadvantage and highlight the structural barriers that prevent equitable access to PA for many young people.



I think that when you sit down, my brain feels sluggish but standing up and when you are running around and playing action, your brain is a little happier.

Pupil

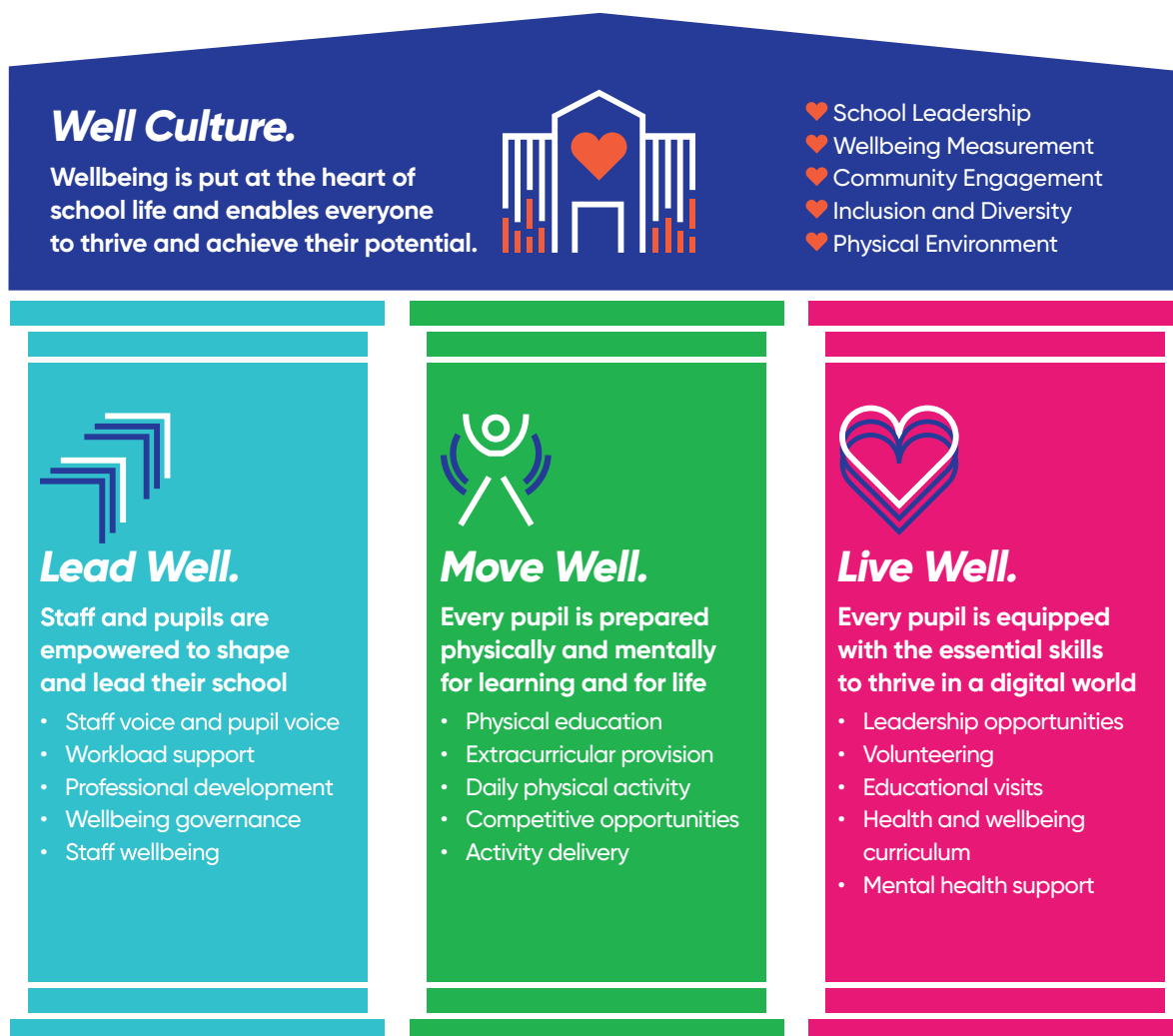


WHAT IS A WELL SCHOOL?

