



Together an Active Future: A Qualitative Synthesis of 35 Middle Leader Case Studies

Dr Zoe Helme, in partnership with Emily Brady-Young,
Helen Tyson, and Professor Stuart Fairclough.

Executive Summary

The Ready Set Move Middle Leaders Programme supports school stakeholders to embed physical activity within the school system. Thirty-five schools provided case studies showcasing their implementation approaches to improve pupil engagement, learning, health, and wellbeing. Behaviour change was driven by increased staff capability, enhanced opportunities for activity, and motivation, with schools adopting an iterative, stepwise approach to change. Success was strongest when initiatives were supported by senior leadership, collaborative teams, and targeted interventions addressing school-specific needs and inequalities. Recommendations for schools include identifying contextual needs, aligning initiatives across policy, stakeholders, environments, and opportunities, sharing learning, building staff capability, and embedding active practices into school policy. To further this understanding, future research should explore the long-term effects of the RSM programme, mechanisms of change, and strategies to reduce disparities in access and outcomes.



1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Globally, there is continued recognition regarding the importance of physical activity for children's health, learning, development, and wellbeing. Guidance from the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Action Plan on Physical Activity (GAPPA) and investments promoted by the International Society for Physical Activity and Health (ISPAH) have emphasised the need for whole-school physical activity approaches to embed movement throughout the school day (Milton et al. 2021; World Health Organization 2019). These approaches are considered effective because they can integrate physical activity into multiple opportunity areas, such as lessons, breaktimes, and extracurricular activities, while influencing school culture, policy, and staff behaviour (Daly-Smith et al., 2020). However, research indicates the increased complexity of implementing such approaches, which explains why, in the UK, there is currently limited knowledge of how schools adopt these strategies and of the effects they have on pupils' engagement, learning, and wellbeing (Burns et al. 2018; Helme et al. 2024).

The consequences of limited implementation are evident in children's physical activity patterns. In the UK, most children remain largely sedentary, with only a small proportion meeting recommended daily physical activity guidelines (Aubert et al. 2022). This issue is particularly pronounced in multi-ethnic and socioeconomically deprived areas, where structural and social barriers can further restrict opportunities for movement (Hall et al. 2021). Without effective, evidence-informed approaches embedded across the school system, these disparities are likely to persist, highlighting the urgent need for interventions that can create sustainable, equitable improvements in children's activity levels.

1.2 Programme Description

The Ready Set Move Middle Leaders (RSM) Programme is a professional development initiative designed to equip aspiring school leaders with the skills and confidence to embed physical activity within their school systems. Centred on personal and professional growth, the programme empowers participants implement movement into everyday school life and influence whole-school culture and policy. Using the evidence-based Creating Active Schools (CAS) framework, schools assessed their current context and planned for sustainable, long-term change (Daly-Smith et al. 2020). Participants developed active pedagogy skills, enhanced leadership capability, and reflected on their mindsets to identify opportunities for improvement. For more information, visit: [Active Schools - TaAF - Together an Active Future](#).

1.3 Evaluation Aims

The evaluation aimed to explore the effects of the Ready Set Move Middle Leaders Programme to address the key questions;

1. What are the effects of the RSM programme?
2. How does the RSM programme support the integration of physical activity into the school system, develop individual capabilities, and promote equitable access to physical activity opportunities?
3. What are the key conditions or facilitators that enable changes to schools' physical activity provision?



2. Methods

2.1 Evaluation Design

The evaluation used a case study approach to capture in-depth insights into the implementation and effects of the RSM Middle Leaders Programme. This design enabled schools to report their qualitative experiences and conditions of change, facilitating an understanding of the programme's impact at scale.

The case studies highlighted the schools' demographics, implementation approaches, conditions that supported change, outcomes of change, and next steps.

2.2 Data Analysis

Each case study was formatted as an Adobe Acrobat Document (PDFs) and uploaded into NVivo (Version 12) for analysis. Case studies were evaluated using both inductive and deductive thematic analysis approaches. First, each case study was read to ensure familiarity with the data. Next, initial coding was conducted, allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants' experiences, while also applying a deductive lens guided by the National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP) conceptual model, the Creating Active Schools (CAS) framework (Daly-Smith et al. 2020), and the COM-B model of behaviour change (Michie et al. 2011). Related codes were then collated into potential themes reflecting the integration of physical activity into the school system, stakeholder development and behaviour change, tackling inequalities, and conditions for change. During a review of the themes, patterns were refined to ensure coherence and relevance across the dataset. Finally, themes were defined and named, producing a synthesis that integrated both data-driven and framework-informed insights into the effects of the Middle Leaders Programme and the required conditions for change. To supplement the thematic analysis, a descriptive coding frequency approach was used to identify the most commonly referenced themes and codes across case studies, providing insight into the prevalence of key topics.

3. Findings

Thirty-five schools provided a case study following their engagement in the Middle Leaders' Programme, all of which were included in analysis. Of these case studies, 33 were from mainstream primary schools, one was from a SEND school, and one was from a mainstream secondary school.

Findings are organised around the three inductive themes and three deductive themes identified through analysis. The themes are reported and defined in Table 1, along with the number of case studies in which they are referenced and the number of times they were coded. Then, illustrative examples from individual schools are included to highlight variation in approaches and outcomes.

