

Transforming Lives: Alternative Provision and the School Games

"For our pupils; activities that encourage teamwork and provide opportunities for them to succeed have the greatest impact. We passionately believe our pupils will succeed and provide a range of experiences, setting high standards through sport to make this a reality."

This powerful sentiment shared by a Head Teacher recently echoes the core belief that every child deserves a chance to flourish and succeed. And yet, a staggering number of students in England find themselves on the brink of exclusion from the traditional education system and often wider society. Recently I was sent a new publication called '[Onboard](#)' which outlines an alternative provision setting established in 2012 with the aim of delivering bespoke learning programmes for some of South Yorkshire's most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people. In the book they shared stories from young people they have worked with that highlighted the trauma all had faced in their short lives. For example, 14-year-old Jack, born with an addiction to heroin; low self-esteem; no awareness of danger, and had not been in education for two years-but did have a love of scooters; or the story of Ryan whose parent/carer is a drug abuser who had tried to take their own life. Ryan came to Onboard over the summer and through a carefully crafted approach successfully passed his GCSEs, started college and trialled for Team GB Street Riding. Through using sport- such as BMX, Scooter or skateboarding activity young people are welcomed, and feel safe in a caring environment; supported by a dedicated team of specialists that are matched with educators delivering maths, English, art engineering, woodwork- and many others.

The Alarming Exclusion Landscape

As I write this blog; the most recent data, the Department for Education census data, has recently revealed a concerning trend in exclusion rates in England. Notably, 81% of all permanent exclusions occur at the secondary level, with 25% of those exclusions affecting pupils aged 14, particularly boys who are three times more likely to be excluded than girls.

Additionally, the data highlights that specific ethnic groups, particularly Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils, face nearly three times the risk of exclusion compared to their white British peers. Special Educational Needs (SEN) students make up almost 50% of all permanent and fixed-term exclusions, with pupils receiving SEN support being seven times more likely to face permanent exclusion and permanent exclusion rate is around five times higher for pupils eligible for free school meals compared to those not eligible.

The Role of School Games in Tackling Exclusion

Since 2017 the School Games network (School Games Organisers, Lead Inclusion Schools, National Governing Bodies of Sport inclusive of National Disability Sport Organisations, and Active Partnerships) have tested approaches to engage with alternative provision settings, and their pupils through the School Games. This has ranged from working in specific areas across the country, collaborating with highly specialised inclusive schools- including mainstream, special, and alternative provision schools- to immersing ourselves in settings to understand the barriers young people face



when accessing school sport. The goal has been to provide opportunities for students who may not have had access to the same opportunities as their peers.

Our efforts have borne fruit, resulting in several noteworthy outcomes:

- A comprehensive guide to engaging with Alternative Provision, authored in collaboration with Alternative Provision schools. It includes 10 Top Tips for School Games Organisers (SGOs)
- A series of case studies (which increase each term through the School Games Impact Awards) highlighting the transformative impact on students from Alternative Provision who have participated in the School Games
- A recorded School Games Summit workshop discussing the exclusion landscape and how the School Games can promote positive outcomes for young people.
- Two enlightening podcasts with Sarah Dove, President of PRUsAP (Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision Association)
- A set of illustrated resources, co-designed by young people in Alternative Provision, intended to spark conversations about their experiences in PE and school sports and offer solutions.
- Research undertaken by Leeds Beckett University and Loughborough University on the role of PE and sport in alternative provision- found [here](#)
- A Youth Research report created by, with and for young people, launched with Key Stage 3 pupils at Evolution Sports Group- an alternative provision setting in Barking & Dagenham.
- The appointment of five specialist Development Coaches with expertise in alternative provision
- Innovation across the Wave Multi Academy Trust and four National Governing Bodies of Sport; designed to unify both the education and sport sector and understand the deep rooted inequalities exist around accessing provision.

A Beacon of Hope: The Wave Multi Academy Trust

In our quest to address the challenges of both Physical Education (PE) and School Sport in Alternative Provision, we've joined hands with the Wave Multi Academy Trust. Wave Trust, with its 11 schools spread across the Southwest, exemplifies sector- leading commitment to providing equitable opportunities for students, despite the myriad challenges they often face.

The trust stands at the forefront of tackling the PE/School Sport dilemma in Alternative Provision. They reflect the national picture of provision in these settings, recognising the numerous obstacles that include a lack of facility, space, expertise, team sports, and the multi-faceted role of Alternative Provision teachers who often wear many hats, lacking PE specialisation. Wave Trust acknowledges the attitudes and perceptions carried over from pupils' previous school experiences in sport and is committed to breaking down these barriers.

