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RESEARCH

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Active Uniform Case Study: Dame Dorothy Primary School

Changing whole school uniform to an 'Active' Uniform

March 2024

Believing in every child's future

Introduction

"Since 2022 I have been visiting schools in Sunderland to encourage daily activity outside of the PE curriculum.

I have concluded one of the main obstacles to children being active throughout the school day is our outdated thinking about traditional school uniform."

IAIN WILLIAMSON, HEAD TEACHER

Our School Objective:

Our school's goal is to enable all students to engage in daily physical activities by eliminating obstacles. We aim to eliminate barriers to participation, encourage physical activity, and promote healthy lifestyle choices. We strive to make the promotion of physical health and mental well-being our distinctive feature as a school.

Key Action:

We believe that one barrier to reaching our objective is the school uniform; the formal school uniform can lead to a range of issues, including rigid rules, exclusions, parental disputes, missed learning opportunities, high costs, heightened social inequality, and conflicts among pupils or with the school. We therefore want to introduce an "Active Uniform" for all students from September 2024.

To implement an "Active Uniform", we will:

- Transition from the traditional formal school attire to a physical education-inspired outfit
- Offer a uniform designed to facilitate physical activity and movement

School Context

I am a headteacher with a long-standing passion for PE, sport, participation, and competition to engage, enthuse and motivate children in order for them to have the most enjoyable primary school experience possible.

When I became headteacher at Dame Dorothy in 2009 I inherited a school with little interest or involvement in sport and activity. Gradually, that culture and ethos has evolved to reflect my own beliefs as a leader with staff coming along on that journey with me because they too recognise the benefits that an active school offers to children.

A seminal moment in this journey came about five years into my leadership when a year 2 teacher asked me if she could allow her children to run round the school field after her phonics lesson finished because she felt pupil concentration, engagement and behaviour was not as good as it should be. When her class began running each day round the field, she immediately saw an improvement in their conduct and learning. Then the wet winter months followed, and the teacher approached me to say the children were coming back into the school with muddy shoes resulting in a filthy classroom for the rest of the day – 'what a shame we don't have a perimeter path to run on.'

The business manager and I looked at this problem, in particular the expense of creating a path. Within six months we had found a funding stream, a contractor and had our perimeter path in place.

When I informed staff of our intention to implement this, I placed one important condition before we put our energies into this project. The condition was every teacher would make use of the path with their class every day to improve pupil focus, behaviour, and daily physical activity.

Since 2016 our path has become an unwritten part of our daily timetable. Each class runs every day during curriculum lessons at a time when the teacher thinks it is beneficial to the children's learning.

This one decision has had an enormous impact across many areas. Pupil engagement is high, children tell us they love coming to school and they love the opportunities they receive. Despite serving an area of deprivation and socio-economic challenges our end of key stage data remains strong, even with children taking time out of designated literacy and numeracy curriculum time every day. No exclusions have been made during this period; behaviour is a strength of our school.

Arguably, the most impressive outcome of our daily running activity has been the formation of our weekly running club. This inclusive club started back in 2017 with children signing up to run on a Friday afternoon with me and another staff member to see how far we could run in a fifteen-minute session. From a relatively small starting number of about twelve, we now have more than 60 weekly runners (40% of the cohort) who opt to run on a Friday afternoon and not access technology or art and craft activities instead.

The outcomes we have observed from having an inclusive active ethos, particularly from running, are significant. This is best evidenced through our annual participation in the Sunderland City 3k event. In 2017 I took along eight children to compete in the event. In 2023 I took along 34 children, three staff, three parents and a governor to participate in the event. In 2024 the numbers from school will exceed fifty. The children who take part are aged from year 2 to year 6 and represent all areas of the diverse nature of school. What they have in common is they can run 3k in under 20 minutes. In 2023, fourteen of our children finished in the city top fifty with ten of them running sub 15 minutes for 3k. This has come about because we have created a culture that makes activity, health, and fitness a top school priority. Our move to an 'Active Uniform' will help take us to the next level in our journey.

Background and Rationale

In countries where most schools require students to wear uniforms, fewer young people reach the World Health Organization's minimum recommendation of 60 minutes of physical activity a day across a whole week, according to a study by the University of Cambridge.

School uniforms may be barrier to physical activity among younger girls

Fewer pupils of primary-school age meet WHO minimum in countries where uniforms are the norm, Cambridge study finds

The study confirms earlier findings that girls feel less comfortable participating in active play if they are wearing certain types of clothing, such as skirts or dresses. Photograph: Jerry Cooke/Corbis/Getty Images

The City of Sunderland acknowledges the necessity of tackling pupil inactivity, especially considering the concerning national obesity rates among children aged 5 and 11. The regional data for the North East paints an even more alarming picture, with Sunderland's statistics being particularly dire.

In Year 6, there is also a notable increase in the number of children living with obesity compared to previous years. Among Reception children, 24% are

already classified as overweight or obese, and by Year 6, this percentage rises to 40%. These figures for Sunderland surpass both regional and national averages. Additionally, severe obesity among Year 6 pupils has reached 9%. Alarmingly, certain schools have a Year 6 cohort where more than 50% of the children are overweight, obese, or severely obese (*Sunderland Public Health figures*).

This prompts the question: Can primary schools do more to encourage children to engage in physical activity?

Therefore, we want to implement changes at Dame Dorothy Primary School to help to reverse the trends in obesity for children and young people, by removing barriers to physical activity in our school. One of these barriers is our school uniform, so we would like to transition from the traditional formal school attire to a physical education-inspired outfit that offers a uniform designed to facilitate physical activity and movement.