**Table 1:** Inductive and deductive themes, definitions, and number of codes across case studies.

Theme	Subtheme	Definition	No. of cases with theme	No. of codes across cases
Whole-School Physical Activity Provision*	<i>Policy</i>	The internal school policy and vision that guide whole-school physical activity, driven by the school's ethos and practice, and aligned with wider national organisations and policy (Daly-Smith et al. 2020).	35	193
	<i>Environments</i>	The physical and social environments in which physical activity occurs. The physical environment refers to the amount, variety (e.g., green space, playground, hall), and quality of school spaces and resources. The social environment reflects the degree to which key stakeholders engage and support each other to provide physical activity (Daly-Smith et al. 2020).	28	76
	<i>Stakeholders</i>	Key stakeholder groups operate within the environments to deliver physical activity: senior leadership (school leaders), teachers and other school staff (e.g. teaching assistants), pupils, parents/guardians, and wider external stakeholders (e.g. public health professionals, active schools coordinators; Daly-Smith et al. 2020).	35	242
	<i>Opportunities</i>	Seven opportunities for physical activity, which are shaped by both environments and stakeholders. These opportunities span what the school can fully control (e.g. curricular lessons and PE) and what it can influence (e.g. after-school clubs or active travel; Daly-Smith et al. 2020).	35	161
Behaviour Change*	<i>Capability</i>	An individual's psychological and physical capacity to engage in a behaviour. This includes the knowledge, skills, understanding, and physical abilities required for staff and pupils to participate in or deliver physical activity (Michie et al. 2011).	32	85
	<i>Opportunity</i>	The external factors that make the behaviour possible or prompt it. This includes the time, resources, physical spaces, social support, and routines within the school that enable physical activity to take place (Michie et al. 2011).	32	89
	<i>Motivation</i>	The internal processes that energise and direct behaviour, including both reflective motivation (beliefs, intentions, values, planning) and automatic motivation (habits, emotions, and impulses; Michie et al. 2011).	21	41
Conditions for Change	<i>Increasing Awareness</i>	Actions that improve understanding of the importance of physical activity, communicate programme aims, and highlight the benefits for learning, health, and school culture.	27	48
	<i>Sharing Learning</i>	The process of exchanging experiences, effective practices, and insights across staff, pupils, and partners to improve implementation and strengthen outcomes.	23	39
	<i>Collaboration</i>	Working collectively across departments, roles, and year groups, as well as with external partners, to design, implement, and embed physical activity into whole-school practice.	23	34
	<i>Senior Leader Support</i>	Active commitment and endorsement from the Senior Leadership Team, ensuring prioritisation, resource allocation, and integration of the programme into school systems.	26	32
	<i>Champions or Change Teams</i>	An individual or group of motivated staff who drive the programme forward, model good practice, and support others in embedding physical activity across the school.	13	16
	<i>Bravery</i>	The willingness of staff and leadership to trial new approaches, challenge existing routines, and embrace innovation to enhance physical activity provision.	9	9



Theme	Subtheme	Definition	No. of cases with theme	No. of codes across cases
Outcomes	<i>Learning Outcomes</i>	Improvements in pupils' academic performance, engagement, behaviour, and cognitive functioning associated with participating in the programme and improving physical activity provision.	24	32
	<i>Physical Activity Outcomes</i>	Changes in pupils' activity levels, participation, movement behaviours, and fitness, and participation resulting from engaging in the programme and improving physical activity provision.	8	10
	<i>Health and Wellbeing Outcomes</i>	Positive impacts on physical health, mental wellbeing, social connection, and emotional resilience linked to participating in the programme and improving physical activity provision.	26	33
Tackling Inequalities*		Ensuring equal access to physical activity opportunities by addressing barriers faced by disadvantaged or underrepresented groups within the school community.	20	40
The Process of Change		The journey the school undertakes to integrate physical activity into everyday practice, including planning, implementation, reflection, and ongoing improvement.	12	18

*Deductive themes



3.1 Changes to Whole-School Physical Activity Provision

Across the 35 case studies, schools reported notable changes in their whole-school physical activity provision, most commonly through the implementation of initiatives within specific opportunities of the school day. Curricular lessons and break/lunchtimes were the primary focus, reflecting schools' identification of these periods as most in need of improvement, often due to behavioural issues or low levels of physical activity engagement. To enhance the implementation of initiatives within these opportunity areas, schools' focused efforts on developing stakeholder capabilities, school policies, equipment/resource provision, and their outdoor environments.

3.1.1 Policy

All schools conducted or facilitated engagement in staff training or professional development to support the implementation of physical activity initiatives. Training was most commonly delivered to teachers and classroom assistants, though several schools extended this to welfare officers, lunchtime supervisors, and, in a small number of cases, parents. This broader reach helped to embed shared messaging and expectations across the school system. As schools progressed, many recognised that ongoing or repeated CPD was required to maintain momentum and build or sustain staff confidence. For example, one school highlighted a need for *“further staff training and development to increase confidence”* (School 1).

Twenty-nine schools identified the development or revision of school policy as an essential mechanism for sustaining change. This included introducing new policies (e.g., active learning policies) and adapting existing policies relating to teaching and learning, behaviour, curriculum, or uniforms. Some schools embedded physical activity into their School Improvement Plans to ensure it remained part of the strategic vision. Often, policy development was reported as a 'next step', suggesting that schools tended to embed practice first and then formalise it in policy once its value was evident. This forward planning was illustrated by one school's intention that,

“The active curriculum policy will become a focus for all Key Stages and be added to the School Development Plan. The focus will be to develop teaching, learning, and the curriculum so that all children are active for 60 minutes per day” (School 3).

A consistent message across case studies was to ensure that *“Staff feel confident and are all on board”* (School 33), to facilitate changes to whole-school practice and ethos. Changes to policy and increased staff awareness of the benefits of physical activity were both described as essential facilitators for securing whole-school buy-in.

