

Sports Colleges are using PE and Sport to raise standards across the whole curriculum

In September 2002 Lea Valley High School (LVH) became Enfield's first specialist Sports College. Given the attention currently being paid to the decline in physical activity in the nation's youth and its attendant health problems, the concept of a school that specialises in physical education and sport is timely to say the least. Tim Webster talks to the director of physical education and sport, Jane Mullan.

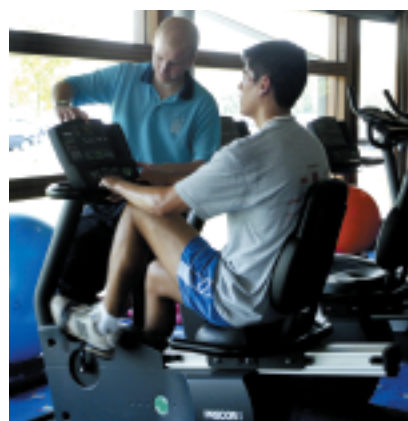


The LVH mission statement is probably a good place to start to explain what a sports college is all about: 'Lea Valley High School is committed to developing a life-long learning culture for all our students, staff and community partners. PE and sport offer a unique route to transcend the linguistic and cultural boundaries within our diverse community and offer opportunities for immediate access and success for all. PE and sport enable all members of our learning community to experience and develop leadership and teamwork, and provide scope for the achievement of excellence. As a sports college we raise the aspirations of our students and prepare them to become fully participating citizens of the future.' This is a somewhat broader remit than your average secondary school and, interestingly, it repositions physical education and sport at the heart of the community, as a character-builder, as a life skill, as the prerogative of us all – which kind of destroys the thought that sports colleges might be all about developing elite sportspeople.

Jane Mullan says: "The aim of a sports college is to use PE and sport to raise standards across the whole curriculum.

Fostering a positive attitude to health, fitness and physical recreation is an important part of our mission and we have a firm commitment to PE and sports development, both at school and in the wider community. We place great emphasis on teamwork and community pride and we have strong partnerships

with many sports organisations in the area, including the Arsenal football club. Far from being elitist, we strongly believe in access to sport for all and we encourage everybody to take part." Richard Caborn, Minister for Sport at the DCMS adds:



"Specialist sports colleges will play an important role in helping to deliver the Government's plan for sport [the Public Service Agreement target of two hours a week of organised physical education for every child by the end of 2006]. They will become hub sites for school and community sports, providing high quality opportunities for all young people in the neighbourhood." Indeed Lea Valley is

already proving to be a magnet for other schools in the area, creating a 'family of schools' as Jane puts it.

LVH has a superb range of facilities including a sports hall, gymnasium, dance studio, weights room, Astro turf, hard courts and a state-of-the-art fitness suite. Equipped by Precor, this includes 23 cardio machines and 12 pieces of resistance equipment. Cardio Theater is available on all of the CV stations, with Sky Sports being the number one choice for PE students. The fitness suite is a Health Action and Physical Activity promotion zone that is accessible to all students in key stages four and five (14-19) – which amounts to around 250 students at any given time. Add to that the 9-13 year-olds who can only use the cardiovascular equipment and you have a buzzing gym. "There is no question that the fitness centre plays an important role in stimulating our students to exercise," says Jane.

"I had four companies tender for the fitness equipment and Precor have been outstanding throughout," says Jane. "Their equipment is robust and easy-to-use – qualities that are pretty important in a school environment – and their service has been exceptional, both during and after the sale. I have been particularly impressed with Precor's desire to build a long-term relationship with us, their ability to understand our market and the knowledge of their key staff."

When I was teaching – 25 years ago – the physical education menu was pretty limited, but things have moved on and now LVH offers a broad range of activities that allow students to participate in sports that reflect their interests and abilities. The PE department organises morning,



lunchtime and after-school clubs, an annual sports tour and visits to a variety of national stadiums and sporting venues. LVH is currently aiming to achieve the Sports Mark Gold Award, one criterion of which is that 65% of students participate in one extra-curricular activity per week – this is a huge percentage.

Jez Whitting, sales director of Precor says, “We all need to sow the seeds for adults keeping fit and healthy in the future by instilling the joy of movement in children. At Precor we have been supplying safe, easy-to-use and robust equipment to schools and colleges for years and we do everything we can to encourage students of all ages to participate in, and enjoy, physical exercise. Precor’s complete fitness package is there to make it easy for you to get all you need, whenever you need it, from just one point of contact.”

Given what we already know about LVH it would be surprising if the fitness suite were used solely in pursuit of physical



exercise. There is an opportunity for students to learn about healthy living and for them to gain an understanding of how their own bodies function by downloading and analysing vital data like heart rate and blood pressure. Tackling inactivity and obesity by educating children about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle rather than lecturing them on the evils of junk food and computer games if you like.

One of the things that Jane Mullan is particularly proud of is the Breakfast Club, which caters for children who want to engage in physical activity before school starts i.e. from 7.30 to 8.30am. “The objective of the Breakfast Club is to involve children in extra-curricular activity and to set them up for the day. We know that physical activity produces endorphins, so the aim is that children participating in the Breakfast Club create ‘happy hormones’ that will enable them to cope better with their lessons for the rest of the day,” says Jane. And it works. One example of PE integrating effectively with another discipline is the Literacy Programme, which targets children with low literacy levels. “The students get to play soccer for 20 minutes prior to doing 15 minutes of reading – their concentration levels afterwards are noticeably higher,” says Jane. “We are also developing key work with other subjects areas like maths and ICT, where students can transfer the data they obtain on their physical performance and apply it in a maths context, using ICT. “It’s all about PE

and sport adding value and interest to the children’s education,” says Jane.

Lea Valley High School has also introduced an exercise referral programme that allows it to target specific students – some of whom have behavioural concerns – using exercise as a way of channelling their energy. For example, children who have English as an additional language can become frustrated in class due to poor language skills so LVH tries to use activity and exercise as a way of integrating them into normal school life. Jane is also planning to use some of the sponsorship money from Precor to set up a rewards programme that will support the work she wants to do in combating obesity. Lea Valley High School’s goal is that every student should leave school fitter and more active than they would have done under normal circumstances, possessing the knowledge and skills to engage in physical activity into adulthood. They will also have sustainable life skills like communication, working with others



and problem solving, which will stand them in good stead, both career and relationship-wise. I have to say that, as a former physical education teacher, I am mightily impressed with the sports college concept and the work being undertaken at LVH. This is how PE was supposed to be. Maybe the next generation of adults will actually have fond memories of school sport, and schools like Lea Valley will have begun to make an impact on the obesity epidemic – and its associated ailments – that threaten to engulf the National Health Service.

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0118 973 3994
info@precor.co.uk