

## Embedding outdoor learning in the primary curriculum at Boston West Academy

**Wellies at the ready, an ample supply of mud and lots of imagination – all crucial elements of the curriculum at Boston West Academy. This is no radical new agenda, but part of a thoughtful approach to learning and engagement that has led to better results and a richer experience for everyone involved.**

The school was in Special Measures when Headteacher Mike Schofield joined 16 years ago. Alongside the harder-edged areas for improvement, developing the children's bond with the school was a key priority; their general attitude to learning was passive, whilst the behaviour of a significant minority was disruptive. Mike says: "Now, the children are engaged, they're fired up and enjoying themselves, whilst standards reached and have been sustained at a high level – culminating in our Outstanding Ofsted judgement this summer."

### Green shoots

It started with an environmental focus. Mike joined at the same time as a teacher with a science background, whose passion for environmental issues complemented his belief in the power of first-hand experience and real-life learning opportunities.

Over time, the school has made use of every square centimetre of its grounds, allowing the children to feed ideas through and be part of the transformation. Mike says: "We now have a woodland area, pond, a place for camp fires, a mud factory (where children can make anything with mud, sticks, leaves, acorns, whatever is around), raised planting beds, a small orchard, wildflower



meadow, a kestrel box with camera, chickens, bee hive and a 'collection' of sculptures made by local artists to add a touch of inspiration!"

### A learning landscape

Today, every subject is delivered outside - maths, English, science, history, art... and there is a minimum weekly time expectation, beyond PE sessions, for children to be learning outdoors.

Teaching and learning is based around a framework of progressive skills and knowledge, but is flexible enough to enable staff to respond to the children's needs, interests and what is happening in the world around them. With wellies at hand, learning can always be taken outside to seize the moment!

Children work in, with and at times learn specifically about the natural environment. There is a focus on teaching skills, not only within subject areas but also generic learning skills, many of which are developed through group interaction whilst solving practical



problems. The idea, says Mike, is to equip children with the skills to acquire any kind of knowledge they need or that interests them.

#### **Room to grow**

'Hard to reach' children have benefited enormously from the school's approach. "There is a danger that when children find learning really difficult, we give them more of the same," Mike says. "Take the example of one child we had, who found reading, writing and maths particularly difficult. He had a challenging home life, and struggled with everyday lessons. As

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soon as he was outside, it was different - here was space and some freedom, and things he was good at. Not only did he 'grow' in self-esteem but his 'status' within his peer group was enhanced. This new found confidence meant he was much more likely to keep trying in all of his lessons, when the challenges were tough and it would be 'easy' to disengage or become disruptive."

#### **Reap what you sow**

Boston West has continued to develop and expand its outside space to include themed gardens, a polytunnel,

bottle greenhouse and an outdoor learning centre – The Hive – offering training courses to staff beyond the school who want to develop their own practice.

The key message for all schools, says Mike, is that outdoor learning should not be treated as a bolt-on

– but as an approach to delivering a high quality educational experience for all.

“Lots of money isn’t necessary to make a start – it’s about small steps together that will make a big difference!”

## Top tips for introducing outdoor learning

- Do it because you want to and not because you think you should/have to.
- Establish/share why you want to develop learning outdoors – be clear about the benefits.
- Let Governors know why you’re taking learning beyond the classroom.
- Introduce outdoor learning in a gradual way – doing it too fast may leave some behind!
- Get the children involved – they will be your best advocates. This can be done through classes, Eco Club, School Council.
- Keep parents informed and ensure children have appropriate clothing for the activity.
- Take small steps and keep at it – start with a 'project' e.g. creating a growing area with raised planters; or a topic/theme (Vikings, an aspect of maths e.g. measures, poetry in Literacy).
- Find your champions – at least one member of staff to be your key driver to start off with.
- Share ideas in planning meetings; ask the question 'Why indoors?'. Be creative and take thinking beyond the four walls of the classroom.
- Celebrate success in staff meetings – put post-its or photos on display in staffroom.
- Support staff with resources, training (practical and theory), modelling good practice.
- Seek help from and develop relationships with the wider community.
- Don't despair if your school grounds are bare – gradually bring the natural environment in.
- Assess and negate risks (don't allow paranoia) – play-time on a hard surface presents as many, if not more risks! A crucial life skill is for children to be 'risk aware'. Involve them directly in the process – ask them 'How are you going to keep yourselves safe?'

**Get out there and see the difference it makes!**