

A CYCLING JOURNEY

Niall O'Brien

The Academy at St James Church of England School is a primary school in north Bradford, serving one of the most disadvantaged areas in the country. In March 2020, early in the lockdown period, we recognised that supporting our pupils' social, emotional and mental wellbeing would be crucial. This was supported by our renewed drive to put physical activity at the heart of our community and vision for a brighter and better future.

Our school is part of a Sport England-funded local delivery pilot known as JU:MP (Join us: move, play). This is a four-year programme that aims to help children and families in north Bradford to be more active. It has enabled us to gain access to funding which we wanted to use to support pupils' physical, emotional and social needs during their time at our school. As part of our whole school approach to physical activity and health and wellbeing, we invested £8,000 of the funding in bicycles, scooters, storage shelters and protective equipment. This came about after identifying and

contacting a school that already boasted a wonderful, high-quality cycling offer.

After visiting the school, senior leaders and I decided to source only high-quality bikes to ensure they were robust enough to withstand regular use. This was an important consideration as sustainability was a key focus in terms of justifying our investment. Thanks to support and expert advice from the JU:MP active travel team, we decided to purchase 'Frog' bikes in a range of frame and wheel sizes. We felt the bikes would be accessible for both competent riders and beginners due to their lightweight frames, quick release systems and saddle height adjustment. As well as purchasing bikes and scooters, we decided to remodel an unused shipping container within the school grounds. The design changes to the container provided effective and safe storage for our fleet of bikes and scooters. Having quick and easy access to the bikes was important to encourage staff to have the confidence to use them without having to fight their way through a cluttered equipment store.

Although lockdown presented many challenges for our school community, the purchase of new bikes and scooters became a significant part of our plans, most notably our aspiration to implement an active travel plan for the academic year 2020/21. In preparation for the launch of that active travel plan, over lockdown we were able to plan and implement a pilot scheme in which children were encouraged to cycle or scoot to school on their specified day. This included pupils accessing a dedicated weekly hour and a half cycling and scooting session on our school site. Sessions were led entirely by class teachers and became extremely popular with pupils and parents alike. Regularly communicating with families via social media allowed us to see the many positive comments from parents and carers about our new cycling opportunities.

Throughout lockdown, our dedication to physical activity within school hours began to gain momentum within Bradford. This led to our school being recognised by our county sports partnership. The opportunities provided by our staff team played an enormous role in us receiving a very prestigious award in September this year. We were delighted to be named the West Yorkshire winners of the Yorkshire PE and Sport Premium Awards Most Active School 2020.

The continued popularity of our cycling provision inspired yet another idea to support the development of cycling in school. Using a small portion of the Sport England funding to purchase building materials and tools, I volunteered the time and services of my Dad and myself to design and build a small bike track. After spending a significant portion of time researching and designing multiple variations of the track, fortunately, I was able to obtain expert first-hand advice from the bike track-building community in the UK as well as a further afield in the USA!

It would be fair to say that the build was a mammoth effort in terms of manually shovelling 15 tonnes of crushed gravel! However, my Dad and I managed to shift and shape a reasonably aesthetically





pleasing 50-metre track to the specified dimensions within two days. While the track is somewhat modest in size, we were pleased with the outcome, particularly as it was our first effort. Moving forward, discussions with senior leaders and staff members have already begun regarding plans to extend the track. With the power of volunteers and potential additional funding from British Cycling's Places to Ride programme, we are excited at the possibility of further developing the project. It is our hope that, eventually, the track and our wider facility will become a real community asset and hub of physical activity for our local schools and families.

As a staff team, we are absolutely delighted that our bike fleet and track are being enjoyed by pupils of all ages throughout the school week. In addition to this, pupils in foundation stage are also benefiting from our fleet of balance bikes and will now have an additional weekly opportunity to use them during their dedicated physical development sessions.

Chris Tolson, our head teacher, says, "It has been clear to see that cycling has supported the children's confidence, helped them to develop balance and coordination, and learn to respect and appreciate equipment. As we reopen our school fully, we will be continuing our bike journey, supported by the purchase of more bikes and more frequent use of scooters and balance bikes."

Chris added, "I can honestly say it has been such a joy to watch. All pupils had the opportunity to learn to ride our bikes and, in some cases, ride them for the very first time. There was such joy watching this happen and seeing eyes widen as that magical moment of 'I can do it' arrived. Having developed a love of cycling myself during lockdown, I can speak first-hand about the positive impact it had on my wellbeing. Seeing children at St James strive for the very best and try new experiences has also inspired me as an adult. In the end I feel this is what life is about: we have to find things that make us happy and, for our children, bikes come very close to the top of the list."

If you would like to see more of what goes on at The Academy at St James, please take a look at our dedicated physical education, physical activity and sport Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/PEchurchprim1/media> ■

Chris Tolson is Head Teacher and Niall O'Brien is Leader of Physical Education and Outdoor Learning at The Academy of St James CoE School.