

Conisborough College: Levelling the playing field for girls across our whole community

Conisborough College is a diverse, inclusive secondary school in south-east London, where around half of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The school is on an ambitious improvement journey – and central to that ambition is a determination to get more girls engaged, active and thriving in PE. It was through this lens that the school approached the Fit to Learn policy: as one practical way to remove the barriers that may be holding girls back.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Like many schools, Conisborough College had long watched girls’ engagement in PE fall away as they moved through their teenage years – a decline seen across schools nationally. The barrier, time and again, was often not the sport itself but that, for some girls, anxiety around getting changed in front of others could be enough to make them avoid taking part altogether. The school recognised that they could take steps to minimise this obstacle.

WHAT THE SCHOOL DID

Conisborough College piloted the Fit to Learn policy with its current Year 7 and 8 pupils. The decision to begin with the younger years was deliberate: it let the school set a clear expectation from the outset and embed it as the norm, with the intention of growing the policy up through the school year by year as each new cohort arrives.

To balance comfort with the school’s commitment to standards, pupils wear a recognised PE uniform on PE days or the full school uniform, and the school manages the occasional creative interpretation of this uniform through its normal behaviour systems.

The policy has been driven from the top by Principal Lucy Oragano, as part of her wider mission to raise standards and get more of the school’s girls engaged and enjoying sport, with Head of PE George Marsden bringing his expertise and passion for the benefits of physical activity to activating the policy on the ground.

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE GIRLS

For the girls, the change has been about comfort, confidence and belonging. The girls describe the freedom of simply being able to get on with PE, without the worry of being watched or judged, and feeling self-conscious.

“I know people who didn’t hate PE but used to do anything to get out of changing. Now they’re not looking for reasons not to do it – they just join in with the rest of us.”

Girl, Year 7

Staff describe the effect as levelling the playing field: with everyone arriving in the same PE uniform, girls feel part of the group and part of the family, and the anxieties that the changing room could expose fall away.

Girls also told us the policy makes it easier to be active beyond the lesson – to walk to school, or to head to the park afterwards – and that being comfortable even helps them concentrate better in their other lessons. They were unanimous in wanting other schools to follow suit, so that girls elsewhere could feel the same comfort and freedom.

“You want other people to experience that. You don’t want other people from different schools to feel uncomfortable – you want them to be comfortable, to be free.”

Girl, Year 7

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE SCHOOL

The benefits have been felt right across the school day.

Participation: among the Year 7 and Year 8 cohorts, far fewer girls now sit out of lessons or rely on a missing-kit reason to avoid taking part. Staff report that the impact has been more marked for the girls than the boys.

“It has definitely reduced the number of kids who are turning up to PE without kit – it’s taken away that barrier of changing.”

George Marsden, Head of PE

Reclaimed lesson time: with no changing at either end, physical activity begins straight away and runs right to the end, allowing staff to plan richer, fuller lessons with girls being active for longer.

“It saves us lesson time – it alleviates that stress of spending lots of time chivvying kids along in the changing room, and we can get into the lesson more quickly.”

George Marsden, Head of PE

Behaviour: the changing rooms had been a source of low-level behaviour problems, an issue that was eliminated by the introduction of the policy.

“If anything, the behaviour is better – because there’s so little time in the changing rooms now, our behaviour problems within Year 7 and Year 8 have gone.”

George Marsden, Head of PE

Inclusion: The benefit has been especially marked for girls with SEND, for whom the changing room could be a distressing environment. Removing this barrier makes it easier for these girls to engage with PE.

The school is honest that the policy is not a cure-all, and that the deeper work of building girls’ lifelong love and engagement in PE and sport continues alongside it – through efforts to strengthen girls’ teams, widen extracurricular opportunities and bring in positive role models. What the policy has done is remove a barrier that stood in the way of that mission, and it has achieved this without the downsides the school had braced for: behaviour has, if anything, improved, and standards have held.

LOOKING AHEAD

Conisborough College is strongly committed to continuing with the policy and to extending it as each new year group moves up through the school. For its leaders, it is a clear and practical part of a much larger ambition – to make sure that every girl, whatever her background, feels included, supported and inspired to take part.

“It’s been 100% a positive move for the girls. If you can do anything to boost the confidence of girls, then we should absolutely do it.”

Lucy Oragano, Principal