

# A BEACON FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

**Niall O'Brien**

## INTRODUCTION

This article looks at the challenges and opportunities for the physical education (PE), school sport and physical activity offer which were presented to The Academy at St James Church of England School prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was written during summer 2020 and shares examples of how we collaborate with partners to enhance our offer by creating an environment in which our school is a beacon of health, wellbeing and physical activity for our pupils and the wider community.

## BACKGROUND

Our school is in north Bradford, serving the communities of Thornton, Lower Grange and Allerton. According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019, these are amongst the 10 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. Born in Bradford data shows that 77 per cent of 5-11-year-olds don't do the recommended 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous-intensity physical activity each day and 38 per cent leave primary school overweight or obese. Due to our location and research in the local community, The Academy at St James has been selected to form part of *Join Us: Move. Play.* (JU:MP) – a Bradford local delivery pilot, led by Active Bradford. It is a four-year pilot, funded by Sport England, which aims to help children and families to be more active.

## DELIVERING DESPITE LOCKDOWN

Prior to lockdown, we were in the process of creating a new, inclusive and broad PE, sport and physical activity and outdoor learning offer to support the needs of all pupils. Although lockdown brought challenges, we looked for the positives and were able to continue to develop our provision within each 'bubble'. We had plenty of dedicated time with no pressure or scrutiny other than from our own school community.

Forest School and outdoor learning opportunities were offered daily, with an additional physically active enrichment experience each Friday afternoon. Each bubble experienced wonderful activities, such as nature walks, orienteering, scooting, cycling, yoga, while Forest School allowed pupils to experience whittling, sawing, fire lighting and den building. We also continued our previously launched Cook & Move sessions in which pupils

participated in and suggested physical activities before preparing and cooking a healthy snack or meal.

Weekly PE lessons continued as staff were supported by up-to-date guidance and resources prepared in advance, giving them confidence to teach. Our involvement in the Yorkshire Sport Foundation #ThisIsPE campaign was well received, by staff and parents who were supporting home-







learning. We also shared a menu of PE and physical activities with families through our website and social media.

Health week and a School Games virtual sports day were also significant events. Both in the school bubbles and at home, pupils competed against a record number of schools county-wide. Health week offered new experiences, such as mindfulness, VX (formerly Rock-it Ball), kite-building, cooking and food tasting. A virtual disco was also arranged to pay tribute to our wonderful parents and carers doing a fantastic job with home-learning. Some of our parents posted videos of their dance

moves while working their shifts as nurses at Bradford Royal Infirmary!

We also launched our active travel initiative. During lockdown we took delivery of £5,000 worth of bicycles to encourage cycling for enjoyment and transport to school. Every week, each bubble had dedicated time for cycling and scooting and pupils were encouraged to bring in their own bikes on specified days. We were proud of several children who had never cycled before who managed to learn on our school fleet. We even enlisted support from a local cycling charity which provided us with a tricycle for one of our most vulnerable pupils.



## LOOKING AHEAD

Achieving Nature Friendly Schools status and the purchase of a mini bus will allow us to plan dedicated visits to local places of natural beauty as part of our outdoor learning offer.

On our return in September we plan to completely revamp playtimes. We are in the process of designing and developing zones to include provision such as traversing walls, loose parts play, music and movement, traditional games, scooting and cycling.

Physically active learning (PAL) will also be a new addition to the core curriculum. PAL opportunities now form part of the whole school medium term planning (MTP) document. On return in September each class will take part in weekly PAL sessions directly linked to curriculum subjects.

Over the summer holidays I was able to enlist the voluntary services of my Dad (Mr O'Brien senior) to help manually build a small 50 metre, 15 tonne cycle track for our early years and Key Stage 1 pupils to enjoy. Plans have already begun to identify funding to further develop our cycle track as a school and community asset through British Cycling supported by local partners.

Having witnessed a significant shift in mindset and confidence, it is wonderful to see colleagues embrace an approach which may seem alien to them. I am hopeful that our commitment to PE, sport, physical activity and outdoor learning will continue to blossom in September and we really will see a whole system change approach to health and wellbeing in our school and wider community.

## QUOTE FROM CHRIS TOLSON (HEAD TEACHER)

*"We are developing an offer we can be proud of and are seeing a real shift in mindset. We recognise this will take time but under our PESSPA expert support we have made huge strides forward. Understanding that to achieve academically you must have great physical, social and emotional well being is really important. I also feel the pandemic and partial closure allowed us to take calculated risks and explore possibilities. We purchased scooters and bikes, developed our use of the beck and wetlands and staff tried our new and different approaches to PESSPA without fear or worry."*

**Niall O'Brien is Leader of PE, Physical Activity and Outdoor Learning.**