

Cambridge Academy for Science and Technology: “Are you PE Ready?”

Cambridge Academy for Science and Technology is a specialist science and technology school taking pupils from Year 9 to 13. Girls make up only around a third of the school and it has a notably high SEND profile. Making sure all students, including girls, feel comfortable, included and encouraged to be active was the lens through which the school approached the Fit to Learn policy.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Because pupils join in Year 9 from many different settings, many arrive with mixed experiences and memories of PE – although for many, the barrier was not PE itself but having to get changed. Some girls would routinely arrive without their kit – not because they had forgotten it, but because not having it was a way to avoid taking part. For the school’s autistic pupils, the prospect of getting changed could be particularly overwhelming. If any behaviour issues were to arise it was likely to be in the changing rooms, and lesson time was lost to changing and managing these issues.

“I always say to them, are you ready for PE? Like, are you PE ready? And they love it. They’re like, yeah, PE ready today.”

Hannah Lally, Head of PE

WHAT THE SCHOOL DID

What has made the policy effective at Cambridge Academy for Science and Technology is the culture the PE department has built around it. Head of PE, Hannah Lally, has turned readiness into a rallying cry – “Are you PE Ready?” – and the phrase has embedded itself so thoroughly that pupils now say it back to her, arriving declaring that they are “PE Ready” and good to go. What was once a source of anxiety, particularly for some girls, has become a point of pride. Much of this comes down to Hannah Lally herself, whose energy and creativity have made PE a place where pupils want to be.

The detail underneath is deliberately practical and inclusive. To protect uniform standards, the school requires a school-branded PE top so pupils stay identifiable, while keeping everything else flexible and unbranded: any black bottoms, with dark thermals underneath for warmth, so nothing need be expensive or hard to find. Wearing the PE uniform is framed as a privilege tied to meeting expectations, not a relaxation of them. Departing Year 11s leave their PE uniform behind to restock a supply of spares, kept on hand by pastoral staff, so a student who is caught out can be quietly supported.

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE GIRLS

The girls told us the difference in moving to a school that followed the policy was immediate. Freed from the need to change in front of others – something several described as genuinely uncomfortable among people they didn't know well – they can simply arrive ready and stay comfortable all day. The anxiety that used to hang over a PE day has gone, and there is no longer a heavy second bag to carry.

“I prefer coming into school in my PE kit a lot more than changing in school because I just don't really feel that comfortable changing.”

Girl, Year 9

“I can just be comfortable the whole day, because I know I've got PE and I don't need to change – I'm already in my comfy clothes.”

Girl, Year 9

Girls also told us that being able to take part comfortably when on their period and without having to change, had removed one more reason to opt out and made puberty easier to manage. As participation has risen, so has appetite: a group jumped at the chance to form a basketball team – and a group of Year 10 girls now plays volleyball on the astro at lunchtime, where the space had previously been the preserve of boys playing football.

“Their confidence has gone up, because you eradicate the thing that was the barrier – not the actual PE lesson, not the sport itself.”

Hannah Lally, Head of PE

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE SCHOOL

The effect of the policy has reached well beyond the PE department.

Engagement: girls who used to sit out PE altogether now take part, and the gap between reluctant and willing participants has all but closed, with girls asking for more opportunities to take part in sport and trying sports they would once have refused.

Improved attendance: pupils who had missed some lessons to avoid having to get changed for PE no longer need to do so, which improved both PE attendance and school attendance more broadly.

Time and behaviour: with no changing at either end, lessons that once delivered 25 to 30 minutes of activity now run close to the full hour; the changing rooms are no longer a challenging space to manage; and staff report no negative effect on behaviour elsewhere. Transitions between lessons are smoother too, with pupils no longer arriving late from the changing rooms.

Belonging and inclusion: the benefits were greatest for those pupils needing the most support to access the PE curriculum. Autistic and girls with SEND, for whom the sensory and logistical demands of repeated changing had been a barrier, are now able to participate in, and benefit from, the full range of PE activities.

So convinced is the school of the policy that it is repurposing one (although not all) of its now-redundant changing rooms into additional gym space for pupils.

LOOKING AHEAD

Cambridge Academy for Science and Technology is committed to continuing with the policy. Their advice to other schools reflects the spirit in which they approached it themselves: treat it as a trial rather than an irreversible leap – start with a single year group or run it across a term – and let the results speak. Hannah was clear about her full endorsement of the policy and the impact it has had on her school community:

“It's been such a positive. The whole attitude just changed around it here. I think it's brilliant.”

Hannah Lally, Head of PE