



SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS
Alliance

Towards levelling the playing field?

Cross-Sector Partnerships and School Sport Inequality

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Abstract:

This paper examines how partnerships between state and independent schools can play a part in addressing inequalities in access to school sport. It draws on the School Partnerships Alliance *Sports Partnerships Report* (S.P.A., 2026) for case studies to exemplify points made and justify claims. The paper centres on the premise that sport plays a vital role in young people's physical health, mental wellbeing, cognitive development, and wider life outcomes, including resilience, teamwork, and leadership. Although these benefits are evident, access to high-quality sporting opportunities is uneven across the education system.

Focusing on school sport, the paper highlights how disparities are most pronounced beyond timetabled lessons. While the National Curriculum sets expectations for broad participation, many state schools face barriers including limited facilities, reduced funding, and shortages of specialist staff. Independent schools, by contrast, often have better resources and established sporting cultures, contributing to unequal participation and the overrepresentation of privately educated pupils in many elite sports.

The paper outlines the contribution cross-sector partnerships can make to addressing these challenges. Such collaborations can expand access to facilities, diversify sporting opportunities, and provide specialist coaching. Examples include shared use of sports facilities, joint programmes, and leadership initiatives involving pupils. These partnerships can also benefit independent schools by contributing to their local communities and enriching pupil experiences.

However, the paper also identifies limitations. Partnerships may lack reciprocity, be short-term, or reinforce existing power imbalances if not carefully designed. In some cases, they focus on resource sharing rather than meaningful collaboration, and concerns about exclusivity may limit engagement from schools. As exemplified in the paper, the most effective partnerships are those that are sustainable, mutually beneficial, and strategically embedded.

A central theme is the importance of inclusivity and breadth of provision. Exposure to diverse sports supports long-term participation and personal development, particularly when introduced early. The paper also highlights inequalities linked to gender, socioeconomic status, and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), noting recent policy shifts aimed at improving inclusion, and giving examples of partnerships increasing opportunities for all.

Ultimately, the paper argues that while cross-sector partnerships are not a complete solution, they offer a valuable mechanism for widening access to sport. A more

equitable system will require sustained collaboration between schools, policymakers, and sports national governing bodies (NGBs) to ensure that all young people can benefit from high-quality sporting experiences.

Introduction: Why playing sport in school matters

‘Sport teaches you character, it teaches you to play by the rules, it teaches you to know what it feels like to win and lose – it teaches you about life.’
(Billie Jean King)

The S.P.A. *Sports Partnerships Report* is dedicated to sports partnerships because sport matters for young people. It matters for their physical health. It matters for their mental health and wellbeing. It matters because it is ‘beneficial for cognitive performance’ (Cooper, 2025, n.p.). Sports clubs matter too, with Hall (2025, n.p.) claiming that ‘women who played extracurricular sport as children were much more likely to reach senior professional roles’.

‘Sport has the power to improve people’s lives. Watching it brings us together. Playing it makes us healthier. Being part of a team teaches young people vital life skills like collaboration, resilience and leadership.’ (Public First, 2025, p.6)

Despite its importance, though, good sports provision is not guaranteed in schools.

While some cross-sector partnership programmes support the delivery of physical education, this report focusses on school sport, defined by the Association for Physical Education (2019, n.p.) as ‘structured learning that takes place beyond the curriculum (i.e. in the extended curriculum) within school settings; this is sometimes referred to as out-of-school-hours learning’.

The National Curriculum for Physical Education (PE) in England, written and published by the Department for Education (DfE), sets out what maintained schools should teach at primary and secondary level:

‘The national curriculum for physical education aims to ensure that all pupils:

- develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities
- are physically active for sustained periods of time
- engage in competitive sports and activities
- lead healthy, active lives’ (DfE, 2013, n.p.)

While some schools have the facilities and resources to effectively meet these targets, others do not. In 2018, The Youth Sports Trust (p.8) found ‘a spiralling downward trend in the number of core PE minutes offered to young people in secondary schools’. As

this report will evidence, cross-sector partnerships can help support national curriculum delivery and extend extra-curricular sports opportunities.

The national curriculum applies to state school pupils from the age of five. Good experiences of physical activity in early years help children develop their love for it and develop breadth of experience (Whitehead, 2010). Kirk (2005, p.252) argues 'that access to a range of activities and specialist teaching at the beginning of KS3 for most children may come too late to impact their competencies, perceptions and motivation'. The earlier they experience the 'broad range of physical activities' (DfE, 2013, n.p.), the better.

