**APPG for Education – Minutes**

**Outdoor Learning – The benefits of outdoor learning and play**

**Meeting Date & Time: 31/01/2024 14:30 – 15:30**

**Present:**

* Lord Storey
* Bea Collins
* Daniel Payne – Tim Farron MP’s office
* Katy Craven – James Sunderland MP’s office
* Jack Freeman – Marcus Fysh MP's office
* Kate Roberts – UK Youth
* Jonathan Bhowmick – Action Mats
* Aleks Bhowmick – Action Mats
* Jon Smedley – Teach Active
* Emily Reynolds – Youth Sport Trust
* Mike King – Institute for Outdoor Learning
* Ali Arber – Insignis Academy Trust
* Peter Doyle – British Educational Suppliers Association
* Dave Smith – British Educational Suppliers Association
* Anna Wolffe – Secretariat, APPG for Education

**Apologies:**

* Marcus Fysh MP

**Alison Arber – Wellbeing Lead, Insignis Multi-Academy Trust:**

Alison Arber spoke about the work that has been done to encourage outdoor play within her Multi-Academy Trust network of schools. Alison shows some examples of schools in areas with low levels of natural outdoor area, and a high percentage of Pupil Premium students, that try to maximise use of their available outdoor space, for example, East Crompton St James.

The concept of Forest Schools is a Scandinavian model of schools which encourages building resilience, independence, creativity, and confidence. The school needs to travel out to attend the forest school, children attend the school between once a week or once per term, depending on the year group. There have been challenges in providing appropriate clothing to go out to forest schools, particularly for children who don’t quite meet the threshold for the pupil premium, and the cost of appropriate clothing to attend a forest school can be a burden for some families. Attendance to the Forest Schools has seen a noticeable improvement in pupil behaviour, concentration, and academic performance – particularly for children that found classroom environments difficult.

Residential visits are normally something we associate with when we think of outdoor learning at schools, however, these have become more challenging recently due to a rise in associated costs for things such as transport.

Outdoor learning opportunities also help develop skills for students with lower attainment. Animal Antiks is a school that students attend for 2-hours per week, Students can engage with caring for different animals and assist in the maintenance of the park.

Promoting activity is to changing mindsets in parents and students to encourage children to lead physically active lives, Alison calls for PE to be made a core subject in schools, a minimum of 2-hours of PE per week and for a physical activity lead to promote more activity within schools.

**Jon Smedley – Founder and Director, Teach Active:**

Jon introduces himself as the Founder and Director of Teach Active which he explains is an organisation that promotes physical activity through the teaching of core subjects of English and Maths.

Physical activity is not just about keeping physically fit, but also helps to build memory, concentration, confidence, resilience, attainment, and there is a wide recognition of the social and developmental benefits of physical activity, particularly since the pandemic.

Children are not maximising the full potential of physical activity. Less than half of young people are not meeting the minimum level of physical activity required by the Chief Medical Officer.

Incorporating physical activity into the school day can be difficult with 70% of the school day being sedentary. Jon identifies three key challenges to increasing physical activity 1) strategies target some students – but not all 2) schools and teachers struggle to find the time to incorporate additional physical activity 3) new initiatives can end up short lived and unsustainable.

Jon explains that by incorporating physical activity as part of the core curriculum, schools can increase levels of physical activity whilst also making lessons fun and engaging. Schools that used his organisation’s lessons were around 33% more active than schools that did not.

Active learning enhances attainment by enabling children to experience what they are taught in different ways, this supports the ‘mastery approach’ approach to learning which is recommended by the DfE and the NCTEM. Globally renowned child-development expert, Karyn Purvis said that it what usually takes around 400 repetitions to create a new synapse in the brain can be reduced to between 10-20 when it is done through play.

Jon showed two case studies of schools that had implemented active learning as part of the curriculum. Holy Family Catholic School and Kensington Primary School. Both schools have seen significant improvements in Ofsted ratings and attainment since incorporating active learning as part of the curriculum.

**Emily Reynolds – National Programme Director, Youth Sport Trust:**

Emily spoke about the research which exists that shows children are not getting enough physical activity in a day. Research conducted by YouGov on behalf of the YST shows that less than half of parents (43%) know that children should be active for at least 60 minutes a day. This is backed up by a report from Sport England which showed that less than half (47%) of children were active for at least 60 minutes a day.

The effect less physically active lifestyles are having on children’s lifestyle is clear from rising obesity levels, which shows that 10.1% of Reception age children (4-5 Years) and 24.4% of year six children (10-11) are obese. Emily then suggests that this could be linked to the declining happiness of England’s children, which was significantly lower than ten years earlier.

A large contributor of these issues is the digital connectivity and engagement of pupils. Almost half of 7-8 year olds (46%) spend more time online or watching TV than they do talking to their families and over three in five (62%) parents believe that digital distractions mean that their children are spending less time being physically active.

The cost-of-living crisis has also been a barrier to improving children’s levels of physical activity. 47% of parents say that the cost-of-living crisis is having a negative impact on the number of opportunities their children have to be physically active and take part in sport.

