

EQUAL

PLAY



ParalympicsGB

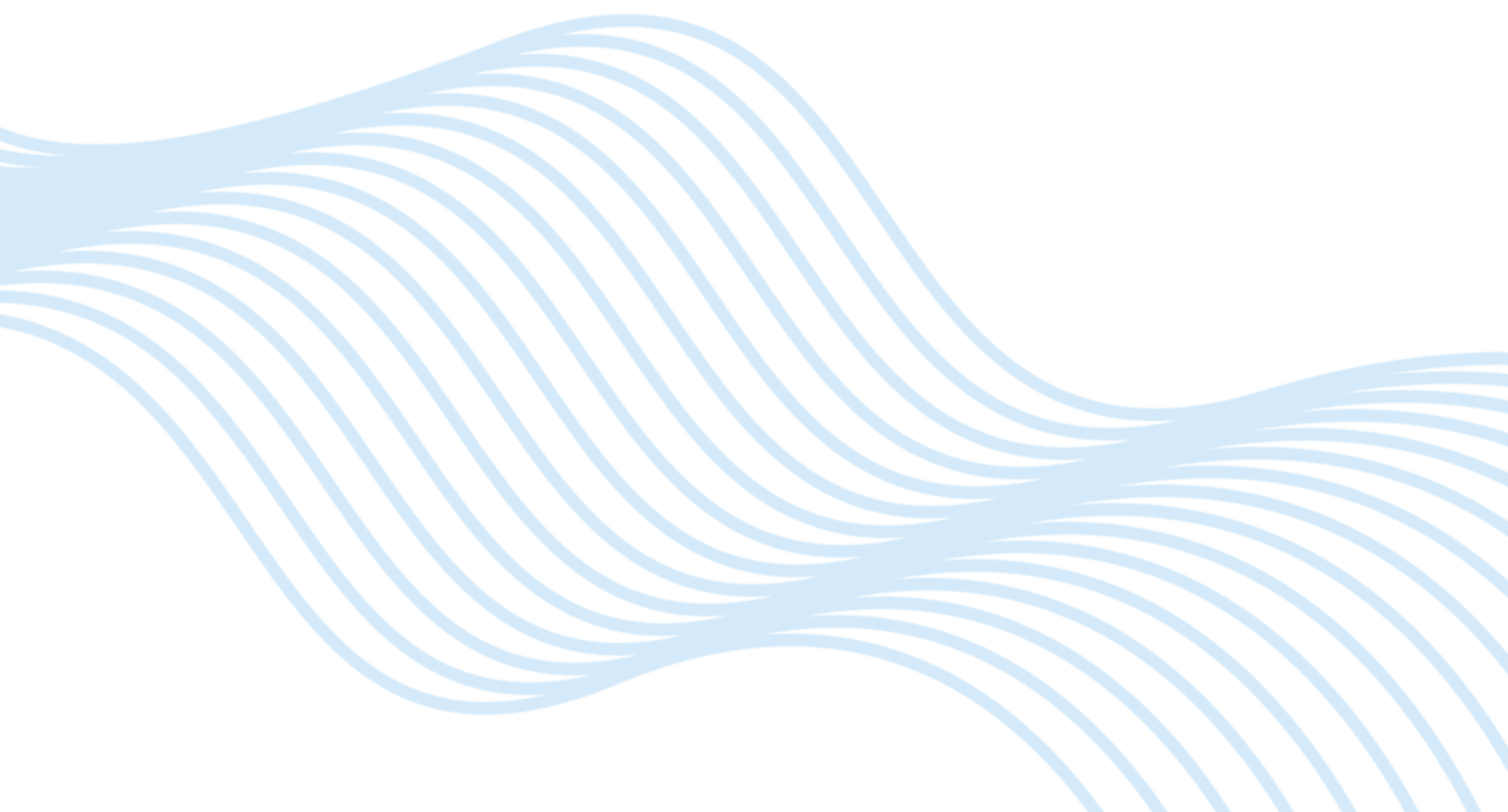


Equal Play: Access to PE and school sport for all children

This paper has been written in consultation with leading organisations from across the sport and education sectors.

