

Help specialist schools to reach gold standard

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Farewell then to our shimmering summer of British Olympic success. As seasoned educationists, I think we know what lesson could be drawn from our bumper hoard of trophies. Standards are clearly falling.

Some Australian pundits have even been muttering that we Brits are only good at sports that involve sitting down (cycling, rowing and sailing) rather than those traditional manly pursuits at which we excelled in our last golden year of 1908.

The usual media mini-frenzy about delayed Sats results and falling academic standards have looked petty and parochial against the achievements of our young and enthusiastic competitors in Beijing.

The daftest Olympic comment has been the excuse to snipe at state schools. Thus Boris Johnson in the *Daily Telegraph*: “Roughly 58 per cent of the contestants we sent to Athens in 2004 were educated at independent schools - schools that educate only 7 per cent of the general population; and, in the past three Olympics, the independent sector has walked off with 45 per cent of the medals.”

Steady on, Boris. Many of our Olympians did attend independent schools, but that may simply be a reminder that sport and money are interlinked. You won't become a sailor or rower or cyclist of any standard without someone investing some money in you - whether it's your parents driving you to clubs and events, or your school having the resources to do so.

In 1996 in Atlanta, we won just one gold medal. It was perhaps the bleakest moment in our sporting history. So what changed?

John Major's determination to establish a national lottery revolutionised things. The idea was visionary and pragmatic, borne out of political frustration. As Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Major watched cabinet battles over money. The swaggering big boys of Social Services,

Education and Health would always win the argument for more cash over those coy newcomers at Culture, Media and Sport. Mr Major recognised that they needed their own ring-fenced pot.

Over the past decade, there has been considerable investment through the School Sport Partnership programme. Today, 471 specialist sports colleges link activities in 21,917 schools. The 2008 target for 85 per cent of children to participate in high-quality PE was one of the few national targets to be exceeded - and a year early.

At our school - we became a specialist sports college four years ago - we were able to reinvent PE. The humiliations of changing room and sports pitch so pointedly illustrated in Barry Hines's *Kes* - the inevitability of being picked last, the macho posturing - all have happily gone. Instead, we offer the usual competitive sports (*Daily Mail*, please note: competition is thriving) alongside mountain-biking, yoga and self-defence. We employ a health coach who works with students with low self-esteem or obesity issues. And we provide specialist coaching for our most talented students.

But even with the lottery funding we've secured, in terms of specialist facilities and coaching hours, we cannot seriously compete with independent schools and their foundations and benefactors. That's why Chris, the most talented young rugby player we've had for 20 years, was offered and accepted a scholarship at a local private school and, reluctantly, left us.

If specialist status is really to mean business, it's time to let us off the leash. Let us reserve places for the sporting elite (or for the outstanding scientists of their generation at science colleges and all the other specialisms). Give us the resources to provide specialist coaching as the hubs of our community of schools, including local independents. Help us strengthen paths from school sport into specialist clubs.

As Team GB triumphantly demonstrated against those grey Beijing skies, success is something you have to invest in and plan for meticulously. And then - frustrating as it may seem to a restless government - you have to be patient to reap the rewards.