

Sir Michael Scholar
Chair, UK Statistics Authority
Statistics House
Myddelton Street
London
EC1R 1UW

13th December 2010

Dear Sir Michael

MINISTERIAL USE OF SCHOOL SPORT STATISTICS

I have serious concerns about the way in which Government Ministers have used statistics relating to participation by school children in sport activities.

It is my view that a misleading picture has been presented to the public by highly selective use of the data in this area. I set out the relevant examples below.

Claim 1: there has been no increase in children playing competitive sport

Government quotes

"One of the problems with the existing system that we have had is that we haven't seen the increase in the number of people playing competitive sport"
Michael Gove, BBC Andrew Marr Show, 21 November 2010:

Contradictory evidence

The School Sport Survey¹ shows that 27% more boys and 60% more girls are taking part in inter-school competitive sport than in 2006.

Claim 2: participation in sport has fallen

Government quotes

"I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that last year the proportion of 11 to 15-year-olds playing sport went down."

David Cameron, House of Commons, 24 November 2010

"We are committed to competitive sport, and the legacy of the previous Government was only one in five children regularly playing inter-school sport. To answer the hon. Gentleman's question about older children, yes, in year 7, four in five children are not playing sport at all."

¹ <https://dservuk.tns-global.com/schoolsports2010/DownloadableDocuments/DFE-RR032.pdf>

Jeremy Hunt, House of Commons, 29 November 2010

Contradictory evidence

The Prime Minister is quoting from the Taking Part Survey² – which relates to activity in general, and not specifically activity within schools, so is largely irrelevant to this argument.

The survey says that the percentage of 11-15 year olds doing active sport in the last 7 days has dropped from 88.8% to 88%. However, in the same survey, the percentage of 11-15 year olds doing active sport in the last 4 weeks rose from 96% to 96.7% and this is the more important measure in the survey.

The Secretary of State's assertion that four in five Year 7 children are not playing any sport at all is contradicted by the School Sport Survey, which shows that 59% of Year 7 children are doing 3 hours or more of sport every week.

Claim 3: the numbers of schools offering some sports has fallen

Government quotes

"The number of people playing rugby, hockey and football has either flat-lined, or gone down in some cases."

Michael Gove, BBC Andrew Marr Show, 21 November 2010:

"I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that what we experienced over the last decade was a lot of money being put into school sport but without seeing a lot of progress. We did not see a lot of progress. Let me give him one figure: **the number of schools offering rugby, hockey, netball and gymnastics actually fell** under the previous Government. That approach did not work and it is time for a new one."

David Cameron, House of Commons, 24 November 2010

Contradictory evidence

The School Sport Survey shows that there has been either flatlining or a small decline in Rugby (Union), Netball, Hockey and Gymnastics. However, these sports are already at incredibly high levels and the decline is minimal. Furthermore, the main reason for this decline is that schools now provide, on average, 19 different sports – compared with 14 in 2006.

While some sports have flatlined, the number of schools offering rugby league, athletics, cricket, tennis, basketball, cycling, golf, badminton, table tennis, volleyball, canoeing, archery, fitness classes, mountaineering, rowing, sailing, judo, karate, boxing, lacrosse, squash, equestrian sports, triathlon, skateboarding, dance and orienteering has increased.

I would be very grateful if the UK Statistics Authority were able to comment on both the accuracy of these claims, and the way they have been presented by

² http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/research/TakingPart_AdultChild2009-10_StatisticalRelease.pdf

Government Ministers to support their objective of abandoning the previous Government's policies on school sports.

I would finally like to draw your attention to an article by Barrie Houlihan, Professor of Sport Policy at Loughborough University, and lead evaluator of School Sport Partnerships. Writing in The Times on 29 November 2010, Prof Houlihan called the Prime Minister's remarks,

"A selective use of statistics that ignore the tremendous improvement over the past decade."

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Burnham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

RT HON ANDY BURNHAM MP