

Gracemount High School & Friends of the Award/Awards Plus



In 2019 the school Head Teacher spotted a gap. Mr Hunter wanted Gracemount to offer Duke of Edinburgh's Award opportunities, to make sure that pupils weren't missing out on chances afforded to other school communities in Edinburgh. He recognised it as a route for fostering a sense of achievement and to help outdoor learning become more culturally ingrained in the learning community.

In that first year, with Miss Bird learning the DofE ropes alongside her Health and Food Technology teaching responsibilities, 5 pupils achieved their Bronze level of the Award. With a pandemic intervention, resumption in 2021 was with 6 participants, City of Edinburgh Council support and a partnership with Friends of the Award in place. (Note: name changed to Awards Plus from June 2023). The aim was to not only increase participation, but to develop staff skills and confidence to make delivery sustainable and an integrated part of the school's ethos.



Momentum built. By 2022 13 Bronze and 7 Silver levels were achieved by pupils. 2023 has seen a 50% increase, with 13 Bronze and 19 Silver completions. For around half it's been something to include on cvs and for applications to universities and jobs; for others the main focus has been on spending time learning new skills through enjoyable outdoor learning experiences.

According to Miss Bird, "For our pupils this is a massive achievement. There's a lot of uncertainty, a lot of nervousness for many around doing new things such as hiking and camping. Expeditions in particular have taken some pupils right out of their comfort zone. But they've come through with flying colours, I couldn't be more proud of them."

A crisp, clear March training day in the Pentlands illustrated this. Taking a Hillend ascent at a staggered pace served two purposes - taking regular breathers and taking in the view. Phones out, capture the moment: a 360-degree panorama from the Forth Bridges to Bass Rock to the Pentlands skyline, via the hallowed Hibs Easter Road stadium... A mile away from school, a short bus-ride, for most it was a new perspective on Edinburgh, on Gilmerton, on home turf.



Expeditions have all been planned to be within a Lothian Bus ride of school, to utilise public transport. Free bus pass in hand, pupils can now revisit East Lothian and the Pentlands under their own steam. They have the knowledge and confidence – in outdoor skills and in places to go - to head out unaccompanied, with many wanting to share their discoveries. “My mum was ‘Right, you can take me!”, said one pupil after an enthused return home. “I’m going camping with friends this summer”, said another.



“There’s a buzz back at school” said Miss Bird after a series of three June expeditions. “It’s now seen not just as a thing to help get into university, it’s been an enjoyable experience in its own right. There are new pupils asking ‘When can I do that?’”



Reflecting on the impact of several months of planning, training and expeditions, resilience emerges as a key theme, a sense that pupils know they've pushed through things they didn't always want to do or think they could do.

"I thought 'I can't do this' but I knew if I went home not having done it my mum would send me back out again", said one. Another, having struggled up hills on winter training walks, sat outside her tent taking in an East Lothian sunset, positively glowing with quiet satisfaction. Pupils have felt valued, and not judged for things they didn't know or couldn't do. They've experienced a sense of achievement and pride.



The partnership with Friends of the Award/Awards Plus – funded by City of Edinburgh Council – has been fundamental to the growth in activity and quality of the experience. As many barriers as possible have been removed for school, staff and pupils, from co-leadership with experienced and qualified staff and additional volunteers for large group ratios to personal and group kit provision to covering registrations and expedition costs.

Pupils' voices

"I really enjoyed that! Can't wait to do it again."

"We've been making memories, haven't we Miss."

"Yellowcraigs is amazing...I want to come back with friends for the sunset."

"It's opening my eyes to new places, to Scotland, to what's on the doorstep."

A Pentlands Walk word cloud



Miss Bird: "It just wouldn't have been possible without all this support. It's not just been practical, it's been at all levels. Credit is especially due for having a good way with our pupils. That's vital. The proof? They all turned up, every single one, no flakers. 32 pupils have been supported through their Duke of Edinburgh's Award journey, cost-free to the school, in a disadvantaged learning community. It's an opportunity they'd never have had without this support."



What Next? Funding for this work ended in August 2023. Ideally, a new 3-year funded partnership with Awards Plus will maintain this momentum, target pupils who benefit, make more curriculum links, and support staff in delivering a Learning for Sustainability entitlement for all learners. Watch this space!



Thanks to Laura Bird, Tom Scott, Fraser Robertson, Rob Bushby, Ian McDougall, Penny Tarsia, Joanne Thin, City of Edinburgh Council
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