



National Assembly for Wales' Children, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee - Inquiry into physical activity of children and young people

NAHT welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Children, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

NAHT represents more than 29,000 school leaders in early years, primary, secondary and special schools, making us the largest association for school leaders in the UK.

We represent, advise and train school leaders in Wales, England and Northern Ireland. We use our voice at the highest levels of government to influence policy for the benefit of leaders and learners everywhere. Our newest section, NAHT Edge, supports, develops and represents middle leaders in schools.

In relation to the invitation to submit evidence to the National Assembly for Wales' Children, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, concerning the inquiry into physical activity of children and young people, NAHT Cymru will focus specifically on evidence concerning the following areas directly related to schools:

- What do we know about physical activity levels in children in Wales? How robust is the data on this issue?
- Differences in gender-based attitudes towards, and opportunities for, participation in physical activity in Wales.
- The role of schools, parents and peers in encouraging physical activity, and the role of Sport Wales

**What do we know about physical activity levels in children in Wales?
How robust is the data on this issue?**

1. In this submission, NAHT Cymru will focus upon the school-level perspective of the physical activity levels of children. In addition to the perceived health and well-being benefits of an increased level of physical activity, we will briefly explore the available research that attempts to establish the links between physical activity / fitness / well-being and the potential positive impact it has on academic and broader school-level pupil achievement.

2. A number of initiatives, brought into schools in Wales over the years, have sought to make use of a perceived benefit of increased physical activity and it's believed link to improved academic performance of children and young people. For example, even as far back as the 1990s many schools will have sought to utilise programmes such as Alistair Smith's 'Accelerated Learning', which itself incorporated theories of movement-based learning undertaken by Paul E. Dennison, Ph.D. Dennison developed the 'Brain Gym®' activities and programme that have been, and continue to be, used in many countries across the world, although the empirical evidence for these theories has more recently been questioned.
3. The 2015 Sport Wales 'School Sport Survey', looking at sport and personal well-being, was one of the largest of it's kind. It gathered the views of over 116,000 pupils in almost 1000 schools. Many school leaders ensured that their schools fed into this study.
The survey found the following:
 - The average amount of time spent in PE lessons in schools per week was 99 minutes;
 - The numbers of young people taking part in sport or physical activity three or more times a week had risen from 40% in 2013 to 48% in 2015;
 - 93% of children enjoyed physical education;
 - Boys (52%) were still more likely than girls (44%) to regularly participate in sport and physical activity;
 - Although an increase in regular participation had been seen across all ethnic groups, 52% of Black British or mixed race children were hooked on sport, compared to 36% of Asian and other ethnic groups;
 - 68% of pupils enjoyed sport outside school and 80% had attended a sports club outside school the previous year.
4. The survey also suggested that pupils were twice as likely to be 'hooked on sport' if they were confident individuals. This suggested a strong link between mental well-being and physical activity. The survey also suggested that positive attitudes to sport were encouraged by extra-curricular activities and when a school listened carefully to pupils about their ideas related to sport.
5. However, one of the most striking findings of the 'School Sport Survey' was that pupils were nine times more likely to enjoy P.E. 'a lot' if their ideas about school sport were listened to. This suggests that children and young people perceive that, in general, schools do not listen enough to them when it comes to physical activity in school. It could therefore be reasonably assumed that there is greater gains to be made by listening and responding positively to pupil ideas and better utilising pupil voice.

Differences in gender-based attitudes towards, and opportunities for, participation in physical activity in Wales.