3.1.2 Environments

Many schools invested in new equipment and resources to support delivery and engage more children in physical activity opportunities. Some also undertook physical renovations, such as redesigning outdoor areas or improving accessibility for pupils with additional needs. These changes typically relied on strong SLT buy-in, as leaders were responsible for allocating or securing the necessary funding and prioritising investment within wider school budgets. Environmental improvements were most effective when aligned



with other CAS domains: for example, when policies supported their use, stakeholders were engaged in implementing activities, and resources were available to enable active practice in the targeted opportunity area. One school illustrated this synergy, reporting that a *“new pathway to make the outdoor classroom more accessible in all weather will allow more use of the classroom”* (School 21).

Changes to the social environment were closely linked to improvements in physical activity provision and the overall school climate. Schools reported that increasing opportunities for pupils strengthened staff–pupil relationships, fostered positive peer interactions, and reduced behavioural incidents. One school noted that *“there are less behaviour disruptions... leading to more learning!”* (School 34), highlighting how reductions in behavioural issues not only improved social interactions among pupils but also increased staff capacity to engage in teaching and learning.

3.1.3 Stakeholders

Teachers were central to the implementation of physical activity initiatives across all schools. Their role included delivering active lessons, leading playground or lunchtime activities, and supporting pupil engagement throughout the day. Broader school staff, such as teaching assistants, welfare officers, lunchtime supervisors, PE leads, and subject or curriculum leaders, were also involved in most schools, emphasising that successful change required whole-school awareness and participation. Onboarding, training, and ongoing support were key to maintaining consistent practice. For example, in one school, *“Teachers were provided with training; a bank of resources and equipment was created to support the delivery of energiser breaks”* (School 19).

Embedding physical activity into daily practice was supported by structured mechanisms such as lesson plans, teacher appraisals, recruitment policy, and feedback through learning walks. These measures helped staff integrate movement consistently across the school day, creating shared expectations and sustaining initiatives over time. As reported, *“Movement should be integrated into learning where appropriate and purposeful. All TA’s, teachers and welfare staff have an active learning objective on their appraisal”* (School 9).

SLT played a critical role in coordinating and enabling the implementation of physical activity initiatives. Leaders ensured that staff had the time, resources, and guidance needed to embed movement into teaching and school routines. They endorsed initiatives, modelled prioritisation of physical activity, and facilitated cross-staff collaboration. One school reported how the *“headteacher protected time and space for staff to attend Ready Set Move training”* (School 16).

In two schools, new headteachers drove engagement in the programme, influencing policy, curriculum planning, and staff behaviours. Their role was essential in legitimising physical activity initiatives, fostering collaboration across different staff groups, and ensuring that physical activity became embedded throughout the school day.

Across schools, pupil voice contributed to identifying priorities, trialling new initiatives, evaluating changes, and, in some cases, taking on leadership roles such as Play Leaders or Sports Ambassadors. Schools with trained pupil leaders described increases in engagement during break and lunchtimes and greater capacity for staff involvement. In one school, play leaders even helped to onboard lunchtime staff into the change process, further supporting the integration of physical activity. As noted, *“Lunchtime*



supervisors had to adapt to changes they initially didn't see as necessary. Sports ambassadors helped make lunchtimes more active and smooth" (School 14).

Parents were engaged to a limited extent, with some participating in active lessons or supporting activity tracking at home. Often, when referenced, schools identified parental engagement as a future priority.

Finally, connections with local schools, universities, and community organisations provided additional capacity, opportunities for shared learning, and collaborative development of solutions. Partnerships with local schools allowed sharing of strategies and co-development of sustainable, cost-effective initiatives, while local universities offered potential avenues for research and evaluation to inform future practice.

3.1.4 Opportunities

Most schools initially focused on developing physical activity in either curricular lessons or break/lunchtimes, often driven by concerns about behaviour, engagement, or readiness to learn. These areas appear to align most closely with schools' immediate needs and priorities, offering a practical 'way-in' to change that could then be expanded into whole-school practice. Regardless of the target area, successful implementation required coordinated changes across stakeholders, environments, and policy. One school noted, *"Following the success an active learning policy has been introduced"* (School 3), illustrating how focusing on one opportunity area influenced wider policy and practice.

Eighteen schools reported extending improvements to additional opportunity areas after engaging with the programme, demonstrating both programmes reach and the scalability of early successes.

3.2 Behaviour Change

Across the schools, behaviour change was driven by interconnected improvements in stakeholder capability, opportunity, and motivation. Targeted CPD, shared learning, and structured resource support increased staff confidence and skills; expanding whole-school involvement and revising environments created more opportunities for active practice; and visible benefits for behaviour, engagement, and learning strengthened stakeholder motivation. Together, these changed collective behaviour, enabling schools to embed physical activity more consistently and sustainably across the day.

3.2.1 Capability

Schools consistently reported increases in staff capability resulting from engaging in; CPD, sharing learning, and opportunities to observe active practice. Whole-staff training, resource banks, and watching model lessons helped teachers understand how to embed movement meaningfully rather than viewing it as an add-on. As one school reported, they *"have moved away from 'brain break' videos in class. Teachers thought this was active learning, but now realise that active learning can be linked to the curriculum topic"* (School 31).

Middle leaders (n=4) highlighted improvements in their confidence to lead and influence others, supported by activities such as peer observation, networking, and the RSM middle-leader programme. Capability building also required investment of time and funding in five schools, often protected by SLT.



In one example, a school commissioned external CPD to upskill staff in supporting pupils with SEND, illustrating how capability improvements supported inclusive provision, as reported, *“Using funding to invest in an external consultant to support the upskilling of the PE lead in Motor Activity Training Programme”* (School 29).

Connecting with local schools, external providers, and community partners further enhanced capability, giving staff new ideas, exposure to varied practice, and opportunities to collaborate. Several schools described this as valuable in maintaining momentum and problem-solving to create sustainable solutions.

