

Wye School: Encouraging every girl to engage with activity

Wye School is a popular and notably active secondary school of around 600 students. Sport is woven through its culture: extracurricular sport take-up is high, the field and tennis courts are full at break and lunch, and nearly half the school has represented Wye in a competitive fixture this year. Wye's story is about what the policy offers a school that was already doing well: a set of real, compounding gains, chief among them the simple value of protecting every minute of PE.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Wye's Head of PE is candid that participation was never a problem here – the department is strong and engagement was already high across most pupils, including girls. The key opportunities the school identified were to make sure as much PE time as possible was spent being active, and to support those pupils who were less engaged, particularly girls who saw themselves as less 'sporty'.

Teachers felt that no one would accept losing 10% of a Maths or English lesson; in PE, this loss had become invisible. The policy offered a way to reclaim that time, while also making PE days more comfortable and easing the challenges of supervising changing rooms.

WHAT THE SCHOOL DID

Wye adopted the Fit to Learn policy through a deliberately phased, highly managed rollout – a consideration that was critical to its success. Rather than switching the whole school at once, it began with Year 7, where the school could set the expectation from day one and learn from the pilot about how to roll the policy out further.

Underpinning it is a single, deceptively powerful change of language: the school refers throughout

to PE uniform, not PE kit. That language shift gives the clothing the same gravitas as the blazer and tie, and it is the key to holding standards – it enables staff to make the case that the logo'd PE top and the regulation bottoms are worn with the same pride, and to the same rules, as formal uniform. To keep it practical and affordable, each year group has a small number of mandated logo items, with a choice of regulation colour leggings, shorts or jogging bottoms so students can pick what they feel comfortable in. An earlier skort is being phased out precisely because girls raised issues around it feeling uncomfortable and needing to be replaced more often than other options.

“It gets a lesson started a lot quicker, and we get more teaching time – it's made me consider the way we design our curriculum.”

Pete Sparks, Head of PE

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE GIRLS

Coming to school in PE uniform means PE days are much easier – less stress getting ready in the morning, no heavy second bag to carry, and none of the worry about forgetting a piece of kit. For girls who might once have dreaded changing in a communal space, that anxiety has gone, and with it one of the reasons they might have asked to sit out a lesson, including when on their period.

“If you have a period, it’s like you can just go and do PE rather than having to worry.”

Girl, Year 7

“I would always dread PE... but now I feel a lot better about it. I feel open-minded.”

Girl, Year 7

Girls noted that the policy helps those who find it hardest – pupils with SEND, or those who feel self-conscious, who tend to be girls. As they are already in their PE uniform, the girls also find it easier to be active across the day – staying out and playing at break and lunch rather than sitting down – and more willing to give a new activity a go. None reported the policy making it harder to concentrate in their other lessons; if anything, being comfortable in their PE uniform made it easier to focus. They would strongly recommend it to other schools.

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE SCHOOL

Reclaimed learning time: The time that used to vanish into the changing rooms is now spent being active and learning.

A richer curriculum: removing changing time prompted the department to redesign its two-hour PE doubles, rotating students through two different activities with two members of staff rather than one long block, giving pupils more opportunities to try different activities they might not have done otherwise.

Behaviour and supervision: the changing rooms had always been among the hardest spaces for teachers to manage. A straight walk into the sports hall has resulted in faster, calmer starts noticed across the department.

Wider engagement: the school has seen a rise in extracurricular take-up across all pupil groups – including girls and boys, and the school’s SEND, disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils – and now plans to schedule physical-activity clubs on the days pupils are already in kit. They might not have done otherwise.

“One of the most pleasing things is our participation with our Pupil Premium and SEND children – they seem to have been more involved this year than ever before.”

Matt Buckley, Senior Leader

The senior team had anticipated some concerns – chiefly that a more relaxed uniform policy (for PE days) might negatively impact standards or behaviour, and that focus in other lessons might slip. However, staff reported no behaviour concerns, and the PE department’s observation is that comfort has improved engagement. The points that remain are ones the school is actively managing: clear communication with parents as each phase is introduced, and the occasional student arriving ready for PE on the wrong day under an alternating timetable.

A real strength of Wye’s approach is the school’s relational PE culture – the Head of PE’s emphasis on knowing each student, from the girl captaining the football team to the girl navigating PE during Ramadan.

LOOKING AHEAD

Wye School is committed to the policy and is extending it to every year group. As the senior team put it, the benefits are clear.

“I don’t see a downside to it. We have a much more functional and practical solution that means they get more time in sport, and the students’ feedback is that they’re happier and more comfortable.”

Matt Buckley, Senior Leader