Well Schools is a whole-school framework that supports schools to embed wellbeing at the heart of their culture, practice, and improvement priorities.

By placing the physical and mental wellbeing of staff and pupils at the centre of decision-making, Well Schools helps create environments where young people can thrive and staff feel supported to perform at their best. This approach recognises that wellbeing is not separate from academic success – it underpins it, driving improvements in attendance, behaviour, and attainment.

A Well School still has high expectations, but places just as much emphasis on health and wellbeing as it does on academic performance. It understands that children and young people are more effective learners when they are happy and healthy, and that staff are better educators when they are genuinely supported. Well Schools take care of the health and wellbeing of their pupils and staff to create a culture which allows everyone to reach their potential.



HOW A WELL SCHOOL APPROACH IMPROVES PUPIL OUTCOMES

The data demonstrates that when physical activity and movement are treated as foundational, they act as a protective factor for the entire school population. The evidence shows that:

- PE, School Sport and Physical Activity (PESSPA) functions as a foundational system. When embedded within a whole-school approach, it supports the psychological, social, and cognitive conditions necessary for genuine educational engagement.
- Staff consistently observe that building physical competence leads to broader self-efficacy. When a child masters a difficult physical skill, that confidence transfers into academic contexts.
- Movement-rich environments shape a pupil's motivation and readiness to learn. The research consistently showed these environments enhance cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and a sense of school connectedness.



For our pupils, and the context for their lives and what they value from their school experience; sport and play act as an important foundation for their social connections, their mental health, and their sense of belonging.

Sue Watmough, Head Teacher, Manchester Communication Academy



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Theme	Mechanism
Emotional Regulation and Mental Health Support	Physical activity provides immediate emotional release, helps students recognise and manage emotions (dysregulation), creates calm/settled states necessary for learning, and offers healthy coping strategies for stress and anxiety. Movement serves as both preventive mental health support and responsive intervention.
Belonging, Inclusion and Safety	Physical activity creates sense of belonging through team membership, shared experiences, and inclusive participation. Universal provision with 'something for everyone' ensures all students feel valued regardless of ability. Physical safety combines with psychological safety to create conditions where students can take risks, try new things, and feel accepted.
Character, Confidence and Transferable Life Skills	Physical activity provides authentic contexts to develop and demonstrate character qualities (commitment, resilience, teamwork, leadership). Success in physical challenges builds confidence that transfers to academic and social domains. Leadership opportunities and skill development create competence that students recognise as valuable beyond sport.
Motivation, Attendance, Behaviour and Engagement	Physical activity increases intrinsic motivation through enjoyment and choice. Active students are more likely to attend school and engage in learning. Movement improves focus and concentration. Students who feel competent and included demonstrate better behaviour. The prospect of physical activity (clubs, competitions, Sport for All Friday) motivates attendance and positive behaviour.



WELLBEING IS THE WORK



We want our children to be safe, happy, healthy and loved. And that's it. Now, of course, we're here to educate. Of course, that's what we're held to account for. But we have an understanding that if we don't have that platform, then we're not going to be able to achieve those educational outcomes.

Ben Levinson OBE,
Executive Headteacher,
Kensington Primary School

Despite operating in challenging contexts, the Beacon Well Schools do not interpret their contextual realities through a deficit lens.

Rather than viewing deprivation, housing instability, child poverty, or linguistic diversity as indicators of limitation, school leaders consistently frame their contexts as complex, dynamic environments that require thoughtful, relational, and wellbeing centred approaches, shifting the narrative away from what children and families lack and toward the strengths, cultural assets, and resilience that characterise their communities.

Physical activity serves as a vital mechanism for improving school attendance by enhancing a pupil's wellbeing and readiness to learn.

Moving pupils from the least active to the most active can trigger transformative results, including a 26% improvement in school experience and a 32% boost in happiness.

For pupils with SEND, the attendance benefits of a Well School approach appear even more substantial. High activity levels result in meaningfully better overall mental wellbeing and perceived health. Rather than being a peripheral "add-on," this level of activity strengthens teacher relationships and general health, creating a positive feedback loop that makes students more engaged and present.