3.2.2 Opportunity

Most schools saw a substantial increase in opportunities for children to be active, particularly where a larger proportion of staff were engaged. As buy-in grew, active practice expanded beyond initial target areas and into wider curricular and non-curricular settings. For example, one school reported that the, *“Development of active play times on the yard with Key Stage 1 pupils has inspired them to take part in more activities that are encouraging them to move more”* (School 6).

Practical changes such as revised lesson plans, enhanced playgrounds, zoned activity areas, redesigned breaktimes, and new equipment increased physical activity options for all pupils. Increased staff capability also enabled more equitable provision, with several schools reporting additional opportunities for pupils who were previously less active or less engaged. This is reported as, *“Children who are not usually active during break times are now more inclined to participate in physical activities”* (School 4).

3.2.3 Motivation

Motivation among staff and pupils increased across most schools, largely driven by the visible benefits of active practice, such as improved behaviour, greater focus, and higher enjoyment of learning. Staff were described as *“enthused and keen to implement active learning strategies in their classes”* (School 7), following observed positive effects on engagement and attainment.

A small number of schools implemented extrinsic motivators, such as rewards for staff or pupils, but intrinsic motivation was more commonly reported. Embedding physical activity expectations within appraisals, learning walks, and monitoring systems reinforced motivation by signalling that active approaches were valued and expected. Many schools described a subsequent cultural shift in which movement became a routine part of teaching and learning.

3.3 Conditions for Change

Schools identified a series of interconnected conditions that facilitated meaningful and sustained change in physical activity provision. These conditions were not experienced in isolation; instead, they interacted dynamically to support staff behaviour change, strengthen whole-school engagement, and embed physical activity across the school day. The most frequently reported conditions for change were increasing awareness, sharing learning, collaboration, SLT support, champions or change teams, and bravery.



3.3.1 Increasing Awareness

Increasing awareness among staff was the most frequently reported condition for change. Schools described gaining a clearer understanding of what physical activity encompasses, how it supports learning, and how much of the school day was highly sedentary. Monitoring tools such as heatmaps, CAS profiling, and pupil surveys helped schools identify priorities, with several staff noting that inactivity levels were far higher than expected. As one school reflected how, *“Each teacher heat mapped a typical day for their class. As a collective they were stunned by how much ‘sitting’ there was”* (School 12).

Awareness-raising was supported through CPD, staff meetings, and practical observations on active learning and outdoor spaces. These opportunities helped staff understand that movement could be purposeful, rather than limited to short energisers. For example, several schools highlighted used, *“training to all teaching staff to identify where purposeful and appropriate movement can be incorporated into every lesson”* (School 29).

Pupil voice also increased staff awareness of children’s experiences, particularly around boredom, disengagement, and lunchtime behaviour. One school described how pupil input guided their approach, *“Listening to the children: Many children expressed that they found learning boring and often lost focus due to being inactive for long periods of time. They thought that being active was only for PE lessons. Many children said they would enjoy learning better if they could move more in the classroom”* (School 30).

3.3.2 Sharing Learning

Sharing learning, both within and beyond the school, was the second most frequently reported condition for change. Staff engaged in CPD, whole-school training, and informal peer observation to exchange ideas, reflect on practice, and build confidence. In many schools, this sharing went beyond discussion to support idea generation and implementation; as one school highlighted, *“Other members of staff were invited to observe active learning in practice”* (School 1).

Sharing learning clarified misconceptions, such as the belief that brain-break videos constituted active learning, and helped staff embed movement meaningfully into lessons and routines. Staff also shared insights about underused outdoor spaces and strategies for integrating purposeful movement into curriculum content.

Externally, schools connected with broader school networks, trusts, community groups, and the Ready Set Move network. These connections supported the development of low-cost, sustainable initiatives and gave schools access to broader expertise. One school described the value of cross-school learning as they,

“went to visit a neighbouring primary school to learn how they have introduced zoning playground spaces and, as a result, retrained play leaders and lunchtime staff to create sports skill zones. This gave children the opportunity to practise different skills and sports across the playground.” (School 13).



3.3.3 Collaboration

Collaboration involved working together across staff roles, year groups, and external partners to design, implement, and embed physical activity into whole-school practice. This emphasises the role of joint problem-solving, co-design, and collective action.

Pupil voice was also central to collaborative efforts, particularly when adapting the physical environments. Schools used surveys, focus groups, and co-design approaches to understand children's preferences and needs, ensuring changes were meaningful and engaging. For example, schools reported the importance of, *"Learning Together: Pupil voice & co-designing with school council"* (School 23).

Within schools, collaboration also strengthened relationships and trust among staff. Teams of teachers, teaching assistants, welfare staff, and lunchtime supervisors worked together to implement active learning initiatives. Staff meetings, shared planning time, and structured leadership teams promoted collective ownership and encouraged staff buy-in.

Finally, collaboration extended beyond the school to include other schools, universities, and community organisations. Most connections supported the co-development of innovative and creative approaches and evaluation methods. As one school reported how they,

"started to work with [name removed] University to co-design an evaluation piece centred around the changes they have made to their outdoor space. This will look at social development and motor competence." (School 13).

3.3.4 Senior Leader Support

SLT support was widely identified as a key enabler for change, shaping whole-school priorities. Leaders who recognised the importance of movement for learning provided direction and protected time for staff to access CPD and networking opportunities. As one school stated,

"Protected time out of the classroom to meet with the Ready Set Move network has been given with the full support of SLT. This has allowed the changes to be embedded across the whole school" (School 10).

Across the case studies, SLT support was crucial for embedding active learning within school policy and creating a culture in which staff felt safe to trial new approaches. Leaders acted as advocates for change, championing the benefits of movement for health, wellbeing, and learning outcomes, as reflected in one example where, *"SLT championed the new physical activity policy and encouraged staff to try new ideas because they understood the need for our children to be active"* (School 16).

