

School Sport—What is it for?



One piece of recent sports news that almost slipped past me was the government statistics showing a significant drop in competitive school sport, since the 2012 London Olympics.

The statistics reported in the Government's annual Taking Part Survey showed the numbers of pupils taking part in competitions against other schools dropped from 31% to 25%. Other indicators around school sports week, playing in a team and being a member of a sports club also showed declines.

Reviving competitive school sport was once front and centre in sports policy, for example when the School Games was part of the Conservative Manifesto for the 2010 election. I saw first hand through the London Youth Games, how a network of competition managers and school sport co-ordinators worked to increase the number and variety of opportunities for young people to play competitive sport. Even as funding cuts caused the SSP funding to be replaced by School Games Organisers with fewer resources, schools continued to get involved in the increasing variety of competitions in sports ranging from Mini Tennis to Handball.

Perhaps the recent news shouldn't come as a surprise, as the implications of lower funding and a broader work remit for School Games Organisers took hold. SGOs now include programmes such as Bikeability.

So the real question is whether or not we should be concerned.

More kids are missing out on the opportunity to play competitive

sport and alarmingly fewer are joining sports clubs. If this is a true reflection of reality, then we should be concerned that the benefits of community sport are being taken up by a smaller group. There are longer term implications for sports clubs, NGBs if this situation isn't reversed.

What the data doesn't tell us is whether this reduction is being seen disproportionately in individual



schools. That is rather than losing the B Team, are we now seeing more and more schools not offering competitive sport opportunities. There is a real concern that underpinning these numbers is a pattern that young people are facing an uneven playing field when it comes to sport at school and community provision. This could be one reason behind the stubborn inequalities we see in sports participation between groups with different income levels.

An alternative viewpoint is that schools, with limited resources, need to focus on developing a level of physical literacy and confidence and an enjoyment in movement in all students, in the hope that this will address the health challenges we face not only for young people but later in life. To achieve this, schools need to focus time and resources

more on areas such as active lessons, active travel and non competitive activities that target those pupils who otherwise wouldn't be active.

This would see a reduction in competitive sport as a regrettable consequence of achieving a higher priority. We haven't yet seen the data which would give comfort that this increase in activity and its benefits have been realised, but let's hope that Active

Lives can give some comfort that this has taken place.

Many I have spoken to over the last couple of weeks

have shown real concern at these numbers and have started to challenge whether this is a binary choice we need to make between competitive sport broader health agenda. Perhaps now is the time for NGBs and others to look at how we can revitalise competitive school Sport and the pathway it offers into community provision without the need for greater resources Department for Education, which are unlikely to return any time soon.

Join the debate:

Are you seeing a reduction in the opportunities for competitive school sport?

Should competition still be a priority for school sport?

How might we make school competition more widespread and financially sustainable in the future?