The data identifies four key pathways connecting activity to consistent attendance, with General Health (accounting for 98% of the total effect) being the primary connection between physical activity and school attendance. The statistical link between physical health and presence in the classroom is remarkably direct; each one-point improvement in general health is associated with a 1.1 percentage point increase in attendance.



Students who've got the right attitude towards sport and wellbeing... that is exemplified by their engagement and attendance.

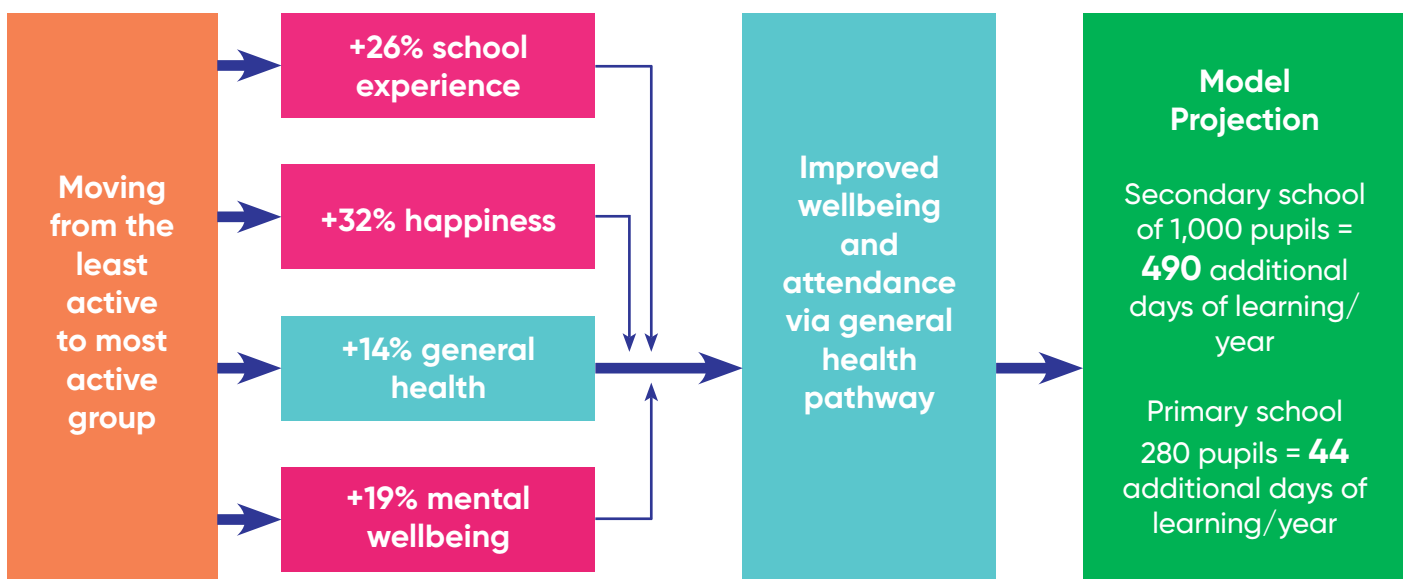
Dan Keefe, Head Teacher,
Clare Mount Specialist Sports

While this might seem modest at an individual level, the cumulative impact for an educational community is substantial.

For an average primary school of 280 pupils, this represents 44 extra days of learning per year, while a secondary school of 1,000 pupils could gain 490 additional days of learning.

By prioritising physical health as the primary lever, schools can effectively use sport as a strategic tool to reduce absenteeism and maximise academic contact time.





Youth Sport Trust and Sheffield Hallam University, 2026, The Contribution of PE School Sport and Physical Activity (PESSPA) to a Well School, Sheffield Hallam University



THE IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND WELLBEING

A whole school approach to health and wellbeing must replace the loss of PE, sport and physical activity that has been systematically removed over the last 15 years.

If pupils, parents, and schools are to benefit from a Well School approach, we need to ensure every child has access to opportunities and positive experience to be active.

The schools demonstrated that despite operating in challenging contexts, activity levels, wellbeing scores, and attendance patterns mirrored national trends.

