



**Gort, Ireland**

# **Gort Community School**

**Striving for Holistic Health for All  
by 'Strength in Unity'**



**WORLD'S  
BEST SCHOOL**  
Supporting  
Healthy Lives

FUNDAÇÃO

**Lemann**



**WORLD'S  
BEST SCHOOL  
PRIZES**

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# Introduction

Gort Community School is a co-educational school in the rural town of Gort, County Galway in the West of Ireland, with a population of 1,000 students, teachers, and support staff. Healthy living is seen as a human right. For the past 27 years, Gort Community School has harnessed close links with local business and community services, CSOs and NGOs, who value the outsider, the 'others', for the wisdom they may imbue. Believing in strength in the community, it has sought connections as far away as North Ethiopia, Malawi, Nepal, Finland, and Silicon Valley.



# Profile:

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**Country:**  
Ireland



**Region:**  
Gort



**School type:**  
Public school



**Location area:**  
Rural



**Student population:**  
501 to 1000



**Prize Category:**  
Supporting Healthy Lives

**“I would describe our school as a warm, happy place and every visitor comments on that.”**

-Sharon Connolly,  
Deputy Principal at Gort  
Community School



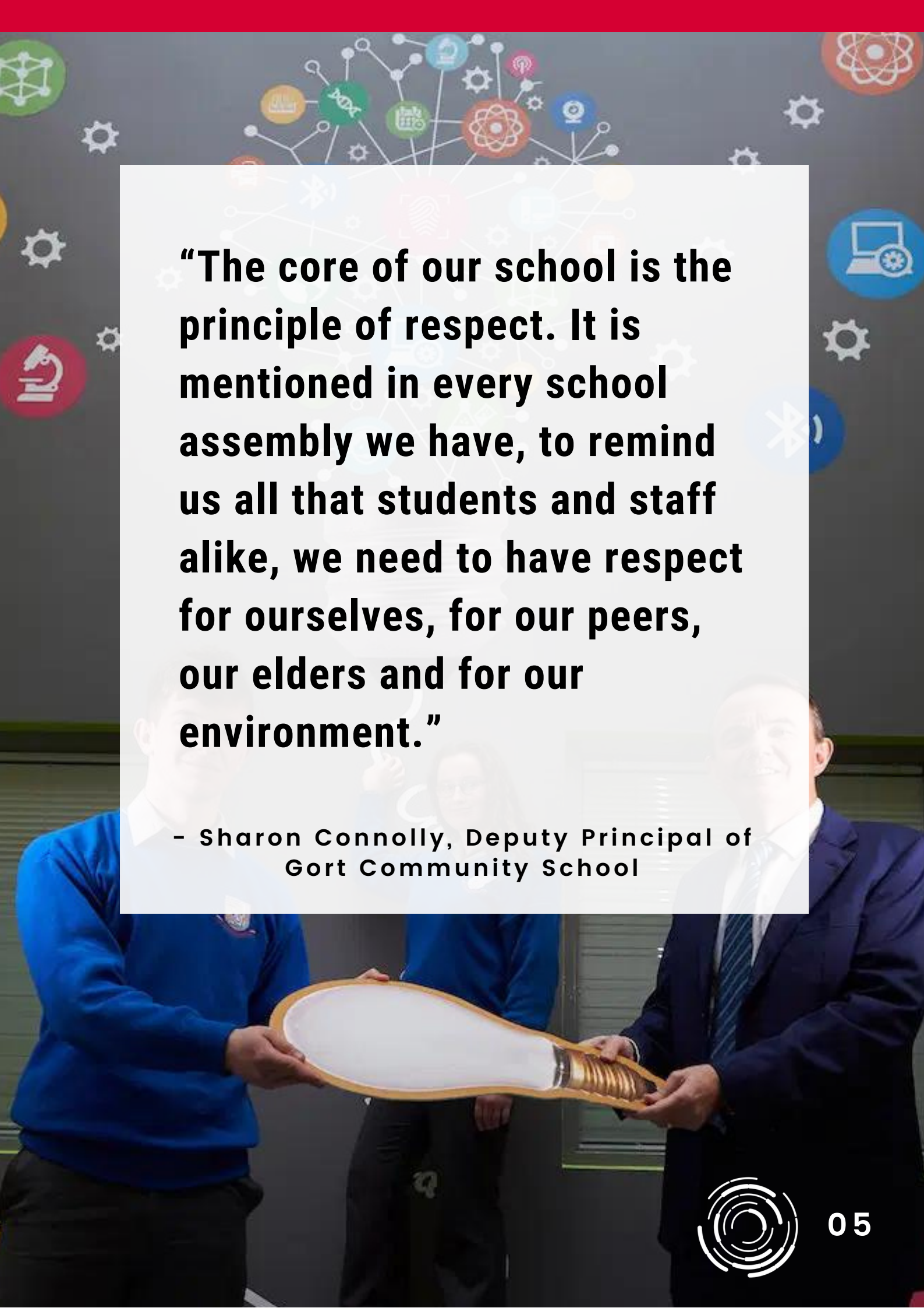
# In-depth look

## CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

In 2007, Ireland was about to enter a severe recession and then an economic depression, which lasted for most of the next decade. The financial crisis saw factories and businesses in the town close. The school has a population of 10% of newly arrived students, mostly from Brazil. Within the school, the economic downturn was evident from children's dietary changes in the canteen. Emotionally, this was a difficult time for the Irish psyche, as overnight Ireland went from Celtic Tiger boom to bust. Students had to rethink their dreams of further education as families struggled to make ends meet.

It was because of these social issues and economic challenges that the school believed something needed to change, to pull communities back together towards 'Meitheal, Belief, Confidence and Belonging'.





**“The core of our school is the principle of respect. It is mentioned in every school assembly we have, to remind us all that students and staff alike, we need to have respect for ourselves, for our peers, our elders and for our environment.”**

**- Sharon Connolly, Deputy Principal of Gort Community School**



# EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

Gort Community School nurtures the ‘Meitheal’ approach (neighbours helping neighbours) and instils these values in students. Emerging student leaders guide younger peers in the transition to experience the ethos and values of the school from the first day. In this way, the expectation of ‘leadership, belonging and belief’ is passed on from one year to the next.