While the recent Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) (DfE, 2025b) is not specifically about school sport, it does emphasise its importance within a broader, more balanced curriculum, saying that it is 'crucial that all young people, regardless of background, are supported to access competitive sport and have the chance to realise their talents at the highest level' (ibid, p.102). Further to this, the 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' (DfE, 2026, n.p.) White Paper marks a significant shift for sports provision for SEND students by moving them from 'sidelined to included', specifically mandating that physical activity and sport are core components of the new 'Universal Offer' (ibid). For the first time, schools are legally required to ensure full participation in the curriculum, even if that requires adaptive sports equipment or modified activities. By integrating sport into the mandatory Enrichment Framework, the White Paper ensures that physical education is no longer an optional 'extra' for SEND pupils but a statutory right designed to foster a sense of belonging and improve long-term health outcomes.

Why sports partnerships matter

Partnership working can bring sporting benefits to schools, and pupils, in both sectors, and also in some cases to local clubs. Talking to state school staff, they recognize that through partnership with local independent schools they can significantly increase the opportunities available to their children. This can be through access to facilities they do not have, or expertise not available in their own school.

While the National Curriculum requires schools to offer pupils a broad range of activities, this is not always done:

'Some schools only offer a narrow selection of competitive sports; these are often limited to main schools sports. This approach can provide the school with a number of advantages, reduced equipment, facilities and coaching costs, but it can also limit the achievement of those young

athletes whose body type and natural ability are not suited to the chosen sports' (TOP Foundation, 2014, p.16).

Working in partnership can significantly extend the range of sports on offer to pupils, at little or no cost to the state school. The independent schools also benefit; their senior pupils sometimes lead activities, as Abingdon School sixth formers do in their multi-sports after school club (S.P.A., 2026) Other ventures, such as the Oxford Academy rowing partnership with Radley College (ibid), see the students working side by side. Staff also benefit, with specialist coaches and teachers given opportunities to work with a wider range of pupils.

Partnership working is not without its challenges, though. While not something often publicly articulated, partnership working may not be 'a positive selling point to potential parents who may well expect their child to have unrestricted, and 'exclusive', access to the full range of school facilities and services including those for sport' (Horne, Lingard, Weiner and Forbes, 2011, p.875). Not all partnerships involve the independent school pupils or staff, some are 'connections' (S.P.A., 2023, p.20). Tozer (2013a, p.35) found in a study of preparatory schools that 'Half of the schools, 19 or 50%, allow their facilities to be used by state schools and local clubs and nearly half, 17 or 45%, organise special activities at school for the benefit of pupils from state schools'. Tozer makes no reference here to the involvement of, or benefits for, independent school pupils or staff.

In his article about 'The Art of the Possible – Celebrating Partnerships', state school educated former five times world karate champion Geoff Thompson MBE called on politicians to work alongside schools and the governing bodies of sports 'to enhance our national sporting legacy' (Thompson, 2025, n.p.). He said:

'What we need is to get politicians of all parties to understand that independent schools are ready to stand in meaningful partnership with them [state schools] to improve outcomes for all. Not the 7% of pupils they educate directly, or the 93% of pupils in the state sector, but the 100% of children.' (ibid)

Thompson (2025) has seen the transformational potential of effective partnership first-hand, through his work at the Youth Charter. Independent schools are involved 'in offering enrichment, mentorship and opportunity to young people and communities facing disadvantage and disaffection' (ibid). These partnerships reflect 'shared responsibility - recognising that sport, art, culture and education together can transform lives, build bridges and foster social cohesion' (ibid).

The earliest references to cross-sector partnerships, in the 1997 *'Excellence in Schools'* White Paper (DfEE, 1997), charged independent schools with sharing both their facilities and their teachers with local schools. This was not only to help raise

standards in state schools, but as a contributing factor in independent schools demonstrating public benefit, and so retaining their charitable status (Hunnaball, 2022). As Morton (2019, p.32) asserts ‘The notion that the state sector needs addressing and independent schools have something to offer clearly sees the privileging of an independent sector perspective’. This can deter some state schools from getting involved in them, but in best practice, sports partnerships are sustainable and mutually beneficial.

‘Sport is supposed to be one of the great meritocracies — anyone can succeed, given talent — but is that true when more than 25 per cent of the 90 British medallists have been privately educated (especially when the figure across the country is 7 per cent)?’ (Dickinson, 2016, n.p.)

In the introduction to the 2014 Ofsted report, ‘*Going the extra mile: Excellence in competitive school sport*’, Sir Michael Wilshaw asserted that ‘every student, wherever they are educated, deserves the opportunity to have their sporting passion identified and nurtured’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.2). Cross-sector partnerships can help in the identification of that passion, by introducing pupils to a wider range of sports. As Tozer found, this is important because most GB Olympians ‘were introduced to their Olympic sport at school (52 or 55%)’ (Tozer, 2021, p.370).

