

William Hulme's Grammar School: Helping girls feel happy, safe and included

William Hulme's Grammar School is a co-educational, all-through school in Manchester serving a richly diverse community with higher than average levels of disadvantage. The school has a large proportion of students from an ethnic minority background and a high proportion of SEND pupils. As a historically boys-only school - admitting girls from 1986 - there remains a slightly higher proportion of boys compared to girls. Making sure girls feel as included, as comfortable and as well served by all parts of the curriculum is a priority for leadership.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Pupil feedback and surveys showed that girls at William Hulme's Grammar School already had an excellent experience at school apart from one stubborn exception: the girls' changing rooms. The changing rooms were also in need of refurbishment and had been identified as letting down the school's otherwise very high standards.

Against this background, the school was keen to participate in the Fit to Learn policy pilot. It resonated with the school's ambition to support girls to feel happy, confident and safe across all aspects of their education.

"I feel more free.
Now you don't have to
change in front of people,
you're more free."

Girl, Year 8

WHAT THE SCHOOL DID

The detail and consistency is what makes the policy work. To protect standards, the school requires some branded PE uniform items so pupils remain smart and identifiable in uniform, and feel a sense of belonging to the school. The PE uniform has been developed with real flexibility in mind - a choice of tops and bottoms, long or short sleeves, and additional dark layers - so the PE uniform can flex around sensory needs, body-confidence and cultural preference, and stay as affordable as possible.

The school holds one firm line, which it identifies as key: pupils come to school in either full PE uniform or full school uniform (on non-PE days) and are held to the same standards either way. The PE department also expects every pupil to take part in PE: anyone who cannot join in physically still comes in PE uniform and continues to undertake a learning role within the lesson.

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE GIRLS

The girls told us the difference was immediate. No longer having to change in front of others, they feel 'more free': no rushing against the clock, no self-consciousness, and no dread hanging over the day. Several said they now concentrate better in their other lessons simply because they are more comfortable, and there is no longer a heavy PE bag to carry around.

The benefits were greatest for the girls the school worried about most. Neurodiverse and girls with SEND, for whom the sensory demands of changing during puberty had been a real barrier, are now much happier coming in on PE days, and girls from communities where modesty is important are now able to access PE fully without worrying about getting changed. Above all, engagement and enjoyment have improved: girls who were hard to engage now take part with a smile on their face, girls play football on the astro at lunchtime, and they are trying new activities they would never otherwise have experienced. The girls were unanimous that they would strongly recommend the policy to other schools.

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE SCHOOL

The effect of the policy has reached well beyond the PE department and shows up most clearly in the school's own data.

Improved attendance: the psychological barrier of the changing-room used to keep some of the school's most vulnerable pupils away from PE — and, for a few, from coming into school at all on those days. The school reports that this avoidance has been removed.

“Our most vulnerable children would avoid going to PE because they don't want to get changed. That's been eradicated.”

**Sophie Galloway,
Senior Leader
(DSL and Head of Behaviour)**

Engagement: the PE department reports a marked rise in participation, now running at close to full participation in lessons, with the change felt most strongly among the girls who had previously faced the steepest barriers to engagement.

“It's massively improved the engagement levels of the students.”

Peter Allen, Head of PE

Time and behaviour: the full 75 minutes of every lesson is spent active and learning; behaviour around the rest of the school has been unaffected, because the school held the line on a smart, uniform appearance.

“It's much easier – we can just put our things in and start straight away. And we have more time to do PE.”

Girl, Year 8

The senior team had anticipated some concerns – students not looking smart, concentration suffering in other lessons – however, because of the parameters put in place to maintain standards, there were no reports of deterioration on these points.

The only practical points to manage have been straightforward: helping families understand which PE uniform items they need, and the occasional pupil arriving in PE uniform on the wrong day. The school's answer to both is the same – clear, consistent communication, backed by a stock of spare PE uniform.

LOOKING AHEAD

William Hulme's Grammar School has fully adopted the policy and is committed to moving forward with it in the future. It is a part of the school's deeply held commitment to give its girls the same opportunities as its boys and to keep them engaged in physical activity throughout puberty and beyond. The advice from both the senior team and the PE department to any school considering it was simple and emphatic: weigh the benefits against the barriers, and the benefits win every time.

“If I moved to another school, this would be something I would implement straight away if it wasn't in place.”

Peter Allen, Head of PE