Moreover, in two instances, new SLT appointments accelerated change in several schools, particularly where leaders had a strong vision for physical activity. In one school, the,

"Appointment of new Head Teacher shifted the focus to ensure children were engaged in activity at lunchtime, reducing behaviour difficulties, increase children's physical activity levels and ensure they come back to the classroom ready to learn" (School 14).



3.3.5 Champions or Change Teams

Champions and/ or Change Teams were instrumental in driving and sustaining change. PE leads, middle leaders, and motivated teachers commonly acted as champions, modelling practice and supporting colleagues. Several schools developed Change Teams to distribute responsibility and create collective ownership. For example, schools reported that, *“Having a small but dedicated team has created a supportive environment where we learn and share together to facilitate change”* (School 17), and how a *“Team of staff developed for Active Learning implementation. Shared ownership of the project and encouraged buy-in from staff”* (School 8).

Champions built their own confidence, often through CPD, networking, and engagement with the Ready Set Move programme, and in turn supported others to adopt new approaches. As one school highlighted how their ‘Champions’, *“capacity and confidence to lead change improved through participation in the Middle Leaders programme, enabling him to influence others effectively”* (School 35).

Finally, Champions and Change Teams ensured momentum was maintained and next steps were clear. Their leadership helped motivate colleagues, coordinate activities, and sustain whole-school change. As one school highlighted the, *“Importance of an inspiring PE Lead / Physical Activity champion to influence and drive forward the programme”* (School 29).

3.3.6 Bravery

In nine schools, bravery was a key condition for change and was reported at both leadership and classroom levels. SLT and middle leaders demonstrated courage by challenging existing practices, being honest about limitations, and advocating for new approaches. One school reflected on leadership courage influencing change, noting, *“Brave Leadership: Being bold on our vision to create an Active School”* (School 23), while middle leaders often had to initiate difficult conversations to drive change, as one reported that their, *“Middle leader was not afraid to have difficult conversations which led to senior leaders being open to re-thinking their school day”* (School 27).

Teachers and staff also displayed bravery by testing and trialling new practices in classrooms, adapting routines, and taking risks to embed movement into lessons. For example, one school reported the need for, *“Being brave to try new approaches with her classroom”* (School 15).

3.4 Tackling Inequalities

Tackling inequalities emerged as a central outcome of the Middle Leaders Programme, with schools reporting that changes to pedagogy, environment, and whole-school culture enabled a broader range of pupils to engage meaningfully in physical activity and learning across the school day. Many schools identified groups who were historically less active, particularly pupils with SEND, girls, and those from ethnic or religious minority groups, and used the programme to address these disparities. For example, several schools highlighted high levels of sedentary time among pupils with SEND and described the need for change, *“Our school recognised that our children have a lot of sedentary time and with a large portion of SEND children, we knew this needed to change”* (School 7).

Increasing purposeful, inclusive activity opportunities across the school day was the primary mechanism for reducing inequalities. Schools consistently reported that children who were previously reluctant or



unable to participate became more engaged when opportunities were adapted to meet diverse needs. Active learning approaches were especially beneficial for pupils with SEND, who showed improved participation and equality in lessons, for example, one school reported that *“Children enjoy active learning opportunities and ALL children participate in the learning”* (School 34). In some cases, specialist CPD was seen to enable staff to tailor movement and PE to individual needs, reported in one school which recognised the importance of, *“Giving staff the capability to adapt to what children want and need”* (School 13).

A distinctive strength of the programme was the contribution of the SEND school, which shared expertise and strategies that mainstream schools used to improve their own inclusive practice. They reported how, *“22 teachers from mainstream schools attended training on supporting children with SEND to engage with purposeful and appropriate physical education and movement”* (School 29).

Schools also addressed structural barriers that limited equitable participation. For example, one school reported how updates to the school uniform policy made physical activity more accessible to all children, *“Active Soles - Update uniform policy - children are now able to wear plain black trainers to school - further supporting activity opportunities”* (School 2). Other schools focused on redesigning playgrounds and activity zones to increase accessibility for all students during break and lunchtimes. These changes supported more inclusive play, as one school reported, *“The variety of designated areas has encouraged more active participation, offering something for everyone”* (School 22).

Many schools strengthened these gains by embedding inclusion-focused physical activity commitments into School Improvement Plans and policy. They aimed to ensure that equitable provision remained a strategic priority, as one school reported, *“School Improvement Plan: To ensure all pupils are accessing appropriate physical activity opportunities and a dynamic sport and PE curriculum”* (School 29). Through these combined efforts, schools created conditions in which all pupils, especially those previously least engaged, were better supported to access the physical, social, and learning benefits of movement.

3.5 Process of Change

Across the case studies, schools described the process of change as gradual, iterative, and dependent on taking manageable steps that could be embedded over time. Many emphasised that this required focusing on one component at a time, trialling minor adjustments, observing the effects, and embedding successful practices before moving on to the next step. Doing so helped maintain momentum without overwhelming staff, as reported by one school *“Focus was on this element of activity across school, something that did not require big changes in practice from other members of staff”* (School 4). Another school promoted adopting this approaching, reporting how *“focusing on one key area at a time will make a difference in the quality of the work”* (School 13).

Change progressed more rapidly when a larger number of staff were involved. Early wins, such as improved behaviour or engagement, helped bring hesitant staff on board; for example, *“Support staff who were previously reluctant to change, saw the benefits after seeing the positive impacts in children’s behaviour and engagement”* (School 18). As more staff adopted active approaches, schools were able to roll initiatives out more widely, with several noting that successful practices trialled in one class or year group were subsequently shared with others, *“Rolled out Active Lessons in Year 5 with resources and learning is being shared with other staff members”* (School 21).