Sport within the National Curriculum

Broad range of activities

‘The national curriculum for physical education aims to ensure that all pupils... develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities’ (DfE, 2013, n.p.)

This ‘broad range of physical activities’ (ibid) matters because it supports pupils’ overall development and allows them to discover which activities they enjoy most, increasing the likelihood that they will continue to participate in these in the future. It also helps them to develop a variety of physical skills, rather than focusing on a more narrow set. The TOP Foundation suggests that ‘Early diversification ... provides young athletes with the crucial physical, cognitive and psychological environment to promote motivation in sport’ (TOP Foundation, 2014, p.15).

Some schools have limited facilities and sometimes narrow sporting expertise across their staff. When they reach beyond these restrictions, schools can face challenges when introducing children to new sports due to ‘the dominance of football in the lives of many pupils’ (Scattergood, 2025, p.30). Scattergood found this to be particularly

relevant for those ‘living in... working-class communities’ (ibid). To offer breadth of experience, the TOP Foundation (2014, p.16) recommends ‘offering a range of complementary alternative sport experiences to supplement their primary competitive portfolio’; not all pupils want to pursue competitive sport.

While schools might not feel able to offer a wide range of activities within lessons, a ‘systematic approach to planning and delivering extra-curricular opportunities... can also celebrate a variety of different activities, some of which might not be included in the school PE curriculum’ (Ofsted, 2022, n.p.). Working in partnership with schools with facilities for, and expertise in, other sports, schools can widen their offering. They can draw on the ‘increasingly diverse range of physical activities that offers pupils alternatives to the more traditional team games and reflects wider trends in participation’ that Morton (2019, p.224) found in independent schools.

Overall, introducing children to multiple sports encourages a healthy, balanced lifestyle and helps them grow physically, mentally, and emotionally. Furthermore, exposure to both team and individual sports helps develop social skills, teamwork, and independence.

Competitive sports

‘The national curriculum for physical education aims to ensure that all pupils... engage in competitive sports and activities’ (DfE, 2013, n.p.)

Competition can help pupils to develop many skills and qualities, and can embed ‘values such as fairness and respect’ (DfE, 2013, n.p.). It can help them ‘to develop leadership and teamwork skills, as well as resilience and self-esteem’ (Public First, 2025, p.8). Furthermore, ‘teachers and parents see the opportunity competitive sport can have in building resilience in young people as they encounter the emotions of winning and losing within a peer environment’ (TOP Foundation, 2014, p.2).

In 2014 Ofsted commissioned a survey of sports in maintained and independent schools: ‘*Going the extra mile – Excellence in competitive school sport*’. Its purpose was to investigate concerns raised after the London 2012 Olympic Games that a disproportionately high number of elite athletes had been educated in independent schools, despite most pupils attending state schools. It found ‘strong recognition of the wider benefits of competitive school sport in building school culture and identity, ensuring academic achievement and developing well-rounded individuals’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.5). In spite of this, they found that ‘competitive sport remains optional in the vast majority of state schools’ (ibid).

Why, then, are there such disparities between the sporting achievements of maintained and independent schools? There can be marked differences in facilities, resources, expertise and, very often, staffing. Beyond this, it is embedded within the fabric of many independent schools. As Sir Michael Wilshaw said in the introduction to the 2014 Ofsted report, ‘In independent schools, competitive sport isn’t an optional extra; it’s a key component in building self-esteem, confidence, school ethos and academic excellence. The drive to compete and excel in sport shapes a youngster’s character, binds the school together and reinforces the drive to compete and excel academically’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.2).

Independent schools typically have an ‘expectation that all students compete in sport and represent the school and they fielded multiple teams to enable this’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.24). They have well established house systems and field teams at all levels to facilitate and encourage pupils of all abilities. This is not only true for independent schools, though, Ofsted found great practice in maintained schools. Some take advantage of ‘competitions, to stretch their most talented students and provide the wider benefits of sport to all. But not enough do’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.7).

Swimming and water safety

‘All schools must provide swimming instruction either in key stage 1 or key stage 2.

In particular, pupils should be taught to:

- swim competently, confidently and proficiently over a distance of at least 25 metres
- use a range of strokes effectively [for example, front crawl, backstroke and breaststroke]
- perform safe self-rescue in different water-based situations’ (DfE, 2023, n.p.)