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Foreword

The benefits of physical education are no secret in the drive to build a happy, healthy nation. Play is fundamental to our children's happiness, and movement and physical activity allow children to have fun whilst they develop their motor skills, build their confidence, and improve their physical and mental health. For disabled children, taking part in physical activity also helps balance and coordination, social skills development, and behavioural improvement. The research is unambiguous; an active life is proven to be a happier, healthier, and more prosperous life.

To unlock these benefits, we need to introduce the concept of physical literacy to our children from a young age and provide every child with the same right to access, enjoy and benefit from these life changing skills. Unfortunately, this is not always the case – both in school and in the community, disabled children are not always being afforded the same sporting opportunities as their non-disabled counterparts.

In the community, finding truly accessible facilities and activities can be challenging and expensive, with fewer opportunities available for disabled children and young people to get involved in local sports activities or teams. Similarly, in schools, despite advancements in inclusive education, disabled children frequently encounter barriers that prevent them from fully engaging in physical education and sports activities.

ParalympicsGB is a highly successful team of elite athletes who compete across multiple disciplines at the third largest global sports event. And yet, their experience of physical education and sport in schools has been patchy at best. Our athletes have told us stories of inspiring teachers who helped shape their sporting futures, and of PE lessons designed with inclusion at the heart. But many of our athletes have also told us about their childhood spent sat on the sidelines, watching their counterparts enjoy physical education in a way that they could not.

I was born into a world where it was not possible for me to represent my school, my town, my county, nor my country at my chosen sport. Whilst I was fortunate to have dedicated teachers within the specialist school environment who were able to support me to access the sports I loved from an early age, there were no external designated pathways for visually impaired kids like me to follow. The first time I received football specific coaching was aged 25, and without the support of my parents and the dedication of those teachers in my early years, I would never have had the opportunity to represent my country at five-a-side football on 144 occasions, scoring a record 128 goals along the way.

In developing Equal Play, we spoke to athletes, the disabled community, academics, policymakers, school staff and industry professionals, and it quickly became clear that the gap in participation levels between disabled and non-disabled students is still a major form of inequality in the UK. Disabled children deserve the same access to physical education in schools as their non-disabled counterparts, and structural change is needed to support schools to enable this.

With 1.5 million disabled school children now comprising 15% of the school population, we know that sport and physical activity has the power to change lives¹. And so, we are proud to launch “Equal Play” – a paper that lays out a plan to do just that.

We set out policy solutions across four priority areas:

1. Empowering teachers with the right tools.
2. Enhancing teacher training.
3. Redefining how physical education is seen within the national curriculum.
4. Increasing representation of disabled people within the teaching workforce.

We now need both the commitment of the Government and support across the education sector to deliver the change disabled children and young people across the country deserve.

We hope you will join us in doing so.



**David Clarke OBE, PLY
CEO of ParalympicsGB**

The Problem

There is evidence that participation rates in PE and sport for disabled children in the UK remain significantly lower than to their non-disabled peers. Research shows that only 25% of disabled children take part in sporting activity all of the time at school, compared to 41% of non-disabled children, with one third of disabled children taking part in less than 30 minutes of sport and physical activity per day. This discrepancy only heightens as children age². This leaves 3 in 4 disabled children in this country not regularly taking part in physical education and school sport. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the true participation rates could be even lower than this, though specific quantitative data is limited; an issue that in itself needs readdressing.

There are a multitude of reasons for this activity gap. Barriers range from a lack of funding for accessible spaces and equipment within schools for inclusive PE, to a lack of inclusive opportunities outside the school day, to prevailing attitudes that marginalise disabled students. Teachers also lack the adequate training, support, funding, and confidence to deliver truly accessible and inclusive PE. With growing pressure on the curriculum and strict monitoring of school results, structural conditions within the education sector result in schools being unable to provide fully inclusive and accessible PE and offer sports opportunities for all disabled students.

Whilst the long-term solutions are evidently complex and broad, there are four key areas of focus where ParalympicsGB believe tangible change could be made in the short term. Our recommendations need to be enacted alongside a long-term plan for structural reform which provides financial support for schools to fund the provision of truly inclusive opportunities for young disabled students.