3.6 Outcomes

All 35 schools reported positive outcomes relating to pupils' learning, physical activity, health, and/ or wellbeing as a result of engaging with the programme and enhancing their physical activity provision.

3.6.1 Learning Outcomes

Most schools described improvements in focus, concentration, recall, knowledge retention, and attendance. Staff noted that incorporating movement into lessons helped children to refocus and sustain engagement, with one school reporting that, *"Children are more engaged in learning and have better focus in class"* (School 3). Improvements were seen across all pupils, including those with SEND, supporting schools' efforts to promote equity, as reported *"Across school, SEND learners are able to better access learning with improved engagement and equality"* (School 12).

Seven schools identified improvements in academic outcomes, including vocabulary, oracy, and writing, with one specifically reporting measured academic progress, *"SATs and writing scores increased massively"* (School 15). The case studies attributed these gains to pupils' improved recall and engagement during lessons, noting that movement-based approaches helped learning to "stick" more effectively. Importantly, these improvements were seen across the cohort, including pupils with lower prior attainment, demonstrating that active learning supported progress for all learners and contributed to closing attainment gaps. For example, one school described seeing, *"improved vocabulary, increased understanding and enthusiasm, improved writing - ALL children are writing more, and lower ability children becoming more independent in writing skills"* (School 24).

3.6.2 Physical Activity Outcomes

Eight schools reported that enhancing their physical activity provision led to increased engagement and levels of movement as children were *"moving more and sitting less"* (School 12). This was accompanied by a reduction in sedentary behaviours, particularly when energisers and active elements were incorporated into lesson transitions, helping pupils stay active throughout the school day. Some schools also observed improvements in children's fitness, particularly where playground or curriculum-based activities were expanded, as one school reported that the *"Fitness levels of children has improved"* (School 4).

3.6.3 Health and Wellbeing Outcomes

Most schools (n=24) reported improvements in pupils' wellbeing, including greater happiness, confidence, and emotional resilience. Case studies described *"Happier, healthier children"* (School 9), and reported positive changes in mood, engagement, and whole-school climate.

A large proportion of case studies reported that enhancing physical activity provision and embedding active learning had significant benefits for pupils' social development and peer relationships. For example, one school reported how *"Children are working with peers, who they may not interact with during playtimes, therefore building new relationships"* (School 5). Specifically, physically active collaborative opportunities further influenced pupils' social development. For example, one school



highlighted that, *“There are more opportunities for collaborative learning and problem solving, helping children to build and develop social connections”* (School 34).

Overall, pupils were more engaged in school life, enjoyed learning more, and experienced holistic wellbeing benefits, supporting schools’ efforts to tackle inequalities. This is reflected in reports of there being *“a positive impact on children’s wellbeing and mental health”* (School 33).

4. Recommendations:

The following recommendations are informed by the above findings from the RSM Middle Leaders Programme case studies. Recommendations are written for schools and future research and evaluation to support and guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of whole-school physical activity approaches.

4.1 Recommendations for Schools and Practitioners:

1. Raise collective stakeholder awareness by identifying areas of need within the school.

Rationale: Understanding contextual needs (e.g., high sedentary time, low engagement, behavioural issues) helps drive staff buy-in and prioritisation of initiatives.

Guidance: Map pupil behaviours, classroom activity patterns, and engagement levels to demonstrate the value of whole-school physical activity. Use this evidence to highlight potential impacts on learning, health, and equity.

2. Consider the interaction of the CAS framework domains.

Rationale: Policy, stakeholders, environments, and opportunities are interconnected; change in one domain is reinforced when aligned with others.

Guidance: Start with a single opportunity area (e.g., break/lunch) and ensure relevant stakeholders, physical spaces, and policies are considered collectively to maximise sustainable impact.

3. Invest in sharing learning and capability-building of all school stakeholders.

Rationale: Stakeholder confidence and skills are critical for Whole-school engagement and implementation. This ensures consistent implementation and sustained change.

Guidance: Provide regular/ ongoing CPD, workshops, access to resources, and informal observation opportunities so all stakeholders understand the benefits of physical activity and are able to embed inclusive active routines into the school day and beyond.

4. Embed initiatives into school policy.

Rationale: Policy formalises practice and ensures longevity beyond individual champions.

Guidance: Once initiatives are successfully trialled and benefits demonstrated, incorporate them into school policy or the School Improvement Plan to maintain focus and secure leadership support.



5. Commit to long-term, step-by-step implementation and change processes.

Rationale: Whole-school change takes time and relies on taking gradual, iterative, and manageable steps that are embedded over time.

Guidance: Focus on one component or initiative and adopt a step-by step approach. Ensure changes are meaningful, purposeful, and inclusive by engaging and collaborating with different stakeholder groups. Doing so can increase the sustainability and impact of implemented initiatives.

4.2 Recommendations for Future Research and Evaluation:

1. Investigate the long-term impacts of middle leader-led physical activity initiatives.

Rationale: Understanding sustained effects on pupils' learning, health, and wellbeing helps identify which programme components have lasting benefits.

Guidance: Conduct longitudinal studies tracking pupils over multiple years to assess maintenance of physical activity behaviours, academic engagement, and wellbeing outcomes.

2. Explore strategies to address inequalities in physical activity provision.

Rationale: Tailored approaches are needed to ensure all pupils, including those from disadvantaged or underrepresented groups, benefit equally from initiatives.

Guidance: Investigate barriers and enablers in multi-ethnic or deprived school contexts, and evaluate initiatives to understand which successfully reduce disparities in access, engagement, and outcomes.

3. Examine the mechanisms of change across the CAS framework domains

Rationale: Policy, stakeholders, environments, and opportunities interact to shape outcomes; understanding these mechanisms and their interactions informs more effective programme design.