Young people were asked to reflect on changes in their physical activity levels and happiness over the preceding 12 months. Regarding physical activity, most pupils reported a positive trajectory, with 54% indicating that their activity levels had increased over the past year.

Findings for happiness were similarly encouraging, 41% of pupils reported feeling happier than they had 12 months ago. These self-reported trends suggest that for most pupils, both physical activity and subjective wellbeing are moving in a positive direction.

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THE IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND WELLBEING



Happy and well-supported staff share their positive energy with pupils, creating a more engaging and effective learning environment

Farhan Adam MBE, Principal, Crown Hills Sports and Community College

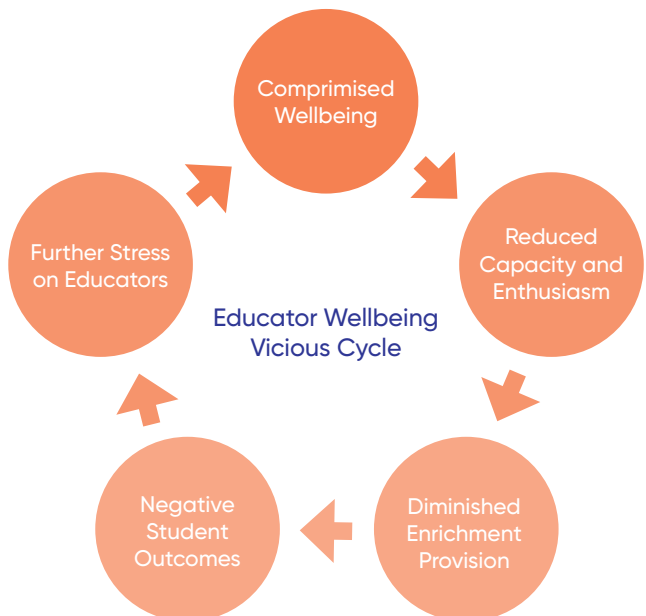
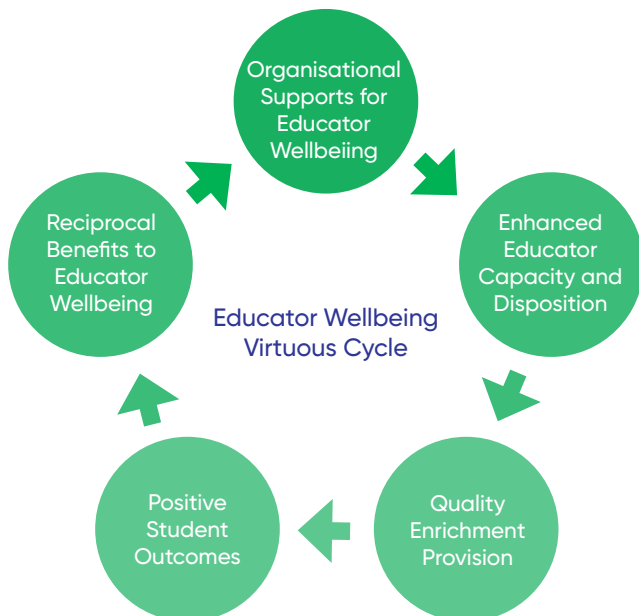
A Well School is only possible when the staff feel well, supported, and valued. The research identified a Virtuous Cycle: organisational support leads to enhanced educator wellbeing, which ensures high-quality PESSPA provision. This, in turn, generates positive student outcomes, further enhancing staff morale.

Conversely, a Vicious Cycle emerges when compromised wellbeing leads to declined capacity and deteriorated provision, resulting in increased staff stress and eroded pupil behaviour.

As one Headteacher observed, "Happy and well-supported staff share their positive energy with pupils, creating a more engaging and effective learning environment." Investing in the physical and mental health of educators is not a luxury; it is the essential infrastructure that enables the student experience.



Educator wellbeing is the foundation upon which a Well School can be created. Schools that systematically support staff through workload management, provide opportunities for staff physical activity, create supportive cultures with genuine voice, and recognise the dual benefits of initiatives, create conditions where physical activity can be authentically embedded. Without this foundation, physical activity initiatives become additional demands on depleted staff, creating a downward spiral of compliance without commitment. With it, staff become energised advocates who model, implement, and sustain physically active cultures.