6. Another of the striking findings of the same survey, was the gender gap and how it appears to continue to present a stubborn challenge to schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that national governing bodies of certain sports, most notably football and rugby, have sought to proactively encourage female participation, either through mixed team tournaments and in-school coaching, or in female only tournaments. In addition, increased media coverage of national women's team successes are more prevalent. There have also been some examples from particular sports which have incentivised the participation by girls in education through providing free resources for schools who are also prepared to set up a girls-only team.
7. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that trends in a particular sport's participation by children and young people show peaks and troughs according to a number of influences. As with other 'fashions', popularity can result from the high profile success of a particular team at a given time (e.g. Wales Football at the Euros), a popular seasonal tournament (e.g. Wimbledon) or when a significant popular figure is famous for success in a specific activity (e.g. Mo Farah winning Olympic gold). For example, the recent success of the Women's England Cricket team has apparently resulted in increased numbers of girls seeking places at local cricket sides.
8. Although much of our evidence thus far has concentrated on sport and traditional P.E. experiences, offering less traditional physical activities has often proven to encourage greater uptake by girls in terms of extra-curricular activities, in particular. Examples of pupil suggested activities – e.g. cheerleading, contemporary dance styles – frequently attract larger numbers of pupils and in many cases greater proportions of girls.
9. Pressures from a number of areas can inhibit the offer provided to pupils across all school sectors. School budget pressures, reduced numbers of staff, high level workload and other issues all impact upon the capacity of schools to offer physical activities outside P.E. sessions. Where schools have managed to mitigate against the negative affect of such pressures, they have often made productive connections with local sports / dance / national bodies and relevant clubs. In any such arrangements and to ensure they function successfully and safely, there clearly needs to be a full awareness of duties such as safeguarding and relevant insurance cover.

The role of schools, parents and peers in encouraging physical activity, and the role of Sport Wales

10. Many schools already offer a range of physical activities, both as part of the P.E. curriculum entitlement and as extra-curricular sessions. The capacity, resource and opportunity for schools to offer a range of physical activities is dependent upon the physical space and layout of the site, the confidence and skills of staff – as well as their willingness to undertake such activities on a voluntary basis – and the support of leadership, governors and parents / families. In many cases, there is an assumption on the part of the wider community, and families in particular, that extra-curricular activities will be offered despite there being no explicit entitlement or additional resource on offer to schools and staff.
11. School leaders also recognise the wider benefits of physical activity and sport both to the individual pupil and to the wider school community. The well-being of pupils is often supported with the opportunities open to represent the school in sport and in simply participating in group activities including those of a physical nature. As a part of the Healthy Schools Network, for example, schools have established high expectations and incorporated a range of initiatives including healthy eating, life style choices and regular physical activity.
12. The challenge for many children and young people can be accessing physical activities they might enjoy at school, when they are outside normal school hours. In certain instances, the activity may not be readily available in the local community, there might be family issues that present obstacles (e.g. transport, disability) and there might be a significant financial demand that cannot be met. For example, for potentially talented individuals wishing to take on and extend an interest in an area such as swimming, the financial demands of elite clubs can be significant – in addition, many of these clubs do not have the ability to differentiate cost according to ability to pay. As a result, they inadvertently exclude a proportion of the young population and this may explain a perceived relationship between physical fitness issues and deprivation. It is worth noting that once that initial interest is lost to a young person, it is incredibly difficult to resurrect it later.
13. The role of peer pressure cannot be underestimated – both as a positive and as a negative influence. If the traditional view of physical activity, and in particular sport, is that it is only for the elite performer or the individual with 'talent', many of the less confident individuals may feel immediately excluded and avoid participation. The challenge for schools is to be able to meet the needs of all – ensure that all children / young people are able to feel comfortable and able to access a chosen activity and stay physically active whilst also providing opportunities for elite performance and high level achievement for those that are able to reach such levels.

14. The new curriculum may offer more opportunities of such an inclusive approach – the Physical Development Area of Learning is for all and schools will need to ensure that they do all they can to communicate this inclusivity clearly to all learners and families in all school sectors.
15. The most productive approaches in schools are often supported by the relationship with external bodies, including Sport Wales. Approaches such as the 5X60 initiative, Physical Literacy and the Dragon Sports Programmes can have a significant impact. The issue for schools undertaking such programmes is sustaining them beyond the set time they are in place (particularly if they are grant funded or free at the point of delivery). The same school based resource and personnel issues outlined in paragraph 10 above still apply.
16. It is clear that where physical activity levels for children and young people are at their optimum, schools, parents and local community groups / national bodies link up seamlessly. The school is often the conduit for lighting a spark in the pupil with the assistance of a recognised external group, the parents are provided with the information, commitment and resource to support the interest outside of school and the external group is located and in a position to continue supporting the child or young person's chosen activity.
17. For this to work best, schools require access to relevant information and resources as to what is available, as well as space in the school day and an appropriate venue on site to provide the opportunities. In addition, the offer they provide to their pupils needs to meet their chosen needs with pupils having input as to what they might wish to undertake. Finally, families need to be provided with the required information in terms of locally accessible groups, they also have to have access to sufficient resources and the ability to support their children's interests outside school irrespective of any potential social disadvantage.

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