The National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) sets clear objectives for the teaching of swimming and water safety. These are, of course, only achievable if schools have access to swimming pools, and suitably qualified instructors. 15% of state primary schools and 25% of secondary schools have swimming pools (Verkaik, 2024), compared to 47% of independent schools (Phillips, 2016). This partly explains the high number of cross-sector, and cross-phase, swimming partnerships. In 2018, the Independent Schools Council reported that out of ‘603 of its member schools that have pools, 304 already share them in some way with state school pupils’ (Courea, 2018, n.p.). At their simplest, these initiatives see schools inviting local primaries to use their facilities

when they would otherwise not be used, while more mutually beneficial partnerships see pupils from both schools working together.

Successive governments have made funding available to support primary schools in meeting their National Curriculum swimming obligations. This is often needed, as ‘72% of primary schools use public pools for swimming lessons’ (Courea, 2018, n.p.), and the associated transport costs can also be high (Ofsted, 2023). Even so, ‘in many schools, the evaluation of the swimming and water safety element of the curriculum is limited, and many schools do not make full use of the PE and sport premium, which can be used to fund top-up swimming lessons, where needed’ (Ofsted, 2023, n.p.). The CAR ‘data shows that in 2022/23 9% of primary schools did not offer swimming and/or water safety lessons, with only half (55%) teaching their pupils safe self-rescue in different situations’ (DfE, 2025b, p.103).

Some of the collaborations featured in the S.P.A. (2026) *Sports Partnerships Report* highlight cross-sector working that reaches some of those in greatest need. This is important because, ‘Sport England found that 44% of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds reported that they could swim 25 metres, compared with 85% of children from more affluent families’ (Ofsted, 2022, n.p.). Swimming skills can be particularly important for pupils with special needs. Wimbledon High School has forged a partnership with Melrose Primary (S.P.A., 2026), a specialist school catering for pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan. The aim of the partnership is two-fold; firstly, to give Melrose pupils access to the full PE Curriculum, including swimming, and secondly that the pupils can all be safe in the water, and understand water safety before they leave primary school. The specialist needs of the pupils mean they require sole use of a pool, unable to share the space with members of the public or other school groups, which proves challenging for the delivery of swimming as part of the National Curriculum.

Resource inequalities

When New Labour first introduced partnerships between the sectors, they said the ‘best independent schools can offer children extensive facilities in sport, music and the other arts’ and ‘specialist teaching’ as part of addressing the ‘educational apartheid created by the public/private divide [that] diminishes the whole education system’ (DfEE, 1997, p.73). This call for sharing facilities has been reiterated by governments of all types, and a range of partnerships have been set up in response.

Case studies in the S.P.A. *Sports Partnerships Report*, include examples of introducing pupils to sports that they could not otherwise access, due to a lack of facilities,

equipment or coaching expertise. Through these initiatives, pupils have been given a chance to try sports often viewed as exclusively played by independent school pupils. Examples include cricket, fives, hockey, lacrosse, rowing and rugby union. For some, this may be the start of a life-long love of these sports.

Some sports are dominated at elite level by the privately educated, largely due to the facilities, equipment and expertise needed to play them (Morton, 2022; Ofsted, 2014; Scattergood, 2025; Tozer, 2024). When it comes to cricket, while some state schools offer softball cricket to their pupils, ‘many fee-paying (often single-sex) schools [are] able to offer a range of indoor training facilities, maintained grass cricket wickets, specialist elite cricket coaches, and regular competitive fixtures’ (Scattergood, 2025, p.4). It is hardly suprising, then, that those educated privately dominate the highest level of cricket (Sutton Trust, 2025).

Where swimming is concerned, the facilities situation is exacerbated by the closure of many municipal pools (Jones, 2025). When a local pool closed in Newcastle, The Royal Grammar School stepped in to offer primary schools use of its pool (S.P.A., 2026). This grew into the RGS Swim Confidence Club. In addition to supplying their pool, RGS also staffed sessions, working with Newcastle University’s SCITT trainees. Recognising that transport costs could be an issue, RGS sought charity funding for the initiative to cover these. This is a partnership that equips children with essential skills, while supporting teacher development and fostering a sense of community and shared achievement.

Alongside facilities and equipment, another important difference between successful sporting schools and less strong ones can be staffing. Not only the level of staffing but also the commitment of individuals within and beyond their timetabled commitments.

