Cuts to School Sport Partnerships: A Case of Ideology over Reason?

Posted on Friday 3rd December 2010

The Coalition Government's proposal to cut £162 million funding for 450 school sports partnerships offers an intriguing case study of this era of new party politics and policy-making. Two points lend weight to the argument that this is a rushed decision made by an ill-informed minister, Education Secretary Michael Gove. First, this decision appears to contradict the number one 'legacy' promise of the up-coming London Olympics; that is, to 'inspire a generation of young people to take part in local volunteering, cultural and physical activity'.

Second, the decision does not appear to be based on any 'evidence'. Research shows that a positive experience of sport in an individual's formative years results in a greater likelihood that they will participate when older. The case for the cuts rests on the fact that the system of School Sport Partnerships (SSPs) is 'centralised' and 'bureaucratic', with ministers selectively using statistics to attempt to prop up their case. Long-term statistics reveal that SSPs have had a huge impact on children's participation in sport, rising from 25% undertaking two hours of sport a week, to over 90% today.

Interestingly, while County Sport Partnerships (at the level above SSPs) have been criticised as 'another layer of top-down bureaucracy' in the research undertaken by colleagues at the University of Birmingham, the common consensus is that SSPs at the coalface have made a difference. This consensus has brought forward a wave of protest against the cuts: 75 Olympians and elite athletes wrote to the Prime Minister and 60 head teachers wrote to the Observer stating that this was an 'ignorant, destructive, contradictory and self-defeating decision'. The 'ignorance' relates to a general lack of knowledge of the sporting infrastructure by the Coalition, clearly evident in the Commons debate on this topic. It is 'destructive' in the sense that it will dismantle a delivery system that is evidently working. The 'contradictory' points to the strains in Cabinet, with many members opposed to the decision, but also the White Paper on Public Health, published on the same day as the Commons debate on sport, which highlights sport among children as important for their health. 'Self-defeating' will be a consequence if participation figures in sport among children fall. Given the UK's high obesity levels among children the long-term burden this will have on our health system is likely to far outweigh the £162 million saved.

Sport is a very emotive topic – witness Andy Burnham's speech in the Commons debate on sport. This is because many people believe it has the power to enact social change. Sport is part of an individual's upbringing and life experience and school sport is experienced by everyone; one of the reasons these cuts have touched a raw nerve. No longer a peripheral subject, sport is clearly inextricably bound up with politics. If understood in this context, the decision to cut SSPs is simply political and, as such, is based more on ideology than reason and it will make a complete U-turn on this policy all the more unlikely.

Jonathan Grix
Senior Lecturer in Sport Politics and Policy in the Department of Political Science and International Studies

Read further research on **County Sport Partnerships (http://ppa.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/11/13/0952076710365423.full.pdf+html)**

© University of Birmingham 2014