

Sportsmark

The following article has been written by Keith Spencer. Keith was the representative for the British Association of Advisers and Lecturers in Physical Education (BAALPE) on the national development group for the first two years of Sportsmark. He now works part-time as an Educational Consultant to Sports England and is primarily responsible for the Sportsmark Award Scheme. He writes here in a personal capacity and as a member of BAALPE. BAALPE has kindly agreed to its reproduction in the PE Newsletter.

Sportsmark – A Personal View

How can an award have been so maligned, but also so eagerly sought after? How can a headteacher be so vitriolic about his school's failure to achieve the award that he believes all his local partnerships will deteriorate and fall apart and another say there is only one word in sport up here – 'Sportsmark'. The plain fact of the matter is, the Sportsmark award has achieved, in its first two years, a notoriety which has caused great pleasure to some and pain and 'tears' to others.

For some it has been a disaster, a disappointment and a shock. For others it has been a real opportunity to audit the work of their physical education departments for their provision for PE and sport. It has motivated some headteachers to ask their PE staff about provision, and it has brought real change in some schools. I know of at least one case where an additional PE appointment was made.

For those of you who are cynical, you probably have every right to be. You may not have properly understood what the award originally set out to do. We need to remember the political context of 'Sport, Raising the Game'. The then Tory Government had introduced a policy and needed to see some quick results. Sportsmark was one of the elements of the policy which was seen as a comparatively easy development. Largely following the template from Raising the Game it was launched onto a largely ignorant and unsuspecting PE world, already under pressure from the recent revision of the National Curriculum. It was offered to schools as part of the 'Four-pack' – a package of information containing four separate schemes, potentially related to each other but not co-ordinated. Like any scheme, which is hastily put together and in which some of the criteria are not based on sound educational principles, there were serious mistakes. Probably the most contentious part of the scheme was the requirement for 2 hours of time-tabled physical education, at a time when the majority of schools programmed their lessons for fifty minutes! One, now departed member of the development group was overheard saying: "An extra 20 minutes activity at lunchtime, one year group per day, would see most schools through!" The other false premise, albeit less possible to substantiate was

that it was felt all schools would want this award. Given the variety of schools, and their particular strengths and interests, this was never likely.

There were those who thought it was the best thing since 'sliced bread', and that it would be a stepping stone which would eventually lead to a bid for Sports College status. Others were expecting too much from a scheme, which set out to reward policies, and planning that demonstrated provision for PE and sport. Is it possible that the award can assist development in a very positive manner?

I was privileged to be a BAALPE representative from the first day of the development of Sportsmark in early 1995/6. We, that is those of us with physical education backgrounds, fought hard to change some of the early criteria – just ask HMI Gordon Clay – and unfortunately we lost most. As the time came for the first appearance of the 'Four-pack', those of us in education were not certain how the scheme would be greeted. Yet another initiative from the Sports Council! What's in it for us? Why would our school want this award?

In the event over 600 schools applied. Some felt this a failure. It did, nevertheless represent about 13% of the total field of secondary schools able to apply. That remains an issue. Do all schools want an award of this kind? If you add this year's applicants, 400 plus, a significant number of England's physical education departments (nearly a third of all state schools) felt they were good enough for the award and wanted the award. Furthermore, they were interested enough to collect information for the application; much of which they would not necessarily have readily available. For example:

The calculation of breadth and balance in the activity areas of the National Curriculum and beyond;

- the percentage of pupils taking part in extra-curricular activities, helping to identify age and gender imbalances in provision;
- intra and inter-school competitions and other opportunities for young people to compete;
- the coaching qualifications of teachers and 'adults other than teachers' and the need to update skills to be able to safely lead extra-curricular clubs; and
- the identification and development of links with local sports clubs.

Many schools were already doing this, testimony to those who applied, but not necessarily collecting the information in the manner in which it was required. This information gathering process enabled gaps to be recognised and identified, and therefore gave PE departments the opportunity to do something about the gaps in their provision.

By the end of the second year of the award, as of May 1998, there are nearly 700 Sportsmark schools and 49 Sportsmark Gold schools – 20% of the potential applicants. As I suggested earlier, the scheme has flaws, some more serious than others. Where did 2 hours come from? Who came up with figures for breadth and balance? Why should teachers update qualifications? Why develop links with clubs? Where do other ESC programmes like Coaching for Teachers and Developing School to Club links fit in? What about post 16 students, leadership courses? And what weight do GCSE numbers have with the Awards Panel?

The real problem is that it appears to be all about numbers. Many of you do not have a problem with the concept of an award, or the very valid reasons for applying, which are numerous, but about a series of quantities, in which time particularly is obtrusive.

A complete review of the scheme for its third year has taken place. Many BAALPE members were involved, as were many of the schools who were unsuccessful, and other interested groups. What has come out of this review?

I believe a much more user friendly scheme which sets out to make awards, rather than frustrate schools and their advisers. The revised scheme:

- still includes a statistical survey of provision, but with flexibility for time issues (100 minutes for Sportsmark curriculum time), expectations of pupil take-up of extra-curricular activities and in the way information is required for breadth and balance;
- now takes into account the particular context of the school – transport issues, lack of staff and facilities, young people with special needs, the pressures coming from examination pupils not to take part, and so on. The opportunity is given to explain the context in general and with regard to the specific criteria;
- allows middle deemed secondary schools to apply;
- asks for two referees who know the schools and can verify and support their application;
- will give credit for post 16 programmes, GCSE/A level provision, CSLA and TOP Link and other leadership courses; and
- much more guidance on such areas as school-club links, teachers and AOTTs qualifications, other sport-led initiatives and what kind of ‘evidence’ a school should be bringing together to present a case to a validator.

This will mean a more subjective approach to the assessment and validation of applications, but I am certain the validators of the award will respond with enthusiasm and empathy. If parts of the scheme are ready for improvement, the initial assessment, the pre-application and post-award Helplines, and the validation

procedures will not require a great deal of development. They are already highly professional, robust and rigorous.

At the time of writing, BAALPE, in conjunction with Events of Excellence, have been awarded a three year contract to validate the Sportsmark award scheme. Good news for BAALPE and good news for Sportsmark. Its future development is assured, as is your opportunity to make a contribution to the scheme and maybe produce a working tool that will help schools to formulate targets and as a consequence raise standards.

The Sportsmark Award is here to stay. I look forward to the day, in the Autumn Term 1999, when some of the early Sportsmark schools will be coming forward with a reapplication. Will there be differences? If Sportsmark is to be developmental, yes! More importantly, what will the differences be in the schools who are reapplying? That is when the real value of the scheme will emerge, since those differences will mean, will already have meant, more and better opportunities for young people in support of their pathways into sport!

The English Sports Council are gaining quality experiences all the time and want to support the work of schools. Sportsmark is part of the Active Schools branding which would ensure more co-ordination of PE and Sport initiatives, should identify the need for support and with longer term planning should help schools cope with overload.