‘The time that PE staff, other teachers and coaches dedicate to organising sport before, during and after school and at weekends is one of the fundamental reasons why some maintained schools and academies match what independent schools do. Competitive sport thrives in those schools where there is a large, well-organised team of PE staff, coaches and academic subject teachers involved in organising fixtures, running sports clubs, coaching skills and taking fitness training.’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.26)

Whilst not always the case, independent schools often ‘invest in first-class sports facilities, teams of specialist teachers, expert coaches and support staff’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.17). Furthermore, they separate ‘responsibility for teaching physical education (PE) and coaching sport, which gave PE teachers and coaches the time to do both well’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.5). Appointing specialist coaches, able to concentrate only on their sports is a luxury unaffordable to most state schools. These coaches, though, are often only used during games lessons and in co-curricular activities. Cross-sector

partnerships, such as that between City Heights E-ACT Academy and Dulwich College (S.P.A., 2026), share these expert coaches with local schools, so that they too can benefit from their expertise.

Schools in both sectors with a strong emphasis on sport have not only staff with ‘the attitude and abilities... to deliver appropriate skills and techniques’ (Scattergood, 2025, p.46), but they devote their time; they ‘go the extra mile’ as Ofsted described in the title of their report. They do this by ‘dedicating much of their own time to organising sport before, during and after school and by running teams that play weekly competitive fixtures against other schools’ (Ofsted, 2014, p.6). Furthermore, senior leaders play a key role in the sporting success of their schools. Where they believe in the benefits sport brings to their pupils, they commit the resources they can to facilitate their development.

Sport for all

In 2023, Ofsted (n.p.) found that, while ‘physical activity levels have generally recovered since the pandemic... Stubborn differences between ethnicities, sex and levels of affluence remain’. While socioeconomic status has been shown to be a factor, it is not clear ‘if this is related to the financial cost associated in taking part in sport or if it is related to the cultural ‘value’ placed on sport’ (TOP Foundation, 2014, p.9). A 2025 report from Public First (p.7) found that ‘Girls in the UK still play significantly less sport than boys’. They found that secondary aged girls miss out on ‘1.4 hours a week’ (p.3)... [and] 340k more girls are being excluded from sport than boys due to cost’ (p.18).

In addition to ethnicity, gender and affluence, ‘those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), [also] report lower levels of physical activity’ (Ofsted, 2022, n.p.). When the Department for Education updated its *School Sport and Activity Action Plan* in July 2023, it included plans for disabled pupils, and were ‘clear that children with disabilities benefit from physical activity as much as non-disabled children’ (DfE, 2023, p.21). The partnership between charity Able2B and Norwich School (S.P.A., 2026) is a strong example of collaboration offering opportunities to those with disabilities. The project culminates in a day of sport for people of all abilities, *Discover Your Ability Day*. Able2B works to develop the confidence and self-belief of disabled children and adults through sport. As part of the project, Norwich School pupils work 1-to-1 with pupils from local special schools over a series of training sessions, learning more about each

other's abilities and preparing for a special duathlon event at the school. The day aims to change perceptions of disability, help people to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, show how working across a wide range of abilities and needs can work successfully, and empower young people to influence change.

Another cross-sector partnership that sees a special school working alongside an independent school is Clifton Hill School's partnership with Caterham School (S.P.A., 2026). For more than 14 years, Caterham has hosted weekly sports sessions for pupils from Clifton Hill, a local special school for children and young people aged 11-19 with severe and profound multiple learning difficulties. This is a well-established, reciprocal and deeply embedded partnership where both schools co-create, deliver, and benefit from the programme. Sessions are designed to promote physical development, coordination, communication and social confidence. In the Summer Term, the partnership culminates in two dedicated Clifton Hill Sports Days held at Caterham. These are celebratory events attended by parents and carers, offering inclusive and accessible sporting activities for Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils.

In Robinson's research for the Education Policy Institute (2024, p.13), he found that 'Vulnerable groups were less likely to attend both sports clubs, and clubs for hobbies, arts and music'. In the case of sports clubs, these vulnerable groups included students 'with lower prior attainment, ... [those] with poorer health, ... [and those] who were bullied' (Robinson, 2024, p.5). In addition to improving social skills, physical and mental health, sport can offer positive pathways for these young people, through 'positive youth development... a widely adopted strength- based concept in which young people alongside participation in sports are taught positive life skills, attributes and behaviours' (Brinkley, 2024, p.573).

The impact of not participating in sport at school is felt beyond education, as 'children from lower social groups, girls and young disabled people are markedly under-represented in community-based sports clubs' (Kirk, 2005, p.252). Partnerships such as the rowing partnership between The Oxford Academy and Radley College (S.P.A., 2026), and the Tulse Hill and Dulwich Phoenix partnership (ibid), include strong links with a local club to ensure that participants can move into club environments free of charge. This is an important component of each partnership, with continuity of sporting involvement through club membership and integral part of each partnership's strategic approach.

