

On-Line Monitoring of Active Schools in Scotland

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Abstract

Introduction

Growing levels of inactivity of young people in Scotland led the Scottish Executive to commit £36M over three years from central government health budgets to sportscotland for the development of the Active Schools Network. In 2004 sportscotland set up the network of Active Schools Managers and Coordinators covering primary, secondary and additional support needs schools to offer pupils opportunities to adopt active, healthy lifestyles. The high level of political interest in the impact of Active Schools both by central and local government necessitated a monitoring approach that would collect sufficient data to measure the impact of the programme without unduly impinging on coordinators' primary role of providing participation opportunities.

In 2004/05 and 2005/6 academic years the number of secondary schools on Active Schools remained much the same (about 340) but the number of primary schools grew (from 926 in 2004/05 to 1957 in 2005/06). In these two years coordinators completed and returned excel spreadsheets electronically. Where it was not possible for coordinators to make returns electronically hard copy print-outs were returned. Data was then imported into sportscotland's database. Although this approach was workable it was labour intensive at three times of the year and the production of aggregated information at national and local authority levels took three to four months. With the continued growth of the network a more efficient and cost-effective monitoring system was required.

Methods

In early 2006 sportscotland started development of a website for on-line completion of the monitoring returns from the first term of the 2006/07 academic year. In designing it, experience from use of the electronic spreadsheets had identified that it would need to address:

- User friendly access and layout
- Security of data
- Consistent reporting across 600 coordinators
- Often limited information technology skills held by coordinators and limited access to computer equipment
- Reporting of results.

Development of the website was undertaken in-house but with guidance and advice from coordinators. Active Schools Managers were trained to allow them to train their coordinators and further assistance was provided through guidance notes and a user manual available online. In addition tool tips at some questions are used to provide additional information to coordinators as they complete their returns. The website went live in late 2006 with helpline support available to coordinators from sportscotland.

Results

In general the website (www.asmo.sportscotland.org.uk) has been successful. It has resulted in:

- Higher percentage returns of monitoring data
- More returns submitted by the deadlines
- Less workload for sportscotland and a quicker turnaround for reporting on Active Schools
- Greater acceptance by coordinators of the need for them to report on their activity
- Improved relationships between sportscotland and Active Schools Coordinators
- Access to monitoring data for previous terms through the website.
- Feedback analyses are distributed to Active Schools Managers after each term for each school type at national and local authority level. These analyses contain aggregate information about, inter alia, the
- Number of schools on the programme and the number and percentage of returns received.
- School roll (with gender split).
- Number of activity sessions delivered in the term and the number of participant sessions.
- Breakdown of participants by year group.
- Number and type of activity deliverers.

However, the introduction of on-line monitoring has not been completely straightforward. Issues encountered have been principally technical problems. For example, in a small number of local authorities internal security settings resulted in coordinators initially being unable to access the website.

Discussion

In the past some Active Schools Coordinators regarded the collection and reporting of monitoring data as an unnecessary bureaucratic requirement. However, the launch of the website and the availability of both on-line reporting and feedback analyses has led to increased and timely return of monitoring data by coordinators. Indeed, Active Schools Managers and Coordinators increasingly view the monitoring data as a useful management tool to identify trends and provide comparative information between the local authority and national positions as well as inter authority comparisons. To date,

Managers and Coordinators have concentrated on internal comparisons but there is scope for inter authority comparisons to identify good practice which could benefit other schools. Also the use of the data for benchmarking of schools and local authorities in specific areas or performance indicators is in its early stages. The project demonstrates how the appropriate use of technology can convert data into information which in turn can be used as a strategic resource.