Why change our uniform?

- To promote daily activity
- To provide an affordable poverty proof uniform for all parents
- To provide a low maintenance uniform
- To provide a smart, high-quality alternative
- To provide the children with a uniform they want to wear
- To remove excuses for non-participation in activities
- To reduce slippage of time when changing for activities
- To align with our school identity

Children at Dame Dorothy run every day. Running in traditional school uniform was possible but not conducive to children moving comfortably, or safely in wet weather. Traditional, expensive, school footwear does not promote running or general active behaviour. Together, this is a barrier that we wanted to overcome. The typical cost of traditional uniform, shoes, plus PE kit, for a September starter can easily top £100 per pupil. The cost for a bespoke active uniform comes in at half of that.

The traditional uniform is also not popular with the KS2 girls. They don't like the skirt option, which they feel is cold and uncomfortable to wear during colder weather. Girls are also noticeably less likely to make use of the apparatus on the playground which involved them spinning upside down on the bars.

We have also witnessed so much time wasted when changing for PE lessons or activities, further cutting into limited time for children to be active. In addition, children not having kit in school to wear is another obstacle, as is the high amount of uniform that would end up in our 'lost and found' box each week.

Academic standards have been consistently high in our school for fifteen years. Taking time out of literacy and numeracy lessons every day to be active outdoors for 5 minutes has not harmed our pupil results. We would even argue it has improved outcomes. Pupil focus, concentration and behaviour has also improved inside and outside of the classroom. Daily running, our weekly running club, and our commitment to activity throughout the school day has provided the children with opportunities to build resilience and determination that was lacking, particularly after the return from Covid.

Activities

We have made this change through:

- Consultation with staff and governors
- Consultation with children and parents
- Secured external funding for launch

School also trialed an 'Active Uniform' with twenty pupils for a two-month period to gain feedback from parents and children. The responses came back overwhelmingly positive.

"I was a bit unsure of how the uniform would look as I am one of those parents that love the first day of school pics in a crisp clean traditional uniform, however trialling the new top was good as it showed how smart and nice it looked, it's so soft and keeps her nice and warm and she's enjoyed wearing it too. It's held its shape and does not require ironing which is a bonus. Overall, it seems fab!"
PARENT

"Love the top – it dries incredibly quickly too and looks very smart."
PARENT

"Bottoms are much more practical, wash great and don't lose shape or fade. My son has found these more comfortable to wear."
PARENT

"No issue with the leggings and she likes the colour."
PARENT

"Good quality leggings."
PARENT

"Love the uniform. A great idea. Hard wearing clothes for active children."
PARENT

Staff and governors view our change to active uniform as a real statement of intent. We are saying to parents that we take the health and fitness of their children seriously. To further reduce the financial burden for parents we also made a commitment to provide every child with a free start up active uniform. This was earmarked from pupil premium; however, we have secured external funding to cover any cost to school.

As of September 2024, all students have been provided a brand new 'Active' Uniform. Orders for uniform went out to all parents in March 2024 for a full roll out of the 'Active' Uniform for September 2024. From September 2024 we will be monitoring behaviour and activity levels of our students to measure impact, in addition with student voice.

Benefits

We believe the below benefits will be achieved through our transition into a physical education-inspired uniform that is designed to facilitate physical activity and movement.

Benefits to young people

- We remove the feeling of inequality for children
- Children are given a sense of worth, value and belonging
- Active uniform is comfortable and practical
- Girls are not disadvantaged to wear impractical clothing during the colder winter months
- Children come to school dressed to be active
- No slippage time for children to change clothing in readiness for an activity
- Children can access activities throughout the day in comfort
- Children are provided with the key message that being active is our school identity

Benefits to the school

- School has removed the final barriers for non-pupil participation
- We can be flexible when we choose to offer activities
- Reduces conflict with parents and simplifies uniform rules
- Further improvements in pupil behaviour, attendance and engagement
- Children continue to improve physical fitness, resilience and mental well-being

This change is for the benefit of the young people in Sunderland, the families who support them and looking at promoting societal change for positive participation in physical activity.

Future

Over the next year, we are focusing on the below activities to further the benefits and impact of our uniform change.

- Engagement in physical activity of students
- Tracking of students' physical activity levels
- Closer tracking of behaviour – determining if there are any improvements or changes within the classroom
- Continued pupil voice
- Continued parental feedback

We are already a highly active school that offers activity from 8am to 4:30pm every day. The change in our uniform, we believe, will take us to the next level in our quest for becoming a school committed to the physical health and mental well-being of all our children. All the key measurements and indicators listed above will provide the answers to how successful we have been.

Top Tips

Our school's top tips for another school looking to make this change are:

- Win the hearts and minds of staff. You need them on board!

- Sell your vision and ethos for the school to all stakeholders. Make the health and well-being of your children a whole school priority
- Review what activity really looks like in your school. Do you comfortably reach the minimum 60 minutes activity per day?
- School leaders – be brave! Are your children dressed for success? Improving the health and life outcomes for children should be the top priority for every school leader

My Motivation!

- Ten of my year 3 class in 2023 completing the Sunderland City 3k
- A range of abilities and backgrounds
- All in our special school running top at the end of Sunderland City 3k
- All finished between 14:15 minutes to 17:11 minutes
- Out of 400 children aged 6-18 years old, 8 pictured below finished top 100.

YST RESEARCH

The Youth Sport Trust (YST) is a national children's charity passionate about creating a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sport. YST Research offers research, analysis, insight and evaluation services to organisations with an interest in the wider children and young people's sector. Our research expertise is focussed on improving the wellbeing of children and young people through sport and physical activity.

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