

# Belvedere Academy: Listening to girls and working together to get active

Belvedere Academy is an all-girls secondary school (Years 7–13) and part of the Girls' Day School Trust. The school sits at the heart of a community facing significant social and economic challenges, serving one of the most economically deprived postcodes in England, with a highly diverse student body including students displaced from conflict zones and a high SEN profile. The school values PE for the physical and emotional benefits it offers, as well as for its ability to create a sense of community for students through shared activity, energy and fun.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Engagement in PE across the school was variable. Some girls were thriving, but others were voting with their feet – “forgetting” their PE uniform or refusing to take part. This sometimes surfaced as challenging behaviour around PE, and a division had opened up between the girls who were good at PE and those who weren't. When the school dug into what was driving these issues, the girls themselves identified the root of the problem – and it wasn't PE at all: it was getting changed.

“The idea of going and getting changed in front of everybody – complete discomfort for a lot of students.”

**Emma Speed,  
Senior Assistant Vice Principal**

## WHAT THE SCHOOL DID

The Fit to Learn policy principles were introduced at the same time as a wider, student-led rethink of PE and PE uniform, which saw girls co-design the PE uniform. Kate Reynolds, Head of PE, sourced options and displayed them on mannequins in the PE corridor, and the girls voted on what they wanted. The school's equality, diversity and LGBT+ groups were consulted to make sure the different options worked for everyone. The result is a flexible PE uniform with a choice of tops and bottoms – leggings, tracksuit bottoms, skorts, short or long sleeves – accommodating sensory needs, cultural preferences and personal comfort, all available for under £65. A pre-loved PE uniform store, stocked by donations from departing Year 11s, means any girl can take what she needs.

“Start small... but it's got to be pupil-led. And you've got to be prepared to hear things that you don't want to hear.”

**Kate Reynolds, Head of PE**

To answer concerns about standards, the school set clear parameters: the PE uniform is worn with the school blazer over the top – a blazer the girls helped redesign for the female form – so students remain smart and identifiable. Expectations were communicated through assemblies, a visual guide

sent to parents every year, and clear guidance to staff on what the PE uniform looks like and whose responsibility it is to follow up when something slips. Changing rooms were retained as an option for any girl who prefers to change.

Alongside the policy, Kate broadened what taking part in PE means. A no-notes culture means every girl is involved in every lesson – if she cannot take part in the activities themselves, she coaches, umpires or officiates. The RISE programme and a creative, ambitious curriculum – rock climbing, rowing, dance, badminton – give girls the chance to discover new activities.

## WHAT CHANGED FOR THE GIRLS

The girls feel more comfortable, less anxious and more able to focus. They describe the relief of no longer having the prospect of the changing room hanging over their day; they get more actual PE in every lesson because no time is lost to changing; they are no longer carrying heavy bags of PE uniform around; and they feel more comfortable travelling to and from school in sporty clothing.

Serial PE avoiders began to engage – and girls with SEN saw the biggest benefits of all. The sensory and cognitive demands of changing between uniforms had been a specific and significant barrier, and its removal made the difference between participation and non-participation.

Freed from the barrier of changing, the girls are also throwing themselves into the school's wide range of enrichment opportunities – and discovering new talents and interests.

“I’ve always loved football and netball, but I never knew that I was good at badminton or tennis, but now I love it when we do it and it’s really fun.”

Girl, Year 7

## WHAT CHANGED FOR THE SCHOOL

**Improved attendance on PE days:** girls who previously missed school altogether, or arrived late, to avoid PE no longer feel the need to. Senior leaders within the school have seen a specific rise in attendance on the days girls have PE. The shift has been most marked among the school's most vulnerable girls, some of whom had been staying away on PE days specifically to avoid the changing room.

**PE lessons are longer and richer:** with no changing time at either end, girls get the full hour of physical activity. Trainee teachers placed at Belvedere Academy from schools where pupils still change notice the difference: used to perhaps thirty or forty minutes of teaching once changing is accounted for, they find they have the full lesson here.

**Behaviour around PE has improved:** bypassing the need for changing rooms has effectively removed any challenging behaviours that may have occurred in them prior to the policy, and lost PE uniform has all but disappeared. Families who once reported constant losses have thanked the school, and the room that used to fill up with lost property now houses the pre-loved store.

**Enrichment is thriving:** the PE department runs at least two after-school activities every evening, and with the changing barrier gone far more girls take part. Where some once tried to join in wearing their school skirts and shirts – restrictive and off-putting for activities such as cross-country – they now arrive ready to go.

The senior leaders in Belvedere Academy had anticipated problems – girls not looking smart, standards slipping, concentration suffering in non-PE lessons. None of these anticipated problems materialised: as much as the school worried about its high standards, behaviour didn't dip. The girls gave us an insight into why behaviour and concentration had improved: when you are comfortable, it is easier to concentrate on what the teacher is saying.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Belvedere Academy is fully committed to continuing with the policy and would strongly advocate for it with other schools. Asked what she would tell other schools considering it, Kate Reynolds's response captured the value of the policy:

“The kids have just found a way to fall back in love with being active. It helps them more than you as a member of staff will realise.”

Kate Reynolds, Head of PE