

Schools Plus

“We form a long term relationship with our schools and generate good will”

Project Background

Schools Plus was established in 2004 when the founder, James Woods, left a career at British Gas with the aim of working with and maximising the use of schools. The organisation firstly formed a relationship with Oaks Park High School and the Head teacher agreed to give them the freedom to try out ideas and develop an innovative approach to community use. Nine years later, Schools Plus now continue to work with Oaks Park High along with 32 schools nationwide and a team of over 100 people, some working across more than one school. The organisation work with all types of secondary schools and are just starting to work with their first primary school.

An example of a Schools Plus school:

Type of school: Pimlico Academy opened in 2008

Size: 1268 (11 to 18)

Local Authority: Westminster

Location: Inner city London and including some of the most socially deprived wards in the country.

No. of Community Users: Up to 2000 users/week

Types of Facilities at Pimlico

‘The Venue’ is a shared space in the heart of Pimlico which includes:

All Weather Pitch - 30m x 60m sand based and floodlit.

Sports Hall - 4 badminton court sized

MUGA – floodlit for one netball court, football and tennis court

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Main hall with raised stage, accommodating 300 seated

2 Studios – one is 16 x 12 m with mirror and bar along the full width and the other is 14m x 8 m partially mirrored with bar and high ceiling

Schools Plus also utilise the canteen, car parks and classrooms, the only space they don't use are offices.

In all of the Schools Plus schools the approach is to utilise most of the school facilities at least some of the time, and they are open 365 days of the year.

Types of Community Users

Schools Plus request that each school draw up a list of approved users and uses for their site. If they are approached by any additional groups that fall outside of these categories then the Schools Plus Venue Manager discusses the appropriateness with the school. At Pimlico there are a range of classes, clubs and drop in activities available including: Zumba, Table tennis drop in, Pilates, Pimlico Fitness Gym, Tai Chi, Swedish Fitness, Bootcamp, Netball and Badminton Clubs, Boxercise, Yoga, Belly Dancing and a Running club. In addition there are a range of educational and religious uses, as well as conferences, music rehearsals, and other events.

"We take on the risk instead of the school"

Management Model

Schools Plus operates a model they refer to as a 'partnership'. They form a long term relationship with each school (a three year contract which is then renewed) and the school receive a share of the revenue and a guarantee that they will make at least the same money or more than their current arrangements. Schools Plus then takes on most of the risk and recruits a venue manager whose sole responsibility is to maximise community use of the school. Schools Plus provide substantial infrastructure to support the manager involving technology, people and processes. This includes toolkits, training and procedures, financial infrastructure such as bank accounts and billing systems and kit such as telephones and computers.

Once the manager has covered all the costs of running the business and paid the school, they are entitled to keep any remaining income.

Schools Plus believes this financial incentive keeps the quality of service high and gives a motivation to grow. After three years each Manager



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has the opportunity to become a shareholder in the company with voting rights and the chance to be one of the decision makers for the business as a whole. Currently there are seven shareholders, comprising James Woods (the founder) and six other managers.

“We recruit people with entrepreneurial skills”

Making it work

Schools Plus agree a contract with each school which includes: when they would like Schools Plus to manage the premises (e.g. evenings weekends and holidays), reporting and controlling procedures, rental agreements and arrangements for insurance and maintenance. The Venue Manager then becomes part of the school, has a desk there and looks after and handles any day to day issues.

The Venue Managers are recruited for their ‘entrepreneurial’ approach and their role is to actively market the facilities, sign contracts with customers, run the operation and manage their own staff (including cleaning, portering, caretaking and security). They are able to recruit their own team (often 6th Form students at the school). Anyone employed by Schools Plus, is subject to vetting and background checks, and ongoing monitoring throughout their employment to make sure that they are safe to work around children.

The Venue Manager then becomes part of and develops a relationship with the school, they have a base there and look after and handle any day to day issues relating to out of hours use.

There is an ongoing conversation with the school regarding community groups, activities and their suitability. The school ultimately have the right to ban a group. Prices are agreed for each user, the Venue Manager meets with the user and agrees a customer specific charge based on a Schools Plus charging framework.

Managers are from a broad range of backgrounds, ages and genders and include a Personal Trainer, Facilities manager, IT Engineer, Company Director, and Full time Mum. About half of managers are promoted from within the organisation and the other half are recruited externally. Centrally, Schools Plus has a small Leadership team.



Generally, any 'invisible wear and tear' is covered by each school's own premises team, but if Schools Plus breaks anything during their management period, they will pay for it. For example, at one school they paid for the repair to a sports hall floor which was scratched due to a community rollerblading session. If a Venue Manager requests the heating to be turned on (additional to the school requirements) then they will cover the costs and this is calculated by kilowatt hour rates. Lighting and other costs are covered as part of the revenue share arrangements with the school.

The Schools Plus approach provides an infrastructure which can benefit clubs and community users in that cancellations don't happen, there is a reliable billing system, and a team in place to deal with difficult scenarios.

For example, a Caravan Club hold an event on one site every year, they have complicated requirements including access to a sewer and the Schools Plus team are able to make this happen.

Another example is they are currently dealing with an enquiry from a Hollywood film company who want to film a children's sci-fi at one of the school sites. Also an advertisement (Fridge Raiders 'You Must be Hank Marvin') was filmed at a Schools Plus school as they have the infrastructure in place to attract the interest and meet the requirements of unique opportunities such as these. Schools Plus employ professional marketing techniques and generally have a presence on each school website.

Main Challenges

- 1) On a personal level, James found the process of working out 'how' to achieve his vision a huge challenge and made lots of mistakes in the early stages. The system now in place is tried and tested and based on solutions to problems they encountered. Schools Plus acknowledges that they owe their existence to Steve Wilks the Head teacher at Oaks Park High School who provided them with the opportunity to experiment and when they made a mistake said 'it's ok, try again!'
- 2) Finding good venue managers is an ongoing challenge, as it is a hard job with a lot of responsibility. They recruit on values and it can take a couple of years to develop a great manager with the right support structure.

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Benefits

Schools Plus develops a strong relationship with each of their schools with the aim of generating good will. The school also benefit from a guaranteed income which is also low risk as Schools Plus provides the processes, insurance, and financial infrastructure. Students benefit from taking part in activities and the wider opportunities created by Schools Plus professional team. Sixth Form students are often employed as Schools Plus staff with opportunity for progressing within the organisation.

Top Tips

Schools Plus would recommend that any school interested in developing their community use, need to decide how serious they are and on what scale they want to work. It will only be attractive proposition for an external company if the school show commitment and are willing for community use to become a significant part of school life.

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