The benefits sport brings

(See Appendix 1 for a full list of benefits identified in the literature and Appendix 2 for the benefits of playing sports reported in the S.P.A.(2026) Sports Partnerships Report)

Pupils benefit from their involvement in sport, both during their time in school and beyond. Naturally, the benefit most often referenced is physical health (DfE, 2024), but equally important in many contexts are the positive impacts sport can have on pupils' mental health and wellbeing (ibid). When pupils' time in school is so busy, sport can 'offer an important space to have fun and relax away from the pressures of school work' (Donnelly et al., 2019, p.3).

In academic terms, benefits include improvement in concentration and overall 'cognitive performance' (Cooper, 2025, n.p.). Where extra-curricular sports are concerned, participation can increase 'attachment to school' (TOP Foundation, 2014, p.16), which in turn can enhance academic achievement. This is evidenced through the TOP Foundation (ibid) finding that 'elite athletes experienced increased educational success than non-athletes'.

'School leaders and staff said that they believe that the values students develop in sport, such as discipline, resilience and commitment, carry across into their academic work – 'commitment on the pitch/court is carried across into the exam hall' and beyond.' (Ofsted, 2014, p.16)

Donnelly, Lažetić, Sandoval-Hernandez, Kumar and Whewall (2019, p.62) also found that 'participation in certain extra-curricular activities [including sports] had an impact on levels of educational aspirations'.

There are also social benefits for pupils of participating in extra-curricular activities. They 'boost young people's confidence to interact socially with others... [and] extend their social networks' (Donnelly et al., 2019, p.3). They also give pupils the opportunity to 'build rapport with the teachers delivering the opportunities which can have positive impacts on pupil behaviour during the core school day' (DfE, 2023, p.13).

There is considerable research that evidences lasting benefits of participation in school sport beyond the years of formal education. In employment terms, Robinson (2024, p.6) reported 'a positive association between attending sports clubs in secondary school and being in employment or education aged 21/22'. With girls still reporting lower participation levels than boys, there is considerable research into the positive impact sport can have on them.

'The research found that women who played extracurricular sport as children were much more likely to reach senior professional roles. It attributes this benefit to the resilience, confidence and adaptability that sport builds, with women who play sport almost a third more likely to

handle pressure well and bounce back after hard times, and a fifth more likely to enjoy trying new things.’ (Hall, 2025)

Perhaps this impact of sport on professional achievement is linked to Morton’s (2022, p.403) claim that sporting success ‘offers cultural capital to pupils and the possibility of this being transformed into economic capital in the future’.

Pupils who choose to get involved in extra-curricular activities, or forms of volunteering such as partnership working, show a ‘higher level of civic participation as adults’ (Robinson, 2024, p.8). Although not specified by Robinson, for those involved in sports this is likely to include involvement in supporting and running local sports clubs.

Extra- / Co-curricular activities

Extra-curricular and co-curricular activities are those offered outside the timetabled curriculum. The subtle difference in terminology reflects a difference in attitude towards them; while extra- suggests these activities are ‘in addition to’ the curriculum, co- indicates that these are ‘complementary to’ it. Children thrive through these sports, and other activities, and Robinson (2024, p.26) asserted that activities beyond lessons ‘should not be considered as a nice “extra” for those that can afford it, but an integral part of childhood for all’.

Ofsted (2022, n.p.) recommend that ‘Extra-curricular provision and sport that occur within school can and should complement and enrich the PE curriculum for all’. In best practice, this generates ‘a symbiotic relationship between timetabled lessons and extra-curricular participation’ (ibid). These school based activities offer pupils ‘more time to practise, extend and refine their knowledge’ (ibid). They also offer them ‘the possibility for developing a wider set of skills beyond the qualifications obtained from school’ (Donnelly et al., 2019, p.62).

As with many aspects of school sport already discussed, there are considerable inequalities when extra-curricular activities are concerned (Robinson, 2024).

‘Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds may be less likely to be able to benefit from sport clubs and other physical activities outside of school due to the associated financial costs (e.g. equipment). By providing physical activities free of charge, schools give pupils access to benefits and opportunities that might not otherwise be available to them’ (EEF, 2025, n.p.).

Access to activities beyond the curriculum are also impacted by ‘social class, school attended, gender, ethnicity and geography’ (Donnelly et al., 2019, p.62).