Children’s levels of physical activity and their engagement with outdoor learning is not improving. Data from the DfE shows that the number of hours children spend in physical education has decreased by 12.4% since 2011-12 and the number of PE teachers has fallen by 7.6% over the same period.

There is a significant body of evidence that suggests behaviour can be directly linked to the level of physical activity a child has. The government’s first National Behaviour Survey has shown that up to six weeks of lesson time can be lost due to misbehaviour. The scale of the wellbeing issues within schools is a ‘societal sized problem’.

Emily moved on to make a link to the proposals put forward in the Youth Sport Trust’s recent manifesto for action – she explained the vital role that schools can play in contributing to all children achieving 60 active minutes a day. Whilst this includes PE and school sport – suggested PE should be made a core subject to give every child a guaranteed 2 hours a week - there is also a role for quick bursts of activity, interjecting and embedding physical activity throughout the day which was a key part of the Active Recovery Curriculum a number of schools adopted post pandemic with positive outcomes.

Emily highlighted an need for coordinated response to the mental health crisis facing young people, including the importance of taking preventative action. By putting wellbeing at the heart of education we can support and equip children to better manage their mental wellbeing, capitalising on the role physical activity can play in driving improved mental health. This should include using National Professional Qualifications to embed wellbeing principles amongst teachers and school leaders, aligned with a new national measurement for children and young people’s wellbeing that can track progress, and help to target investment and interventions.

Finally, too many children lack safe spaces to play freely and have fun, which supports socialisation. Changing this requires action, to guarantee play sufficiency for children in every community. Longer term, progress necessitates the embrace of active design principles, informed by youth voices to help build communities of tomorrow that deliver daily opportunities to be active, supporting happier, healthier lives.

**Mike King, Institute for Outdoor Learning Environments:**

Mike introduces himself as chair of trustees to the institute for outdoor learning. Mike explained that the Institute for Outdoor Learning is an organisation which sets standards, fosters a community, gives a voice to, and provides workforce development opportunities for individuals working in the area of outdoor learning.

Mike explained some of the initiatives that the Institute for Outdoor Learning has developed as part of its promotion of outdoor learning. This includes skill-based learning such as their IOL Bushcraft Skills Award, to enable outdoor practitioners to identify and award children when they have developed skills in outdoor learning.

The group also publishes the Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning and the Horizons Magazine.

Mike argued that it is critical for policy makers to ensure that as many children have the resources and opportunities to experience outdoor learning and calls on MPs to raise the issue in parliament.

Q&A

**DS:** **The issue of wellbeing was raised [a lot], is that what we are trying to improve by increasing children’s physical activity?**

ER: There are so many different types of interventions that come in and out of fashion. Principally, the how a school is led and managed needs to have wellbeing at the centre of it, with a clear wellbeing measure – not a league table but at least something that schools are conscious about. We have piloted with Bupa a programme called *Well School Movement* which has created a network of senior leaders in education and a range of other organisations who have established the pillars of a *Well School*.

AA: The reason I’m here is because of that Well Schools movement. The CEO of our Trust needed somebody on the central team in charge of wellbeing. It’s quite a unique role to have in a trust and not every trust has one, but that’s certainly what’s been identified in our Trust, is that there is someone that needs to lead on wellbeing.

BW: You spoke about reactive measures, there’s a huge need to have a member of staff whose responsibility it is to deal with this mental health problem. We need to shift the focus from reactive to preventative because the pressure this is placing on both the pupil and the workforce is great. Part of the issue is that the curriculum is too rigid, and there aren’t enough opportunities for Primary School teachers, particularly in those earlier years, to participate in play and outdoor learning, as there is a lot of emphasis on areas such as phonics which teachers have a pressure to deliver on.

JS: Sometimes it takes a brave head to make that decision that they need to focus on something like physical activity which can take you – in the case of Ben Levinson – from a school which requires improvement to outstanding. Often, I talk to teachers about the idea that physical activity is a rollercoaster in a school, sometimes the level of physical activity in a class can be dependent on the teacher of that class and because of this, it has to be from the top down to encourage a whole school approach.

MK: It’s not necessarily about wellbeing; wellbeing is a product. What a lot of the research discussed today has highlighted, is that outdoor learning and play doesn’t just help wellbeing, it helps: academic attainment, decision making etc. We know that the child that has confidence does better academically. The question isn’t how we improve wellbeing, it’s how we can do things which gives us a range of benefits, wellbeing being one of them. However, wellbeing is an important part of the narrative, particularly in relation to engaging the media, policy makers, and politicians in tackling this issue.

AW: There is an opportunity to engage further with politicians and policy makers further on this issue. To this end, I think the next steps will be to write to the responsible minister(s). We could potentially also apply for a Westminster Hall Debate on this, to keep the debate moving. We are also hoping that the shadow Schools minister and the shadow Secretary of State will be able to address the APPG, as it’s important for the APPG to understand where all political parties stand on this issue, not just where the government is.

**The meeting was adjourned at 14:40, attendees were invited to share any additional thoughts or research for the APPG to distribute to officers and members of the group.**