Gort Community School has launched a number of initiatives that complement academic classroom practices, programmes, and pedagogy. These act as the fertile ground on which a healthier lived school experience shoots out strong roots. With a sense of fun, a community element, and a recognition that fitness is not just for academics or elite athletes, the focus of everyday life is simple; “minding the body, minds the mind”. The school’s expertise has been driven by its Physical Education & Health Science teachers, who ambitiously and creatively promote physical health and wellbeing daily.

The school instils the belief that health is a human right. At Gort Community School, hiking is included as part of Year 5, and sometimes Year 2 classes. As part of its physical involvement school faculty set up a cycle bus that runs from Ardrahan to Gort – the cycling route starts from the local village to the local town and students join with their bicycles along the way. The school designed this programme so that students could help reduce their carbon emissions in a healthy way. Those who didn’t have bikes were able to benefit from a cycle-to-school scheme. The school also launched a walk-to-school initiative, where everybody who walked to school was entered into a competition to win a prize. Over 400 students ended up walking to school every single day.



The school has made gains in changing the traditional attitudes in society towards gender roles and physical activity. Complimentary research highlighted the alarming lack of participation and interest in physical education and sports culture for girls in the school, especially after 14 years of age. Within six months, the school entered a joint collaboration with the local university (NUI, Galway), and rolled out a Girl's Active Programme (GAP), targeting inactive girls within the school community who did not feel comfortable in the clubs and sports teams already on offer. "It was a general culture in Ireland, where the boys got all the sports," says teacher Aisling Collins. "Enough was enough," Aoife Lynskey Keane, Physical Education teacher at Gort Community School says, explaining how the school tackled the imbalance by offering girls the opportunity to be involved in Pilates, Yoga, and Zumba, and asking parents and other community members to help act as mentors or instructors so that the activities could take place. "The best resources are within the school itself... a lot of the parents got involved and teachers had qualifications that we didn't even know [of]", Aoife Lynskey Keane says. Students also decided to teach each other different sports skills.



**“The reality is students’ time in school is so important. This is where they learn how to live a healthy way. What we’re all trying to do in our own way is teach them how to live a healthy life that will last them for their life.”**

**– A Teacher at Gort Community School**



# OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The school has won national awards for being among Ireland's fittest schools.