Robinson's research for the Education Policy Institute (2024, p.13), quantifies the differences between types of school. He found the following attendance levels for pupils attending sports clubs:

- independent schools 91%
- academy converters 71%
- sponsored academies/free schools 69%
- local authority maintained schools 67%
- special schools 47%

Cross-sector partnerships enable some independent schools to share their 'unparalleled breadth and range of activities compared to state schools' (Donnelly et al., 2019, p.3). Partnerships such as Abingdon School's sports club for local primary school pupils (S.P.A., 2026) offer extra-curricular opportunities that pupils might not otherwise have. Run by Abingdon's sixth formers after school, this mutually beneficial venture sees primary pupils introduced to new sports, while the sixth formers develop their leadership and mentoring skills.

'One of the worst statistics in British sport' (Moynihan, 2012)

'It's one of the worst statistics in British sport. It is wholly unacceptable that over 50% of our medallists in Beijing came from the private sector. It tells you that 50% of the medals came from 7% of the population.

'There is so much talent out there in the 93% that should be identified and developed. That has got to be a priority for future sports policy. I have spoken about it many times and I will continue to speak about it until there is not breath left in me.' (Lord Moynihan quoted in The Standard, 2012)

When Lord Moynihan made his oft quoted comment, most people focused, and still do, on his reference to the dominance of athletes privately educated. What he went on to do, though, was emphasise that state school sport needed to be a strategic priority for development.

There are undoubtedly sports dominated by independent school educated athletes. These include hockey, rowing (Ofsted, 2014), cricket (Scattergood, 2025), rugby union (Morton, 2022), athletics, swimming, equestrianism, sailing (Tozer, 2024), and lacrosse (Tozer, 2013a). Ofsted (2014, p.12) found that 'football is the most demographically representative sport, with 94% of English footballers competing in the Premier League having been educated at state schools'.

Some independent schools offer pupils with strong sporting potential financial support to join them. 'Full sports scholarships and all-rounder scholarships with a sports

ingredient are normally offered at age 11 or 13' (Tozer, 2013b, p.1447). A further round of scholarships are often awarded for sixth form entrants and are 'awarded to support the candidates' international or professional ambitions and to boost the performance of school teams' (ibid). These scholarships offer potentially life-changing experiences for those offered them. While partnerships cannot give potential elite athletes the same depth of experience as scholarships, they can introduce a higher number of pupils to sports they may excel in. These are often sports the pupils would otherwise not get an opportunity to play. Examples of this include the rowing and hockey partnerships previously mentioned, and the Primary School Lacrosse Festival run by St Mary's Calne (S.P.A., 2026).

Conclusion

'The independent sector's resources, values, and networks can be leveraged not to separate, but to unite; not to preserve privilege, but to democratise possibility' (Thompson, 2025, n.p.)

When it comes to sports provision in schools, the playing field is far from level. As Ofsted (2014, p.17) found, the 'combination of high quality facilities and well resourced staffing for sport, a focus on the sports that matter to the school and a high level of commitment from all concerned, combine to breed sporting success'. But this combination is not found in all schools, and nor is sporting success. As this paper has found, independent schools often have better facilities and higher staffing levels for sport. Not surprisingly, then,

'perhaps the greatest hope rests in the independent and state sectors working together, along with NGBs, clubs and academies to provide a form of physical, sporting education which ensures a greater level of equitable access, both in terms of mass participation and support for the development of talented young athletes, regardless of their background' (Morton, 2019, p.224)

Sports partnerships can, and do, play a significant part in increasing the opportunities for young people from all backgrounds to participate in high quality activities. Involving clubs to give those young people pathways to follow if they wish to pursue the sport outside school increases impact and supports their continued involvement. The School Partnerships Alliance *Sports Partnerships Report* shows what is possible when schools work together, agree project aims, and commit to genuine, often mutually beneficial, collaboration.

Sir Michael Wilshaw (Ofsted, 2014, p.3) suggested that 'the real value of competitive sport is the positive effect it has on education. Schools that win on the field win in the

exam hall.’ But not all pupils want to participate in competitive sport. As one international school says in its sports handbook, ‘the true value of school sport lies in the habits, values and relationships built along the way’.

If the widely cited benefits of sport - for health, wellbeing, academic development and social mobility - are to be realised for all young people, then access must be both universal and meaningful. The challenge is not simply to increase provision, but to ensure that it is inclusive, high-quality and sustained. Cross-sector partnerships, when thoughtfully designed and genuinely collaborative, have the potential to be a powerful part of this solution.