Our recommendations must also sit alongside additional research into disabled children's experiences. The Chief Medical Officers' (CMOs) guidance on activity levels for young disabled people highlighted a lack of evidence in this space, with the benefit of physical activity amongst disabled children not historically prioritised for research focus or funding. For any policy intervention to have the desired effect, government needs to improve and invest in co-produced research on the experience of disabled young people.

Professor Brett Smith of Durham University, and author of the UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines for Disabled Children and Disabled Young People, supports this recommendation, adding

“co-producing the CMOs communication of the physical guidelines with disabled children and their families highlighted the urgent need to enhance both the quantity and quality of PE. It also demonstrated the value and need for more funded co-produced research so that disabled children, families, carers, and teachers can direct the future of PE in ways that benefit them.”

Priority Areas For Change

1. A lack of training and development opportunities to empower teachers to deliver truly inclusive physical education.

Whilst there is a willingness to include disabled pupils in all aspects of school life, a lack of training and development in this area has left teachers across the curriculum underqualified and underconfident to do so. Consultation with the Education Policy Institute indicated that the number one type of training needed, according to teachers, is further support on teaching SEND and/or disabled students.

When delivering PE specifically, many teachers report feeling under prepared and ill-equipped to include disabled children. Across their careers, teachers struggle to find time for professional development³, and whilst schools have access to PE and sport premium funding to upskill their staff and enhance their confidence in leading PE lessons, competing priorities mean this funding is often not used for disability inclusion. The biggest obstacle to individual CPD development remains funding, and without improving this, teachers are unlikely to develop their confidence in disability inclusion over time, and instead will remain ill-equipped throughout their teaching careers.

ParalympicsGB's 'Get Set' youth engagement programme, run in partnership with Team GB, provides free inclusive resources to support teachers to provide a high-quality PE curriculum for all young people. Impact reports show that this additional CPD is helping teachers feel more confident, both in their own classrooms and in conversations with colleagues.

According to the most recent data from the academic year 2022 – 23, since using 'Get Set' resources, 79% of teachers feel more confident delivering inclusive and accessible PE lessons, with three quarters of respondents feeling more confident advocating for more inclusive practices at their school as a result of the programme⁴.

2. A lack of focus on inclusion within initial teacher training and education.

Formal primary school teacher training includes only a few hours of PE in total, with no requirement for specific training in PE inclusion. Consequently, only 56% of primary teachers report feeling confident teaching PE⁵. In some primary schools, this problem is alleviated by bringing in external sports coaches, but their experience of inclusive PE and sport can vary considerably, with anecdotal evidence suggesting these coaches often have limited training in disability inclusion.

At secondary level, even those specialising in PE spend minimal amounts of time focusing on inclusion, with the educational experience dependent on the specific initial teacher training (ITT) or initial teacher education (ITE) provider and no requirement in the core training curriculum to engage with disabled students. Many PE teachers lack the training and confidence to adapt activities and use inclusive pedagogies which results in a one-size-fits-all approach that does not accommodate the diverse needs of disabled children with different impairments.

Most teacher training happens on site within a school classroom, and whilst this presents many opportunities to gain experience about inclusion in practice, the experience can vary significantly depending on the confidence and practices being delivered by staff in these placement schools. There could be increased opportunities for ITE providers to focus on disability inclusion and more school placements that expose trainee teachers to disabled young people and inclusive practices.

Kate Hamer, Teaching Fellow at the University of Warwick, supports the call to include disability inclusion in the ITE curriculum. During a year's training programme, Kate has twelve days in the classroom with her prospective PE teacher students to deliver her training curriculum, and so, despite her best efforts, specific focus on disability inclusion is still limited.

3. A lack of prioritisation of PE as a curriculum subject in a crowded curriculum.

Physical education sits outside the core subjects on the national curriculum and is often seen as an add-on in a crowded timetable, with senior leaders struggling to give it curriculum time amidst competing pressures, despite the wide range of benefits that it can deliver. Research with trainee teachers showed that PE is perceived as having low status and priority as a subject⁶, with anecdotal evidence also suggesting that schools prioritise other foundation subjects ahead of physical education, particularly when it comes to disabled children who are seen as being harder to include.

