

Schoolgirls compete in the volleyball tournament at the 2012 Schools Games.

Action Images/Paul Harding

What legacy?

A renaissance for competitive sport in schools? Or a missed opportunity from which few will benefit? **Elyssa Campbell-Barr** looks at the likely legacy of the London 2012 Olympics for young people.

"Without a doubt, one of the most important parts of the Olympic and Paralympic Games has always been the legacy," said Prime Minister David Cameron, congratulating the winners and participants in this May's Schools Games.

The games, in which 1,600 English schoolchildren competed in four of the new Olympic venues, are the centrepiece of the Government's strategy for school sport. Children compete at four levels – in school, between local schools and at county/area level, with the very best selected to participate in the national finals.

Around £153m of funding, from the Government, Sport England and sponsor Sainsbury's, has been committed to support the games over the next four years – a fraction of

the £162m a year for the School Sport Partnerships (SSPs) that Education Secretary Michael Gove announced was being scrapped in 2010. And though over 12,000 schools will take part, this represents just half of schools in England. In the host city of London, only 42 per cent have signed up.

With the support of SSPs, the proportion of schoolchildren engaged in two hours or more of sport each week rose from 25 per cent in 2002 to over 90 per cent in 2010. It seems unlikely the Schools Games will have such an impact.

Critics point out that the Schools Games and other competitions do little to motivate the majority who don't excel at sport. SSPs were lampooned by some for introducing pupils to yoga, streetdance and trampolining

alongside rugby, netball and hockey. But for most pupils – and the future health of the nation – participation and enjoyment are surely more important than competition.

Not according to the Government. Ministers have been falling over themselves to stress their commitment to competition. "I want competitive sport to be at the centre of a truly rounded education that all schools offer," said Michael Gove in December 2010. "Competitive sport is the best way to teach children the values that are going to be really important in later life," Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt told the *TES* last year.

Unfortunately their words are not backed up by their policy. As well as slashing funding, the Government will stop collecting data on participation in sport from next year, which will make the impact of the cuts and the legacy of the Olympics difficult to evaluate. And free schools (see page 34) aren't required to have a school gym or sports field or PE on the curriculum.

"The best way to create a lasting Olympic legacy in schools is to give them the freedom and incentives to organise it themselves, for themselves, rather than imposing a centralised government blueprint," Michael Gove wrote to Baroness Sue Campbell, Chair of the Youth Sport Trust, in 2010. But, faced with falling funding, the demise of SSPs

"While only 7 per cent of Britons are privately educated, they represent 50 per cent of medallists at recent Olympics. It would be tremendous if the London 2012 Games could transform these statistics."

and ever-increasing pressure to do well in academic league tables, can schools be expected to prioritise time and resources for sport?

"Despite these very difficult times, there remains some great work going on in schools, and some great opportunities through the new School Games, to build a lasting legacy following London 2012," insists Baroness Campbell. "It remains a significant challenge though, and it is critical that school sport gets the funding and profile it deserves following the Olympics and Paralympics. There is a real risk that the universality of the previous school sport offer can't be maintained without further financial backing."

Before the first race has been run, many are already questioning whether the 2012 Games can deliver the legacy that was central to London's winning bid. Tessa Jowell, the Labour former Olympics Minister and member of the Olympics board, told the *Observer* in January that the London Games are set to be a huge "missed opportunity" without government funding and policies to support school sport afterwards.

Even Lord Moynihan, the Conservative Peer, former Olympic rower and chair of the British Olympic Association, has warned: "At the moment I don't see the policies being put in place that will build on the inspiration of the Games for young people and that will change their lives for a lasting sports legacy."

Currently, 30 per cent of British children aged two to 15 are overweight or obese. And while only 7 per cent of Britons are privately educated, they represent 50 per cent of medallists at recent Olympics. It would be tremendous if the London 2012 Games could transform these statistics for future generations.

Sporting links

www.london2012.com/getset
www.london2012.com/education
www.youthsporttrust.org.uk
www.schoolsportweek.org
www.sportwales.org.uk