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Appendix 1: The benefits of playing sports identified in the literature

Skills and qualities:

Adaptability (Hall, 2025)
Character building (DfE, 2013)
Cognitive performance (Cooper, 2025)
Concentration (Cooper, 2025)
Confidence (Hall, 2025) (Donnelly et al., 2019)
Leadership (Public First, 2025)
Mental health (DfE, 2024)
Physical health (DfE, 2024)
Resilience (Hall, 2025) (Public First, 2025)
Self-esteem (Public First, 2025) (TOP Foundation, 2014)
Teamwork skills (Public First, 2025)
Wellbeing (DfE, 2024)

Embedded values:

Commitment (Ofsted, 2014)
Determination (Ofsted, 2014)
Discipline (Ofsted, 2014)
Fairness (DfE, 2013) (Ofsted, 2014)
Hard work (Ofsted, 2014)
Honesty (Ofsted, 2014)
Resilience (Ofsted, 2014)
Respect (DfE, 2013) (Ofsted, 2014)
Self-discipline (Ofsted, 2014)
Self-efficacy (DfE, 2024)
Team spirit (Ofsted, 2014)

Soft skills:

Confidence to interact socially with others (Donnelly et al., 2019)

Dealing with authority figures (Robinson, 2024)

Fitting in with peers (Robinson, 2024)

Following instructions (Robinson, 2024)

Independence (Robinson, 2024)

Persistence (Robinson, 2024)

Working well within groups (Robinson, 2024)

Wider benefits:

Attachment to school (TOP Foundation, 2014)

Better chance of employment or education aged 21/22 (Robinson, 2024)

Bounce back after hard times (Hall, 2025)

Cultural capital (Morton, 2022)

Extend their social networks (Donnelly et al., 2019)

Handle pressure well (Hall, 2025)

Healthier weight status (DfE, 2024)

Higher level of civic participation as adults (Robinson, 2024)

Improved sleep (DfE, 2024)

Increased educational success (TOP Foundation, 2014)

Managing stress (DfE, 2024)

Mental health benefits (Ofsted, 2023)

More likely to enjoy trying new things (Hall, 2025)

Social benefits (Ofsted, 2023)

Space to have fun and relax (Donnelly et al., 2019)

Appendix 2: The benefits of playing sports reported in the S.P.A. Sports Partnerships Report

(A Claude AI summary of benefits, organised by theme, exemplified through quotes from the impact summary section of the report.)

Health & Wellbeing

- Improved mental health and long-term engagement in physical activity
- Enhanced physical fitness, coordination, stamina, and resilience
- Reduced risk of children dropping out of sport as they get older, particularly girls
- Positive contribution to overall health and wellbeing across all partnerships

66% of pupils could swim; 47% could use a range of strokes effectively after partnership swimming programmes

Leadership & Life Skills

- Older students develop leadership, communication, coaching, and management skills
- Improved resilience, self-esteem, teamwork, and social skills for all participants
- Students gain formal qualifications such as the Sports Leaders award
- Increased empathy, emotional intelligence, and maturity in sixth-form and senior students

20% of coaches felt confident working with younger children before the programme; this rose to 83% by the end

Academic & Educational Outcomes

- Improved attendance, academic progress, and achievement points
- Enhanced language acquisition and social confidence
- Positive behaviour outcomes linked to sport participation
- Access to the full PE curriculum, including sports not available in partner schools

"In every metric — attendance, achievement points, academic progress — all pupils on the rowing programme have improved" (Head Teacher, The Oxford Academy)

Inclusion & Access

- Access to facilities, coaching, and sports that partner schools could not otherwise provide
- Increased swimming access, including for Pupil Premium and disabled children
- Introduction to culturally rich, specialist sports (e.g. judo, lacrosse, rowing)
- Developing confidence and self-belief in disabled children and adults through sport
- Removing barriers and changing perceptions of disability

62% of Pupil Premium children could swim; 50% could perform safe self-rescue in different water-based situations

Community & Social Impact

- Stronger community connections and increased civic responsibility
- Positive role models provided by older students coaching younger pupils
- Celebration of teamwork, perseverance, and mutual respect through competition and events
- Sustained, lasting relationships between partner institutions
- Mutual inspiration benefiting both senior students and younger participants

Behaviour points dropped (2.61 to 2.20) and achievement points rose (0.85 to 0.95) for the SOHK cohort

Pupil Enjoyment & Aspiration

- High levels of enjoyment and enthusiasm for new sports and physical activity
- Pupils motivated to continue playing sport outside school
- Broadened horizons and raised aspirations through exposure to new opportunities
- Making new friends and meeting people from different schools

88% of pupils enjoyed their lacrosse day; only 12% did not want to play more. Most common words used: "fun", "amazing", "exciting", "friendly"