Guidance: Use mixed-methods approaches to explore how initiatives focusing on one domain (e.g., opportunities for activity) interact with stakeholder engagement, environmental factors, and policies.

4. Evaluate the role of staff capability-building in sustaining physical activity programmes

Rationale: Staff confidence, knowledge, and skills are key drivers of consistent and long-term implementation.

Guidance: Assess which professional development methods, opportunities, or resources most effectively enhance staff competence and confidence in delivering whole-school physical activity initiatives.



5. Summary

This report evaluates the RSM Middle Leaders Programme, designed to equip school leaders to embed physical activity across whole-school settings. Thirty-five schools participated, submitting case studies detailing their approaches, outcomes, and experiences. Findings suggest that the RSM programme can positively influence school culture, pupil engagement, health, and wellbeing, particularly when supported by senior leadership, collaborative practices, and targeted interventions aligned with school needs and inequalities. Behaviour change was supported through increased staff capability, opportunities for activity, and motivation, with the change process described as gradual and iterative. Based on these insights, recommendations were developed for schools, future research, and evaluation. For schools, key actions include identifying contextual needs, considering the interaction of CAS framework domains, sharing learning across staff, building stakeholder capability, and embedding initiatives into policy. The report demonstrates how middle leader-led initiatives, when combined with system-level thinking and structured support, can drive sustainable whole-school change.

6. References:

- Aubert, S., Barnes, J.D., Demchenko, I., Hawthorne, M., Abdeta, C., Nader, P.A., Sala, J.C.A., Aguilar-Farias, N., Aznar, S., Bakalár, P., Bhawra, J., Brazo-Sayavera, J., Bringas, M., Cagas, J.Y., Carlin, A., Chang, C.-K., Chen, B., Christiansen, L.B., Christie, C.J.-A., Roia, G.F.D., Nyström, C.D., Demetriou, Y., Djordjic, V., Emeljanovas, A., Endy, L.F., Gába, A., Galaviz, K.I., González, S.A., Hesketh, K.D., Huang, W.Y., Hubona, O., Jeon, J.Y., Jurakić, D., Jürimäe, J., Katapally, T.R., Katewongsa, P., Katzmarzyk, P.T., Kim, Y.-S., Lambert, E.V., Lee, E.-Y., Levi, S., Lobo, P., Löf, M., Loney, T., López-Gil, J.F., López-Taylor, J., Mäestu, E., Mahendra, A., Makaza, D., Mallari, M.F.T., Manyanga, T., Masanovic, B., Morrison, S.A., Mota, J., Müller-Riemenschneider, F., Bermejo, L.M., Murphy, M.H., Naidoo, R., Nguyen, P., Paudel, S., Pedišić, Ž., Pérez-Gómez, J., Reilly, J.J., Reimers, A.K., Richards, A.B., Silva, D.A.S., Saonua, P., Sarmiento, O.L., Sember, V., Shahril, M.R., Smith, M., Standage, M., Stratton, G., Subedi, N., Tammelin, T.H., Tanaka, C., Tesler, R., Thivel, D., Tladi, D.M., Tlučáková, L., Vanderloo, L.M., Williams, A., Wong, S.H.S., Wu, C.-L., Zembura, P. and Tremblay, M.S. (2022) Global Matrix 4.0 Physical Activity Report Card Grades for Children and Adolescents: Results and Analyses From 57 Countries. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* 19 (11), Human Kinetics 700–728.
- Burns, R.D., Brusseau, T.A. and Fu, Y. (2018) Moderators of School-Based Physical Activity Interventions on Cardiorespiratory Endurance in Primary School-Aged Children: A Meta-Regression. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15 (8), Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute 1764.
- Daly-Smith, A., Quarmby, T., Archbold, V.S.J., Corrigan, N., Wilson, D., Resaland, G.K., Bartholomew, J.B., Singh, A., Tjomsland, H.E., Sherar, L.B., Chalkley, A., Routen, A.C., Shickle, D., Bingham, D.D., Barber, S.E., van Sluijs, E., Fairclough, S.J. and McKenna, J. (2020) Using a multi-stakeholder experience-based design process to co-develop the Creating Active Schools Framework. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 17 (1), 13.
- Hall, J., Bingham, D.D., Seims, A., Dogra, S.A., Burkhardt, J., Nobles, J., McKenna, J., Bryant, M., Barber, S.E. and Daly-Smith, A. (2021) A whole system approach to increasing children's physical activity in a multi-ethnic UK city: a process evaluation protocol. *BMC Public Health* 21 (1), BioMed Central 1–16.
- Helme, Z.E., Chalkley, A., Walker, T.J., Bartholomew, J.B., Morris, J.L., McLoughlin, G.M., Bingham, D.D. and Daly-Smith, A. (2024) Opening the Black Box of Implementation: Developing the Creating



Active Schools Logic Model. *Translational Journal of the American College of Sports Medicine* 9 (2), 1.

- Michie, S., van Stralen, M.M. and West, R. (2011) The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science* 6 (1), 42.
- Milton, K., Cavill, N., Chalkley, A., Foster, C., Gomersall, S., Hagstromer, M., Kelly, P., Kolbe-Alexander, T., Mair, J., McLaughlin, M., Nobles, J., Reece, L., Shilton, T., Smith, B. and Schipperijn, J. (2021) *Eight Investments That Work for Physical Activity in: Journal of Physical Activity and Health* Volume 18 Issue 6 (2021). <https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/jpah/18/6/article-p625.xml> Accessed 21 March 2023.
- World Health Organization (2019) *Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030: More Active People for a Healthier World*. World Health Organization.



