

## **The numbers game**

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Around the country, professional football is inspiring children to take an interest in learning, reports Heather McLean

Four years ago, three premier division football clubs launched an initiative to help underachieving children improve their literacy and numeracy through ICT and football.

Today, Playing for Success (PFS) has spread through the entire premier division to other divisions and even to the odd airport.

PfS focuses on raising standards in key stages 2 and 3. It uses football and ICT to encourage children to attend a 10-week after-school course which uses remedial teaching methods. Progress and aims are decided by the children themselves.

Harpreet Hansra was a shy 10-year-old before she attended two Charlton Athletic Football Club PfS courses at Fossdene Primary School, south-east London. She says: "The teachers here talk friendly, really help you and give you more information. In the classroom at school, they just say this is what you have to do."

Jyoti Marwah is the centre manager for Charlton Athletic PfS. She says:

"All our PfS kids are disaffected in some way or another, but that can be changed. They are switched off, but they can be switched on again.

"PfS increases academic skills from level 3 to level 4 and also increases social skills such as confidence and self esteem. All children make substantial gains and all make it to level 4. A handful of our kids tested in post-course evaluations moved from level 3 to level 5 in 10 weeks."

Steve Smith, education manager for Leeds United PfS, runs one of the three pilot schemes set up by the Department for Education and Skills, the FA premier and Nationwide leagues and LEAs.

Smith says the children's achievements have helped the centre: "We've pulled in extra funding from various organisations, from private sponsorships to Single Regeneration Budget Funding. Our four-year database shows that in literacy, numeracy and ICT, kids perform about 40 per cent better on post-course tests, than pre. On post-course evaluations, some kids have scored 100 per cent better in IT."

The growth of most PfS schemes has been phenomenal. Smith says: "When we launched PfS as one of the first three pilot clubs in April 1998, it was just me with no premises, moving around spare rooms. We've now taken over the underneath of the south stand at the football ground. We have 10,000 square feet with four classrooms, three offices and an IT suite."

Leeds PfS has 15 computers for children and nine for adults, two interactive whiteboards, a digital camera with Microsoft Publisher software, a movie camera and a microphone system for quizzes. It also uses Microsoft's Encarta

encyclopaedia and RM maths learning software.

Leeds PfS now delivers 60 hours of tuition a week as well as summer schools. It helps parents, the unemployed, Princes Trust Volunteers, and children targeted by educational welfare officers. The centre runs exam revision classes, operates an Excellence Challenge that works with children who may get into university, and holds tailor-made days for schools. In recognition that not all children are mad about football, the Leeds scheme has been extended to Leeds Rhino Rugby Club, the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Yorkshire County Cricket Club and the airport.

However, despite their burgeoning popularity, PfS centres are not in competition with schools. Mark Hopkins, from Learning Through Leeds, says:

"It's a complementary education programme held in places where kids will want to go. Going somewhere away from school is a motivating factor for kids."

Being associated with a football club inspires students and teachers alike.

Steve Wilson, centre manager for Arsenal PfS, says the club association is invaluable: "You can't put a price on meeting Patrick Vieira, Tony Adams or Arsene Wenger. They're real heroes to the kids."

As each centre manager shapes his curriculum, Arsenal's is heavy on sport, whereas others may be less so. At Arsenal, work assignments such as fantasy football teach children Excel and literacy skills, while football-based quizzes for the group are planned on PowerPoint.

Jyoti Marwah is enthusiastic about getting the children to act out problems in role playing or games, such as leap-frog maths, to give them confidence and help absorb facts.

At the end of each course, players come in and present the children with certificates and prizes. Alexandra Agyemang is a confident 11-year-old. She attended a Charlton Athletic PfS course and says: "The presentation at the end of the course by the football players made me feel like I'd achieved something. This place helps me feel confident and responsible."

PfS centres are continuing to expand and by last September, 59 sports clubs were signed up.

#### FINAL TALLY

Between 2000 and 2001, 35 PfS study support centres took more than 12,600 pupils from 710 schools for 10-week courses in average classes of 20.

During that period:

- \* Initial evaluations of pupils beginning courses showed their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills were below average.
- \* Primary pupils improved their numeracy scores by an average of 18 months and secondary pupils by an average of 14 months.
- \* Improvements in numeracy brought underachieving students into line with their

age group, particularly at key stage 2.

- \* Primary pupils increased reading comprehension scores by about 15 months.

- \* Attitudes towards independent study improved significantly for both primary and secondary pupils.

- \* Despite sessions being held out of school time, most pupils attended more than 80 per cent of courses.

Source: DfES and National Foundation for Education Research

#### HIGH SCORER: ONE PUPIL'S PROGRESS

The satisfaction and exuberance of children who have been lucky enough to attend PfS courses speaks volumes.

Benjamin Town, an 11-year-old who has attended three Charlton Athletic PfS courses, barely realises how much work he has put in. He says: "Normally I sit inside playing on my PlayStation. The first time I came here I did football skills with coaches from Charlton. There should be more centres.

More kids would come."

He was first put forward for a Playing for Success course in Year 5. His attainment in literacy and numeracy was at level 3 instead of 4, his peer group average. He found it difficult to concentrate in class, often requiring help to complete a single task.

For the duration of his first 10-week course, his spelling and reading were targeted. Two software programs were used to raise his level of attainment: Star Spell, a CD-Rom that uses phonetic spelling to teach children how words are put together, and SuccessMaker, a comprehension, inference and deduction programme that incorporates spelling, reading and writing.

When Ben started the course he was a reluctant reader. Class activities such as group reading and role playing using a digital camera, made him more confident.

Ben and the rest of the class worked on projects that come up on each PfS course. The first was Charlton Athletic player profiles. Working in pairs, the children went to the club website and researched their chosen player then framed questions for an interview. These questions were tried in role play, then the players came to read with the group and be interviewed.

The children used tape recorders and digital cameras to record their interviews which were then written up as a Word document with or without pictures, as a brochure or newspaper article, or a PowerPoint presentation with a 30-second digital film clip of the interview.

Towards the end, the children reviewed the course in the form of a newsletter. They worked with an adult in pairs or threes. At the end of the 10-week course, Ben had fulfilled his literacy targets.

In Year 6, Ben volunteered to attend PfS as he had enjoyed himself so much the year before. He was accepted as he needed to improve his numeracy to reach

level 4. Centre manager Jyoti Marwah said Ben had changed. He did not require any adult intervention, he knew what the course expectations were and he helped other children.

SuccessMaker was again used and an RM maths activity-based program that consolidates key maths skills. Class games such as leap-frog maths, where the child at the back answers a maths question then leap-frogs the child in front, helped raise Ben's confidence. As a result of the course, Ben's mental math skills improved substantially.

The third PfS course Ben attended was a three-week summer school where the focus was on art and music in ICT. The children produced a piece of digitally enhanced music on CD, writing the lyrics for a song (literacy), putting the words together with music using computers (music and ICT), designing and creating the CD cover (art and ICT), and calculating the cost of the CDs (numeracy).

At the end of the summer school, Ben agreed to become a child mentor. And as well as mentoring for PfS, he has helped present ICT to his own school.

He is now at level 4 in literacy and numeracy and is way ahead of his peers in ICT.