A ROADMAP FOR CHANGE

For Senior Leaders and Governors

Leadership must move from viewing wellbeing as a “bolt-on” to a vehicle for learning. At St Breock Primary School, this is embodied by the presence of a dedicated wellbeing practitioner who ensures every child has “someone in their corner.” Governors should support a leadership vision that positions physical activity as a fundamental mechanism for inclusion and community connection.

This includes protecting PE time even under academic pressure; for example, Clare Mount Sports College protects 166 minutes of PE weekly, resulting in pupils feeling more settled and confident.

- Start with a broad curriculum offer that meets the skills, interests and talents of the whole school population and ensure that curriculum subjects like physical education are based on the needs of the pupils.
- Articulate clear rationale for physical activity within broader wellbeing vision. Ensure whole leadership team alignment and that it is set in the components of a Well School not just standalone.
- Involve staff in design, start with volunteers, address workload proactively, invest in staff wellbeing and ensure this isn't tokenistic.
- Focus on building lasting culture through structures, systems, and cultural norms, not quick fixes, or short-term programmes.
- Position physical activity within whole-school wellbeing strategy, integrate across curriculum, connect to school values, and character education.
- Recognise that readiness factors interact and reinforce each other. Address multiple factors simultaneously rather than focusing on single interventions.

For School Staff

We must empower staff with autonomy and support. When movement is treated as a skill for regulation rather than a reward, staff report calmer classrooms. Kensington Primary School empowers pupils to lead clubs meaningful to them, which strengthens teacher-pupil relationships and reduces the workload on staff.

By using a behaviour system that provides stability and clarity, such as the one at Crown Hills Community College, teachers have more capacity to focus on pedagogy and relationships rather than constant crisis management.

- Develop clear understanding of how physical activity supports learning readiness, emotional regulation, confidence, and broader development.
- Use movement breaks, active learning strategies, and outdoor learning regardless of subject area.
- Be physically active yourself and share your experiences with students. Model that physical activity is valued.
- Involve students in activity selection and programme design. Create opportunities for student leadership and student voice.
- Physical activity is not just the PE department's responsibility. Collaborate with colleagues across subjects to integrate movement.

For the Physical Activity Sector

The sport and physical activity sector must help schools remove economic barriers through subsidised provision and equipment, ensuring participation is universal. For parents, schools like Manchester Communication Academy have shown that offering skills for life programmes and wraparound mental health support helps families feel more connected to the school.

When parents see their children leading sports activity or participating in leadership programmes, physical activity transforms into a source of identity, aspiration, and pride.

- Offer expertise to colleagues across subjects. Support active learning and outdoor learning beyond PE lessons.
- Ensure all students have positive experiences and find activities they enjoy, not just developing school teams and talent.
- Help students understand how physical activity supports their mental health, learning, confidence, and future success.
- Create links to community clubs and organizations. Support transitions and remove barriers.
- Use wellbeing and learning readiness framing to advocate for physical activity in high-stakes academic contexts.

BEING READY TO CREATE A WELL CULTURE

Physical activity (PA) levels among children and young people remain a significant concern, despite recent modest improvements. Just 49% of children aged 5 to 16 are meeting the Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) guideline of an average of 60 or more minutes of moderate-intensity activity per day, meaning more than half of all children in England are not sufficiently active (Sport England, 2025, Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic Year 2024-25).

The Beacon Well Schools show that creating physically active, wellbeing-centred school cultures requires a fundamental reorientation of educational purpose, organisational design, and professional practice. Physical activity becomes sustainable not through isolated programmes but through a coherent system of leadership vision, structural embedding, staff wellbeing, inclusive culture, and student agency.

Are you ready to start your Well School journey?

Find out more here – youthsporttrust.org/well-schools



With thanks to:

Clare Mount Specialist Sports College
Crown Hills Sports and Community College
Kensington Primary School
Manchester Communication Academy
St Breock Primary School

youthsporttrust.org/well-schools