

# Why sport matters to...



**Eddie Playfair**  
Principal, Newham Sixth Form College

*Eddie is Principal of Newham Sixth Form College (NewVIc), London. We spoke to him about the impact of sport and physical activity on learner outcomes, his objectives as a College Principal and cross-College priorities.*

## **What are your key objectives as Principal and how does sport contribute to achieving them?**

“My key aim is to help our students develop as rounded, skilled, confident, educated young people, and to achieve the skills and qualifications they need to progress to where they want to go. Beyond that, we want them to be effective, responsible, well-informed members of society. Getting involved in sport and keeping fit and healthy is a huge part of this.”

## **When you came to NewVIc five years ago, was sport high on your agenda?**

“I don’t have a personal background in sport but I’m convinced, as Principal, about the importance of physical activity and sport in young people’s lives. In my previous College we were short of good sport facilities – we didn’t have a gym or a sports hall and it was something that the students regularly complained about.

“Thankfully, sport was already strong when I arrived at NewVIc. The College has consciously chosen to invest in a separate sport academy that represents all our work outside the curriculum – participation, talent development and forging partnerships. Having a separate sport structure is an important part of how we work. The role of the Sport Academy Manager is crucial and gives us the capacity to form partnerships and create progression pathways with schools and the local university.”

*“The evidence is all around us: students who are involved in physical activity, who keep fit and participate, will be better students. The phrase ‘healthy mind, healthy body’ is spot on – students are more likely to engage with academic work if they feel good about themselves.”*

## **How has sport and physical activity evolved at NewVIc?**

“Participation in physical activity here has increased dramatically, from 29% in 2008/09 to 46% in 2012/13. This is fundamentally down to the sport academy team creating an attractive and inclusive programme for students. The main reason is that physical activity is seen as fun, accessible and something social that you can do with your friends.

“We have also created a uniform timetable, with a common lunchtime, which means students can participate at lunchtime, after school and on Wednesday afternoons. This also makes coaching and training sessions easier to organise, and students know when and where activity is taking place. Involvement in these activities is dependent on good attendance and academic progress and, if students are slacking in their studies or their attendance drops below 95%, they’re not allowed to take part. We know that being involved in sport is, for some students, the thing that keeps them attending classes and keeps them in the College. Sport is one of the many incentives to stay here and we’re happy to use it to our advantage!”

### **You mentioned that, as Principal, your key objective is to develop skilled, well-rounded learners. What difference do you see in students who are involved in sport?**

“When I look around the College at student leaders, those that play key influencing and shaping roles within the student body, they’re often sport coaches, leaders or team members. Sport makes a significant contribution to developing leadership skills, which we really value and recognise. Learners also develop teamwork and wider social and communication skills. All of these areas are enhanced by being involved in sport.

“The number of sport academy students achieving 95% or above attendance is 4.47% higher than the College average. This demonstrates that if you’re committed to one thing in College you’re more likely to be committed to other things. The reason students turn up for College is not just about academic sessions or tutorials, it’s because they enjoy College, their friends are here, they like the environment and enjoy being part of a team – everything’s connected.”

### **What other, wider cross-College benefits is sport having at NewVlc?**

“Health is a key area for us. We’re working very hard to develop our students as health advocates, as we know peer to peer promotion is the best way of engaging other learners. We have students, with different expertise, acting as advisors on many areas, including healthy eating, fitness, mental health, sexual health and smoking cessation. We’re not saying that they’re experts but with some training and development young people can be incredible advocates. If you have hundreds of ambassadors promoting healthy lifestyles, rather than just a few staff, it’s so much more effective.

*“Sport, physical activity and health are part of life and a College should reflect this day in, day out.”*

“For young people in Newham, it’s quite a big deal to travel out of the borough and out of London. Playing sport helps develop their confidence and gives them the opportunity to become less insular. If they want to go to university and gain employment they will have to consider leaving Newham and maybe London. Being involved in sport, going with a team and friends you feel comfortable and safe with, is a great start – a good way to go out of your comfort zone. Education is all about striking a balance between what you’re comfortable with and pushing the boundaries, going beyond and taking some risks – sport is a fantastic tool for doing this.”

### **NewVlc is an inner-city London College with limited space – how have you overcome this barrier?**

“It all comes down to partnerships. We’re very lucky that we have the University of East London (UEL) nearby and they take sport very seriously. We use their facilities and they coach and sponsor our teams.

“We have also developed ‘quid pro quo’ relationships with other organisations, for example sharing facilities and resources with local schools. Between the College, UEL and our partner schools, we actually have a very attractive set of facilities! We’re also planning a campus redevelopment and sport is going to play a big part in that. We’re thinking very carefully about the facilities that we need to provide – for example, our fitness suite is very small and overcrowded, and it may be that the only way to get round this is by working strategically with another organisation. We’ll never be able to have a full-size football pitch, but we’re looking at ways around this. One possible option is to put a pitch on top of our large car park. The car park is a big plus but it’s almost a missed opportunity to get some floor space. Any new buildings we build will need to be part of our culture to promote physical activity.”

### **How are the forthcoming funding changes going to affect sport provision at the College and how do you plan to manage them?**

“For Colleges nationally it’s a big, big challenge. The most significant budget cuts are for enrichment and sport comes under that. There’s no earmarked funding for sport. The solution is to be very strategic about how you spend your money, work in partnership and decide what your priorities are. Part of the rationale for having a dedicated sport academy, and the Sport Academy Manager role, is that she can go out and find different sources of funding, whether this is from National Governing Bodies, charities or the government, and make the best use of bids and grants to invest in sport.

“One thing I would say, however, is that we’ve managed to increase student engagement in sport over the last five years without increasing spending. We did this through employing great, highly motivated staff, good organisation and leadership and, crucially, focusing on the development of skilled student leaders and using them as deliverers and role models.”

### **In your opinion, what are the key things a College can do to grow sport?**

“A key aspect is student voice and consultation. At my previous College, I had students tell me that their experience of sport was not as good as it had been at school. It shouldn’t be that way. For a student who has enjoyed sport to have to accept at 16 that they can’t access the same opportunities isn’t right. We shouldn’t see a drop off between school and College; if anything there should be a boost at 16. In my opinion, the answer is to form strong partnerships with schools to manage this transition.

“One very successful and cheap option is the external equipment we have, which has been a revelation to me. We’ve invested in outdoor gym equipment and table tennis tables – it’s effectively ‘play’ equipment for grown-ups and it really engages students because it’s intuitive, social and fun. This equipment makes things simple so that students can quickly and easily get involved – it’s had a massive impact on morale and engagement. I’m sure every College, regardless of size or budget, has some opportunity to develop their facilities with physical activity in mind. You’ve got to be creative with your space.”

**“ Building strong relationships with external organisations is crucial. I’d say think strategically and reach out to partners. ”**