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# MLB First Pitch Case Study: Watergate School

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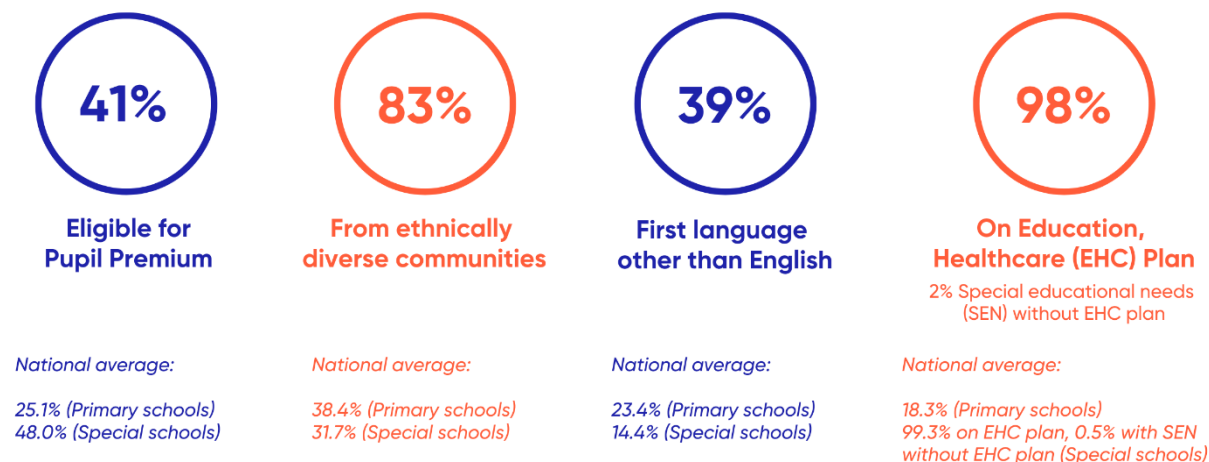
**Believing** in every child's future

# Introduction



Watergate School is a special school for pupils aged 4-11 years with severe learning difficulties, complex needs, and a number of children have an additional diagnosis of autism. The school is located in the London Borough of Lewisham.

Below is an overview of the demographic profile of the pupils who go to Watergate School, and how they compare to the national averages of pupils in primary schools and special schools in England in the academic year 2024/25<sup>1</sup>.



In September 2024, Watergate School took part in the Major League Baseball (MLB) First Pitch programme. All schools are provided with fun and inclusive resources to help spark an interest in physical activity and sport through learning how to play baseball and developing basic skills.

MLB First Pitch is delivered in partnership with MLB and BaseballSoftballUK, the national governing body for baseball and softball. The Youth Sport Trust facilitates the delivery of the programme through their tutor network. The Youth Sport Trust also manages the connections between schools and local delivery networks to set up hub schools, which function as a local support for other schools in the area who take part in MLB First Pitch.

## Background

Watergate School wanted to get involved in the MLB First Pitch programme as the PE lead teacher felt passionate about showing that their children can participate in mainstream sport. The programme offered the school the opportunity to take part in a completely new sport and by doing so, to demonstrate that anything is possible for their young people.

<sup>1</sup> Source: [Youth Sport Trust Schools Database](#)

“They’re very often put in a box of needing to participate in tokenistic programmes that have been adapted to their needs. But if you do the work, anything can be adapted for these children, and it’s so exciting for them to be a part of something that everyone else is a part of.”

**PE LEAD TEACHER**

The PE lead teacher already had a passion for baseball, which meant that she had knowledge and love for the sport that she was eager to share with her students.

## Activities

Watergate School engaged 28 young people from Years 3 – 6 in MLB First Pitch during the PE curriculum time, as part of two one-hour sessions in the morning. One session involved a whole class, and the other session involved children across different year groups. These children had a range of physical disabilities, some of them were in fully supportive wheelchairs with very limited head control, others used walking frames with different levels of support. The group also included visually impaired and hearing-impaired young people.

“It was a very, very mixed group with a huge range of physical and cognitive disabilities. The level of understanding was very different with all the children in the group, and yet it still managed to work. They were in the same group. And that was really lovely.” **PE LEAD TEACHER**

The lead teacher who has extensive PE experience simplified the activity cards provided as part of the MLB First Pitch programme resources in order for them to work with the groups. This meant that all children were fully able to participate in baseball activities. Every week, the group would do three activity cards and then conclude a session with a game.

Further resources that supported inclusive delivery of MLB First Pitch:

- Making the baseball bases noisy with bell balls helped the visually impaired children to know where they needed to aim towards.
- The big plastic bats included in the MLB First Pitch resources were the most accessible to all children.
- The different sizes of the balls included in the MLB First Pitch resources catered to all abilities in the group.