Even when PE is prioritised within the curriculum, teaching approaches often emphasise traditional sports, which can be more difficult to adapt for disabled children. This narrow focus limits opportunities for all children to engage in physical activity in ways that suit their abilities and interests.

Physical education is a crucial part of young people's development, and helps support better health and wellbeing, which in turn supports effective learning and in turn academic attainment⁷. It can also be used to teach additional skills – ParalympicsGB and Team GB's 'Get Set, Path to Paris' programme, for example, uses physical education to teach students about the capacities and capabilities of disabled people.

ParalympicsGB is seeking a cultural shift in how PE is viewed, moving away from a narrow focus on traditional sports towards a broader concept of physical literacy that celebrates diverse ways of being physically active and delivers widespread benefits, particularly for disabled children. This is building upon the Physical Literacy Consensus Statement for England, developed to facilitate a shared understanding of physical literacy across multiple sectors, which defines it as "our relationship with movement and physical activity throughout life"⁸. It also sits with the government's recent commitment to protecting time for physical education in schools and ensuring no child misses out on a broad range of subjects, including PE and sport.

Karé Adenegan, a six-time Paralympic medallist, was excluded from PE lessons during school. She said "although there were some attempts to include me, the majority of the time I watched my classmates participate whilst I worked in the library or helped younger pupils with their reading. The excuse given by my PE teachers was health and safety, so if I was in the room, I was given the position of 'judge' of the other pupils."

4. A lack of disabled teachers and representation within the teaching profession.

According to a 2016 DfE study⁹ – the last time disability data was captured for the teaching workforce – only 0.5% of teaching staff are disabled, despite a commitment from the government in the 2019 Teacher Recruitment and Retention strategy to prioritise the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce¹⁰. The national average of disabled people in employment in Q2 of 2023 was 15.4%¹¹.

The lack of monitoring in this space is a problem in itself; whilst the School Workforce Census (SWC) has good coverage of characteristics such as ethnicity and gender, at present disability data is not provided for 52% of teachers¹². This has prevented the reliable reporting of the proportion of disabled staff within the workforce and a true understanding of the scale of the problem. In a 2018 statement of intent, the DfE admitted there was “more to do” to support disabled teachers, yet action in this space remains to be seen¹³.

There is a lack of research in the UK to evidence the impact that representation would have on disabled young people in terms of educational attainment, but widespread anecdotal evidence highlights the importance of role models for young disabled people. Research from the Youth Sport Trust’s Class of 2035 report shows that disabled young people are more likely to take inspiration from a PE teacher than non-disabled children¹⁴. ParalympicsGB athletes told us that as students they did not see themselves represented at the front of the classroom, and teachers don’t come with the lived experience that would help them develop truly inclusive PE.



The Impact Of Change

We must not let the growing generation of disabled young people develop without the essential skills, confidence, and health benefits that physical education can bring. Habits taught in the classroom stay with children throughout their lives, and there is a growing body of data to prove that active children are more likely to become active adults.

Inclusion in physical education ultimately has wide reaching benefits for the public purse, as “active people live healthier, longer and happier lives”¹⁵. Every £1 spent on sport and physical activity generates almost £4 in return across health and wellbeing, with active lifestyles delivering a combined saving of £7.1 billion to the UK economy each year and contributing to 30 million fewer GP visits¹⁶. Recent research undertaken by the Youth Sport Trust finds physical activity in schools is worth between £4.5bn and £9bn in wellbeing benefits, whilst free to access school sport and physical activity is most valuable to those who are least likely to access it outside of the school environment, including disabled children and young people¹⁷.

The impact of implementing changes in physical education in schools goes beyond the wide-ranging benefits for disabled children and young people and their families and carers, but also impacts non-disabled pupils by influencing changes in attitudes and behaviours towards disabled counterparts.