Ready Set Move Middle Leaders Programme: Summary of Findings

The RSM Middle Leaders Programme supports school leaders to embed more physical activity across the school day, benefiting pupils' learning, health, and wellbeing. Thirty-five schools shared case studies about the initiatives they implemented, how they achieved change, and what impacts they observed.

Evidence of Good Practice:

- Schools increased opportunities for children to be active, often active lessons, lesson transitions, and break/lunchtime, increasing movement throughout the day.
- Staff training and professional development ensured school staff (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants, and lunchtime staff) understood how to embed activity meaningfully into school-day routines.
- Schools upgraded equipment and outdoor spaces, creating accessible, engaging areas for all pupils.
- Pupil voice was used to shape and design activities, with children taking leadership roles as Play Leaders or Sports Ambassadors.
- Inclusion-focused approaches ensured pupils with SEND, girls, and children from minority backgrounds could participate fully, with some schools sharing expertise to improve practice across local networks.

Enablers of Change:

- **Increasing Awareness:** Staff and leaders developed a clearer understanding of the importance of physical activity for pupils' learning, behaviour, and wellbeing. Tools like pupil surveys, heatmaps, and activity profiling highlighted sedentary patterns and areas needing improvement. This awareness motivated staff to prioritise change because they could see the link between movement and positive classroom outcomes.
- **Sharing Learning:** Opportunities to observe active lessons, participate in CPD, and exchange ideas with colleagues and other schools helped staff refine practice and build confidence. Sharing learning also corrected misconceptions, such as the belief that short brain-break videos were sufficient for active learning, and reinforced practical strategies for integrating movement meaningfully into lessons.
- **Collaboration:** Working across year groups, staff roles, and with pupils enabled co-design of initiatives, ensured buy-in, and fostered collective ownership. Collaboration extended beyond the school to include community partners and universities, providing additional expertise, resources, and sustainable solutions. This shared responsibility made implementation more feasible and consistent.
- **Senior Leader Support:** Active backing from headteachers and leadership teams provided time, resources, and legitimacy for initiatives. Leaders who modelled prioritisation of physical activity and safeguarded staff time for training created a culture where change was valued and safe to trial, accelerating adoption across the school.



- **Champions / Change Teams:** Motivated staff or dedicated teams acted as role models, coordinating activities, mentoring colleagues, and maintaining momentum. Their visible commitment encouraged others to adopt new practices and ensured that initiatives continued beyond initial trials.
- **Bravery:** Staff and leaders demonstrated courage by challenging existing routines, trying innovative approaches, and being willing to fail and learn. This willingness to take risks was critical for embedding new practices into the school culture, overcoming resistance, and sustaining meaningful change.

Outcomes:

- **Learning Outcomes:** Pupils showed improved focus, concentration, and engagement in lessons, which supported better knowledge retention and understanding. Several schools reported measurable gains in academic achievements, including improved SATs results, writing, vocabulary, and oracy. Behavioural improvements also increased teachers' capacity to deliver lessons effectively, benefiting all pupils, including those with SEND or lower prior attainment.
- **Physical Activity Outcomes:** Pupils were more active across the school day, including lessons, breaktimes, and extracurricular activities. Schools reported reductions in sedentary behaviour, higher participation levels, and, in some cases, improvements in fitness. Inclusive provision ensured that historically less active pupils could engage.
- **Health and Wellbeing Outcomes:** Pupils experienced enhanced wellbeing, including greater happiness, confidence, and resilience. Positive impacts were also seen on social development, with improved peer relationships and collaboration. The overall school climate improved, creating a more engaging, supportive, and inclusive environment for all pupils.

Summary:

The programme demonstrates that middle leader-led initiatives, when supported by strong leadership, collaboration, and well-planned resources, can create lasting improvements in physical activity, learning, and wellbeing across whole schools. By combining targeted actions, inclusive practice, and stepwise change, schools can build a culture where movement is part of everyday learning for all pupils.



5 Tips for Developing your Whole-School Physical Activity Provision

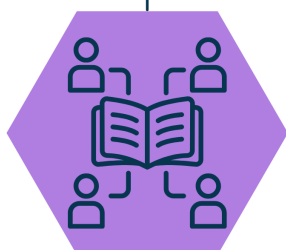
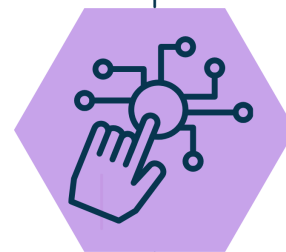


Raise collective stakeholder awareness by identifying areas of need within the school.

Map pupil behaviours, classroom activity patterns, and engagement levels to demonstrate the value of whole-school physical activity. Use this evidence to highlight potential impacts on learning, health, and equity.

Consider the interaction of the CAS framework domains.

Start with a single opportunity area (e.g., break/lunch) and ensure relevant stakeholders, physical spaces, and policies are considered collectively to maximise sustainable impact.

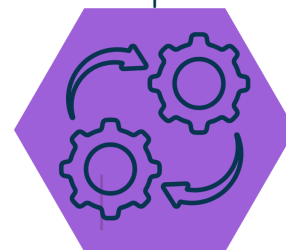


Invest in sharing learning and capability-building of all school stakeholders.

Provide regular/ ongoing CPD, workshops, access to resources, and informal observation opportunities so all stakeholders understand the benefits of physical activity and are able to embed inclusive active routines into the school day and beyond.

Embed initiatives into school policy.

Once initiatives are successfully trialled and benefits demonstrated, incorporate them into school policy or the School Improvement Plan to maintain focus and secure leadership support.



Commit to long-term, step-by-step implementation and change processes.

Once initiatives are successfully trialled and benefits demonstrated, incorporate them into school policy or the School Improvement Plan to maintain focus and secure leadership support.