Importantly, what really supported engagement was that the group would spend the first 10 minutes of every MLB First Pitch session watching a condensed baseball game on a projector together. The PE lead teacher emphasised that this increased their understanding of what they were doing and got them excited. Every child was able to enjoy this part of the session. For example, the visually impaired child enjoyed the noise of the game and all the cheering.



“I have one little boy who’s nonverbal, but he gets so excited. He goes up to the screen and then tries and replicates the movements he sees on TV, like he’s watching somebody getting ready to bat and then he does the same.”

**PE LEAD TEACHER**

Figure 1: The PE lead teacher took photos of the young people taking part in MLB First Pitch activities and showed these photos to the young people alongside activity cards ('watching', 'baseball') and emoji cards ('fun', 'happy'). This meant that the young people could choose what feelings they associated with the activities. This case study includes two more of these photos including young people feedback.

## Benefits

### Increased baseball skills and knowledge



According to the PE lead teacher, the children learned skills that were specific to baseball as a result of taking part in the MLB First Pitch programme. The skills varied among the young people, but every single child was able to improve their skills in their own way, which was celebrated as a success.

“One girl who is very talented was pitching fastballs by the end of the programme. But for other children, they just had a bat and a ball on their lap, and they were pushing the bat with their hands, and it would push the ball off their lap – and that was just as big of a deal as the child who was pitching.” **PE LEAD TEACHER**





Some of the children also picked up the vocabulary of baseball which showed that they were able to associate new words with different actions. One of the children taking part (*photo on the left*) was described as severely physically disabled, nonverbal, and quite clever, by the PE lead teacher. She has an iPad on the back of her wheelchair which is attached to two switches, one either side over her head, which she can press to find vocabulary to speak. Because the girl enjoyed the MLB First Pitch programme so much, the teachers put baseball vocabulary on the system for her, so she can say terms like “home run”. In class, she now often asks “I want to listen to baseball”, and teachers can put baseball on an iPad for her to listen to while she’s in the bathroom for example.

### Improved functional mobility skills



The PE lead teacher highlighted that there was one child who was using a walking frame and struggled to turn around the bases at the start. The MLB First Pitch programme helped this child to get more control in his walking frame. Another girl struggled to keep her arms steady and in one place, and the programme helped her to develop her ability to grip and push objects by keeping her hands on a bat. Moreover, a couple of wheelchair users refined their self-propelling skills by moving around the bases, and other children developed their ability to raise their heads.

These functional mobility skills are vital for these children’s everyday lives outside of school, and the PE lead teacher was thrilled that the programme gave them the opportunity to further develop these skills in a playful way.

### Improved social connections



The MLB First Pitch programme allowed the school to mix young people across year groups with a wide range of disabilities in PE for the first time. Due to its success, the PE lead teacher is now looking to do the same for other sports such as tennis and basketball. The PE lead teacher, an avid MLB fan, also brought in her own jerseys and hats for the group to dress up in. The children understood the significance of a uniform, and this provided another element of fun and excitement within the group. The programme created a sense of enthusiasm for a new sport, and the fact that the PE lead teacher already had a passion for baseball, bonded them as a group.

**“It brought together children with a very wide range of disabilities, and they were all able to play together. It was a lovely social activity for them.” PE LEAD TEACHER**



## Future



Watergate School plans on returning to baseball in the summer term. Before this, the PE lead teacher aims to produce more simplified resources for baseball activities, based on the original programme resources. The goal is to engage more teachers and young people and to keep growing the legacy of MLB First Pitch in their school. The PE lead teacher also highlighted that a parent came in for sessions and reflected that MLB First Pitch was “one of the best things” her son has done. The parent would like to further support her child’s love for baseball outside of school. This is why the PE lead teacher aims to involve more parents in the future and invite them along to the baseball sessions.

Finally, the PE lead teacher would like to get a softball or baseball club to visit Watergate School. The lead teacher is part of a disability sports network for Lewisham who provide free sports activities in the school holidays. In the summer, they did two days each week of free sports activities, which will happen again next Easter. As part of this, organisations come in to deliver different sport activities. The PE lead teacher aims to engage BaseballSoftballUK as part of this holiday project in 2026.

“Our children aren’t always seen in society, they don’t always get to mix with people outside of the school and home environment. So when people from outside come in and show enthusiasm for spending time with them and share their skills with them, the kids really thrive on that.”  
**PE LEAD TEACHER**

To summarise, Watergate School was delighted to get the opportunity to take part in the MLB First Pitch programme and has thoroughly enjoyed the first year of delivery. This case study demonstrates the inclusive nature of MLB First Pitch and that many children can benefit from taking part. It also provides further context into what steps need to be taken for the programme to work effectively in special schools. Watergate School look forward to growing the MLB First Pitch programme in the academic year 2025/26 and would recommend other special schools to take part.

“I would definitely encourage special schools to do the programme and put in the effort because of the impact it has on the children.”  
**PE LEAD TEACHER**



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