Earlsdon Primary School in Coventry are engaged in ParalympicsGB's Get Set programme. The Get Set resources have helped to broaden all Earlsdon pupils' awareness of disability and enabled them to better understand disabled people's capacities and capabilities, in turn forging greater allyship between pupils. "Seeing disabled athletes on the Get Set website... made my pupils more open to working with the disabled pupils and work more collaboratively together." (Teacher, Earlsdon Primary School)



ParalympicsGB's Ask

As we celebrate the achievements of Paralympians representing our nation, we must ensure that every disabled child has the same opportunity to take part in sport as their non-disabled counterparts.

We want the Government to commit to ensuring every child has the same access to, and experience of, physical education and school sport and activity regardless of age, location, educational institution, or disability.

We want to empower and support teachers and schools with the right training, tools, and leadership to be confident that they can give disabled children the education they deserve. We know that educators are keen to do this, and want to be part of the solution.

By the Los Angeles 2028 Paralympic Games, we want to see systemic change that will enable a marked improvement in the number of disabled children enjoying physical education and physical activity in school.

To deliver this, government should prioritise the following actions:

1. Empower the school workforce with the right tools, understanding and resources to deliver truly inclusive physical education.

Government should	Schools should
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1.1. Fund the development of a formal CPD qualification specialising in disability inclusion in PE for both primary and secondary schools.1.2. Fund the development of an appropriate training and mentoring programme to support understanding of disability inclusion for school leaders, coaching staff, teaching assistants, trustees and governors.1.3. Raise awareness of the expansion of existing initiatives (such as the Inclusion 2024 Inclusive Education Hub and the Get Set programme) to provide disability inclusive PE training/CPD materials (co-produced by disabled people) that schools and teaching staff can access to support their lesson delivery.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1.4. Signpost and encourage PE teaching staff to undertake accredited CPD modules that focus on disability inclusion, such as training on specific impairment groups or examples of accessible lesson plans demonstrated by those with lived experience.1.5. Utilise existing networks and forums to share best practise on disability inclusion in PE across the sector, such as Youth Sport Trust's Lead Inclusion School Network.1.6. Actively listen to the disabled student voice and ensure that teaching methods and session delivery is coproduced with the disabled student population. Adopt inclusive practice and principals such as STEP or the activity inclusion model, so that inclusion is built-in not bolted-on, giving teachers the confidence to ask a young person first and foremost.

2. Adapt teacher training and education to ensure the next generation of the teaching workforce have the skills and confidence necessary to deliver truly inclusive physical education.

Government should	Training providers should
<p>2.1. Update the ITT / ITE Core Content Framework to include specific disability inclusion focused training, exemplification of disabled experiences, and exposure to disabled students.</p> <p>2.2. Introduce subject based disability inclusion training to the Core Content Framework for PE specialists, such as accessible lesson plans and knowledge of a wide range of adaptive sport.</p> <p>2.3. Encourage the educators within the teacher training workforce to upskill in disability inclusion by including it as an element in the government accredited provider criteria.</p>	<p>2.4. Commit to including disability specific inclusion training in their ITT/ITE curriculum.</p> <p>2.5. Support educators to upskill in disability inclusion by providing opportunities for training and development in this space.</p> <p>2.6. Share case studies and best practice with government and the wider sector to help continually develop training resources that can be utilised by both trainee and current teachers.</p>



3. Redefine how physical education is seen within the school curriculum, ensuring that physical literacy in its broadest sense becomes a priority across the education system.

Government should	Schools should
<p>3.1. Reimagine the definition of physical education, recognising the ability to learn a variety of lifelong skills by adopting the wider definition of physical literacy, and taking a more holistic view of the PE curriculum beyond traditional sport.</p> <p>3.2. Invest in research into young disabled experience in schools to understand the importance of engaging in sport and physical activity from a young age for disabled people specifically. Utilise more accessible research methods to engage and coproduce with disabled children and young people.</p> <p>3.3. Reprioritise physical education within the national curriculum combined with including movement as a key theme within education and the school day to ensure that all children and young people have access to it. Launch an information campaign aimed at parents and teachers to disseminate knowledge of the CMO guidance that disabled children should engage in 20 minutes of sport or physical activity daily.</p> <p>3.4. Include physical education as a section in EHC Plans to ensure there is an understanding and commitment to disabled children’s support needs in this area. Combined with training of local authority officers.</p>	<p>3.5. Sign an inclusion pledge that commits to including disabled children in all aspects of school life, including their physical education.</p> <p>3.6. Adopt a new definition of physical education, considering the role of PE lessons in teaching movement more generally and the ability to build physical literacy beyond traditional sport.</p> <p>3.7. Teach the importance of physical literacy across the curriculum, recognising that all teachers have a responsibility to include movement within the school day.</p>