In 2007, when the school set about increasing the participation rates for girls (and boys) in Gort, it decided to involve the local primary schools of Gort as well as Bahir Dar Secondary School in Amhara Region in Ethiopia. From this cohort of schools, it set about collecting, and comparing activity rates, 'beep' test data, and food diaries which it went on to report on in the Young Scientist and Young Social Innovator competitions.

The school's push towards addressing physical inactivity created an environment where exercise was looked at positively by students. The key message was simple: "Take care of the body and the body will take care of the mind," and this message managed to resonate with students who felt encouraged

to engage in a wide variety of physical activities.

Throughout its development journey, Gort Community School has continued to create links with communities and schools, locally, nationally and in the Global South. The experience has taught it to recognise the value of gaining insight into the daily life experiences and understandings of health in different cultures. This knowledge has become a useful tool to reflect and improve how it sets out to develop the lifestyle of faculty and students in a positive, inclusive, healthier, and more holistic way.





# Key Steps



## BREAKFAST CLUB

The school began recognising that students from different socio-economic backgrounds where parents often work long hours often didn't eat breakfast, so a breakfast club was introduced. Studies and research showed that students that eat a healthy breakfast are more likely to be actively engaged in the learning process. The beneficial effects of eating breakfast on cognitive performance are expected to be short-term and specific to the morning on which breakfast is eaten and to selective cognitive functions. Planning revolved around the school's human physical and financial resources, ensuring that all is in place to run this programme financially and logistically. Available to all students, this breakfast club was designed to ensure that students are set up for their day of learning with a good breakfast. Additionally, the project was designed around encouraging students to eat healthy foods and encouraging more beneficial eating habits.





## **STUDENT WELLNESS INITIATIVES**

Cross-curricular activities and links were created between physical education and wellbeing, which includes other subjects such as SPHE, CSPE, home economics, construction and Irish. All these subjects are interlinked regarding the wellness of students. The school also launched Culture Day, an event that aimed to 'Diversify Through Food' that was run by students for students who acted as participants, organisers and helpers. Around 40 students and their families cook dishes from all over the globe, representing their own cultures. Another 30 students designed posters, for display, celebrating these cultures and different cultural backgrounds, while another 160 first-year students sample the food, and finally, all students in every year group participated in a quiz created to celebrate the vast cultural diversity the school has.



## **CREATING WALKING ROUTES**

In conjunction with the Irish Heart Foundation, the school created walking routes around the grounds. Different routes with assorted colours signifying different distances on banners and signs were placed on the school grounds.





## LAUNCHING PILOT SCHEME

In 2022, the school started a pilot scheme to get all students involved, no matter what their ability was, in Gaelic games. There were no barriers to learning in this course because of so much variety to choose from. The programme gives pupils the knowledge and skills to support all roles required in the effective staging of Gaelic games. As part of the programme, students were challenged to organise and run both on-field and off-field events for younger students.



## ENTERING FITNESS INITIATIVES

The school entered Ireland's Fittest School in 2013 and has taken part in the challenge every year since then. In planning and organising this project, the faculty had to include the entire school community in a six-week programme. This is the biggest fitness test of its kind in Ireland. A core group of teachers set up a “healthy body, healthy mind” committee. As teachers, they used their influencing skills to encourage and motivate students to get involved in the initiative. This required the cooperation of all teachers and the support of school management.



It was a remarkable success which led to Gort Community School winning the national title of Ireland's fittest overall school, Ireland's fittest mixed school, and Ireland's most improved fittest school.



## CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS

Gort Community School supports and celebrates the achievements of teachers outside of school as well as inside the school community. For example, some of the school's teachers climbed to Everest base camp and completed marathons and numerous activities where students were then given tasks to do.



# Advice and Guidance

Everyone from students to faculty should be heard – for instance, students had a direct say in the design of the school uniforms and get actively involved in activities and initiatives the school implements. It is important to acknowledge and appreciate that different members of the wider school community will have different opinions on how to tackle certain issues or approach tasks in their own way. “Everybody’s ideas are valid, everybody’s contributions are valid,” Connolly says, pointing out how necessary collaboration, respect and inclusivity is in the process.

## More information

-  **@officialgortcs**
-  **Gort Community School**
-  **@gcs\_greenschools\_ty**
-  **Gort Community School**
-  **<https://gortcs.com/>**

Learn more about their work by watching their event at 2022's T4 World Education Week: [watch here](#)