Wave acknowledges that what works in one setting may not work in another, and that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. They understand that PE/School Sport in Alternative Provision isn't a quick fix; it requires collaboration, shared determination, and the collective effort of all stakeholders. They are pioneering a response to these barriers with four National Governing Bodies of Sport. British Judo, British Orienteering, England Boxing and Swim England are providing dedicated support and sharing their journey in response to this as sports, resulting in shared learnings, innovation and collective efforts. In Wave's own words, "*The solution to a life-enhancing equitable offer of PE in Alternative Provision isn't a quick fix, in a magic wand. It's in the magic of all of us at the table.*"

We also know many School Games Organisers across the country are also dedicated to tackling the deep rooted inequalities that exist for young people in their areas. Over the past twelve months we have seen the following examples come through from the School Games Impact Awards.

i) **Thornleigh Salesian SGO area:** Targeting Vulnerable Children and At-Risk Behaviours

One prime example is Thornleigh Salesian, an area deeply committed to addressing the needs of more vulnerable children and those at risk of involvement in offending behaviour. Situated within Bolton, the initial aim was to establish a connection with at least one Alternative Provision (AP) or Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) (their advice to others is start small and build on your successes!) and target specific cohorts of young people such as a group of 8 boys with an EHCP, low socio economic background and family history that was often associated with criminal and anti-social behaviours. Through providing opportunities through sport leadership and the Panathlon format; where young people felt a shared sense of belonging, as leaders and competitors, reported increases in self-esteem, and also raised aspirations with many asking about how to become a sports coach. Their success led them to develop a support package focused on engaging young people in Alternative Provision settings.

ii) **Shrewsbury SGO Area:** Overcoming Transport Barriers

In Shrewsbury, SGOs identified a significant barrier to involving alternative provision students in the School Games: transportation. They recognised that many students faced difficulties accessing School Games events due to limited transport options. Instead of viewing this as an insurmountable challenge, SGOs decided to tackle it head-on.

By proactively reaching out and developing relationships with transport providers, they found innovative solutions to ensure that alternative provision students could participate in the School Games. This creative problem-solving approach not only removed a significant obstacle but also showcased the power of collaboration and determination in fostering inclusivity.

i) **Birkenhead SGO Area:** High-Energy, Personal Best-Focused Competitions

In Birkenhead, SGOs engaged with Head Teachers in alternative provision settings to create a unique approach to School Games competitions. They recognised the need for competitions that were high-energy for pupils, focused on personal best achievements, and offered a positive and engaging environment for students.

The result was a series of School Games events that promoted the spirit of personal growth and achievement. These competitions encouraged students to challenge themselves and celebrate their own progress, fostering a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. By tailoring the School Games to meet the specific needs and preferences of alternative provision students, Birkenhead's SGO area exemplified the concept of inclusivity.

These innovative initiatives from Shrewsbury, Birkenhead, and Bolton SGO areas demonstrate the power of creative thinking and proactive problem-solving when it comes to engaging alternative provision in the School Games. By addressing barriers, adapting to the unique needs of students, and fostering an inclusive environment, these regions are shaping a future where all children have the

opportunity to thrive through sports and teamwork. Their collaborative spirit serves as an inspiration, igniting positive change and innovation across the educational landscape.

Four Quick Wins for School Games Organisers

To further support SGOs in their engagement with Alternative Provision schools, here are four "Quick Wins" to consider (all taken from recent Impact Awards):

- **Quick Win 1:** Understand Your Patch Start by identifying the types of schools in your area, including Alternative Provision. Leverage School Games data and local intelligence to uncover opportunities for collaboration.
- **Quick Win 2:** Do Your Research and Find Your 'In'. Similar to Birkenhead SGO area, seek to establish connections within Alternative Provision and understand what their settings/pupils most need. It does take time- be prepared to spend time doing the groundwork and building relationships.
- **Quick Win 3:** Consider Your Approach- be clear on the intent and aim of events so young people know what to expect. Offer sports they can try for the first time. Prioritise youth voice by seeking the opinions and feelings of Alternative Provision students (TIP-read the [youth research](#) strand of the University report).
- **Quick Win 4:** Virtual Delivery- Harness the benefits of virtual delivery to introduce young people in Alternative Provision to the School Games, eliminating barriers and providing them with an opportunity to engage with their mainstream peers in a safe environment.