4. Increase the number of disabled people entering the teaching profession.

Government should	The education sector should
<p>4.1. Run a national campaign to raise awareness of teaching as a career option and encourage disabled people into the education sector.</p> <p>4.2. Support schools to record disability data for their workforce, alongside the recommendations set out in the Department for Education's Disability data collection in schools (workforce) report (2023).</p> <p>4.3. Commission research on the barriers facing disabled teachers to fully understand why disabled people don't currently consider teaching as a profession and what is needed to ensure a disabled person has the support they need through training and into employment.</p> <p>4.4. Develop new, more accessible routes for disabled trainee teachers to qualify, and seek to attract more disabled people onto teacher training courses.</p>	<p>4.5. Work to become Disability Confident employers, to help recruit and retain disabled staff and make a demonstrable commitment to prioritising inclusion and diversity in the workplace.</p>



Conclusion

ParalympicsGB commissioned Ceva Global to undertake a high-level evaluation of the Equal Play policy recommendations and analyse how the Equal Play initiative could be implemented. It drew on insights from key stakeholders, including teachers, trainers, policymakers and experts in inclusive physical education, and concluded that the Equal Play campaign presents a significant opportunity to transform the landscape of physical education and sports participation for disabled children in the UK. By improving the training of PE teachers to deliver inclusive lessons; identifying and mitigating the barriers preventing disabled children from participating in PE and sports; fostering a cultural shift towards viewing PE through a lens of physical literacy for all, rather than just sports performance; and increasing the visibility of disabled role models in teaching and sports to inspire disabled children, Equal Play can break down barriers and empower disabled children to experience the joy and benefits of physical activity.

Ceva's analysis highlighted that our policy recommendations align with national priorities for inclusive education and support the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to health, education, and reduced inequalities. It also concluded that a significant percentage of the anticipated costs for delivering the proposals within this policy paper would be met through reprofiling existing budgets.

Ceva concluded that "implementing Equal Play would be a complex endeavour, however, the significant impact that will be achieved is worthy of the investment of time, funds and other resources"¹⁸

With 1.5 million disabled school children in schools today, and 3 in 4 of these (75%) not regularly taking part in physical education and school sport, it is time for the government to take action. Disabled children deserve the same access to physical education in schools as their non-disabled counterparts, and ParalympicsGB is calling on the government to address the significant barriers that prevent disabled children from participating in physical education and sports in UK schools.

With the commitment of the Government and support across the education sector, Equal Play will deliver the change disabled children and young people across the country deserve.

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Appendices

List of consultees

ParalympicsGB would like to thank the following interviewees for sharing their expertise during the development of this policy paper. Any consultation doesn't automatically mean endorsement of all recommendations.

Andy Reed, The Sports Think Tank

Baron Jim Knight, Life Peer

Brogan Pierce, Hark London

Dave Bradley, Teach First

Dr. Stuart Bray, Paralympian

Hannah Russell, Paralympian

James Zuccollo, Education Policy Institute

Kare Adenegan, Paralympian

Karl Edwards, Director of Strategy and Impact Teach First

Kathryn McColl, Hark London

Mikey Erhardt, Disability Rights UK

Natalie Arnett, National Association of Head Teachers

Niamh Sweeney, Deputy General Secretary of the National Education Union

Professor Brett Smith, University of Durham

Professor Patrick Jachyra, University of Durham

Professor Kate Hamer, University of Warwick

Roy Turnham, Paralympian

Sarah Brown-Fraser, Director of External Affairs Activity Alliance

Steve Clapperton, Head of Policy and Public Affairs Youth Sport Trust

Sue Wilkinson, CEO Association for Physical Education

Tim Archer, Director of External Affairs, Education Policy Institute