

# GIVING YOUNG PEOPLE SKILLS FOR LIFE THROUGH SPORT

## Background

The purpose of this article is to show the role that targeted sport and physical activity-based interventions can play in building a fairer, more equitable and sustainable future while also closing the gap in education.

The Department for Education<sup>1</sup> estimates that there are at least 35,600 pupils educated across as least 761 alternative provision settings in England. Additionally, there are 11,684 pupils enrolled in pupil referral units (PRUs) and a further 11,100 have a dual registration, meaning they are registered at another school. Within these schools there are increasing numbers of children and young people with mental health needs, and there is a growing recognition that pupils' mental health and wellbeing influence their educational attainment.

In September 2022, we approached our local authority in Barking and Dagenham to run a new alternative provision pilot for Key Stage 4 students, placing physical education (PE) and sport at the heart of education and providing opportunities for disengaged boys and girls to leave education recognising their strengths.

We had noticed that a lack of facilities and poor access to existing clubs was proving challenging for young people in the borough, leaving them with limited opportunities to participate in sport. We felt that too many young people at risk of school exclusion were missing out on careers they could love due to needing targeted support but none being available.

Furthermore, research released last year by Leeds Beckett University in partnership with the Youth Sport Trust<sup>2</sup> was the



<sup>1</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-xchange/2022/11/the-challenges-of-delivering-physical-education-in-alternative-provision-schools/>



first of its kind to explore the barriers that young people in alternative provision face in getting active. The research revealed that more than half of the surveyed alternative provision settings did not have an indoor space available for the delivery of PE. Over 60 per cent of settings rated their equipment as average, poor or very poor and only 57 per cent suggested PE was taught by a specialist PE teacher.

We sought to change that – and the Evolution Sports Group 100% Sports & Education Centre was born.

### **Our approach**

The 100% Sports and Education Centre is a sports-specialist setting offering an alternative education to students referred by their schools. We are based at Barking Rugby Club, where we have excellent sports and classroom facilities. We believe that sports participation helps to improve educational performance and the development of critical life skills, including goal-setting, discipline, teamwork, resilience, focus and hard work, so all of our students participate in daily sports activity, tailored to their ability. At the same time, we work with each student on a bespoke learning programme designed to help them to achieve their full academic potential. We want our students to enjoy learning and exercising at a level that is right for them so they can achieve more and develop higher levels of confidence and self-esteem. We also offer

vocational courses and personal development opportunities to help students better understand the world of work and improve their chances of employment.

Eugene explains his passion for this approach: Having started to play sport at a young age myself, I was an exceptional sportsman and able to play for a number of professional sports clubs, but I also found myself running into difficulties in my youth following traumatic experiences which could have changed my whole life. My PE and sports teachers were really influential in changing my life at this time and it is why I have always had a passion for sport and understand its potential to change lives.

As part of our commitment to using PE and sport to develop our students, we teamed up with the Youth Sport Trust to implement the My Personal Best Alternative Provision and Pupil Referral Unit programme. This is funded by the Department for Education Inclusion 2024 grant to support settings to develop students' life skills. It was the ideal fit for our curriculum. We were supported to teach life skills explicitly through PE, reinforcing our wider approach. My Personal Best supported us to develop the required knowledge, skills and resources to use PE to develop learners' character and enable our students to apply those life skills in meaningful ways. This is helping our young people to flourish in PE and school and preparing them for work and wider life.

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Collaboration is key to our success. It has been a real team and community effort to work together to identify the young people who need the support most to have the best life chances. As well as working with national partners, such as the Youth Sport Trust, The Prince's Trust and Duke of Edinburgh Award, we have developed partnerships with schools, sports clubs and three local authorities (Barking & Dagenham, Harrow and Brent) across the area. For example, we work with Barking Rugby Club and Jo Richardson Community School through the Model City London Coalition, Laureus, Unified Action and Breaking Boundaries.

Neil reinforces the importance of this partnership working: The young people we work with are unrecognisable from the young people originally referred by head teachers and that is a testament to all the people who support the programme. The

partnership between the Evolution Sports Group and Barking Rugby Club seeks to use the power of sport to engage young people and deliver all the things we know can be achieved through that engagement: self-esteem, participation, the feeling of belonging and, particularly in this area, getting them off the street and allowing them a safe area in which to learn. The Youth Sport Trust has been amazing in believing in the rugby club and providing us with the resources and know how.

### National recognition

We have already had a lot of interest in our approach from local and national organisations. However, given our first intake of students was in September 2022, we were particularly proud to receive the Youth Sport Trust's Outstanding Contribution to the Community Award in March 2023. This recognised the way we have harnessed PE and sport to bring different people and communities together. Chris Smith, Development Manager for Inclusion at the Youth Sport Trust, said:

*"The Evolution Sports Group is doing an exceptional job in creating a setting and curriculum through the context of sport which enables these young people to thrive. Eugene, Neil and the team have buy-in from key stakeholders across Barking and continue to grow their offer for more young people across the borough. The young people who are referred have had challenges in mainstream education, but all share a passion for sport and are interested in careers in the sector in the future. My Personal Best, alongside the Duke of Edinburgh Award and Prince's Trust Award, is helping the young people to develop the key skills they need as they transition into higher education, adulthood and work."*

This year has been a great start to our mission. Our continuing aim is to ensure our young people develop the skills and confidence they need to build on and demonstrate their strengths. PE and sport are enabling us to do that.

If you would like to hear more about our approach, please watch our video at: <https://evolution-sportsgroup.com/sports-education-centre/>

The Youth Sport Trust is encouraging other alternative provision and pupil referral unit settings to get in touch to ask about support through My Personal Best. For more information, visit <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/programmes/my-pb-for-alternative-provision-pru> ■

### Eugene Dwaah and Neil Kersey

**Eugene Dwaah** is CEO of Evolution Sports Group. He previously worked as a head of behaviour and engagement in an inner-city school.

**Neil Kersey** is Community Manager at Barking Rugby Club in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

