



**London, United Kingdom**

# **The Totteridge Academy**

**Teaching urban students about  
the natural world**



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

FUNDAÇÃO  
**Lemann**



**WORLD'S  
BEST SCHOOL  
PRIZES**

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# Introduction

The Totteridge Academy, a mixed secondary school in Barnet, London, UK, has formed a partnership with local charity GROW to turn a disused field into 6-acre agroecological farm that it uses to grow to produce for healthy school meals as well as for its subsidised and affordable veg box scheme for all. Working with GROW, the Totteridge Academy has developed a unique programme that allows students living in urban areas, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, to learn sustainable food-growing skills and to appreciate nature and the world around them.





# Profile:

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**Country:**

United Kingdom



**Region:**

London



**School type:**

Public school



**Location area:**

City



**Student population:**

501 to 1000



**Prize Category:**

Supporting Healthy Lives

“Since joining us in May 2019, GROW has significantly enhanced the Totteridge Academy’s culture of responsibility and care – for ourselves, for one another, and for our environment. I would recommend the GROW curriculum to any schools that see developing students’ knowledge and skills to support themselves, others, and the environment as essential for the future of education.”

– Chris Fairbairn, principal of The Totteridge Academy





# In-depth look

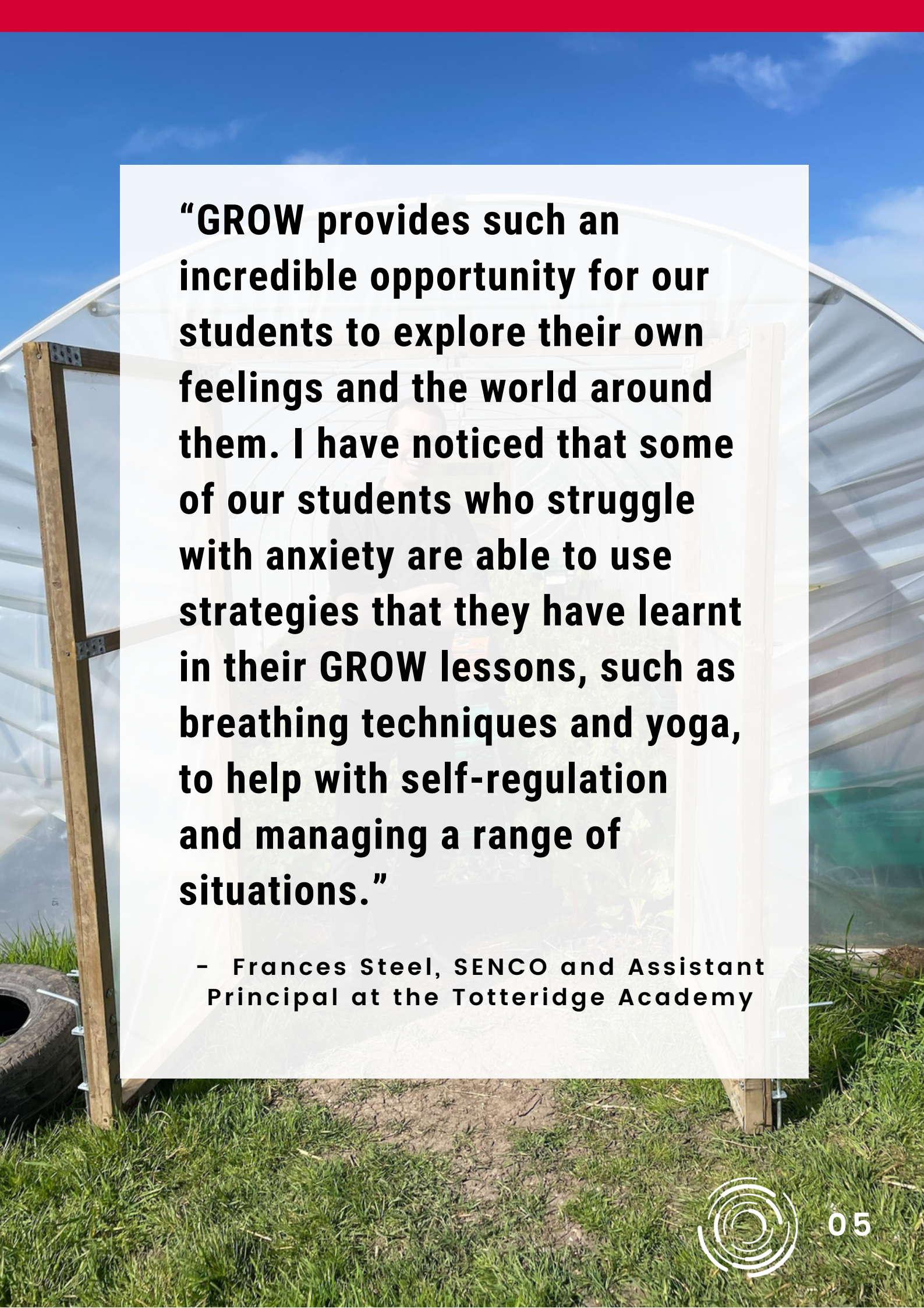
## CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

The Totteridge Academy has a diverse student population with 34% speaking English as a second or third language and 46% coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Grounded in a philosophy that takes inspiration from Kaizen – a Japanese term meaning “change for the better” – the Totteridge Academy tries to instil the values of self-improvement and high ambition in its students and has seen results significantly improve in recent years.

As the topic of mental wellbeing became more prevalent amongst school communities across the UK, the school began to look inwards, conscious that other institutions have historically struggled in catering to the wider school community on the issue.

The faculty also began to notice that there was a strain on both students and teachers regarding their mental health and sought to develop a programme that wasn't superficial in nature. Chris Fairbairn, Principal of the Totteridge Academy, describes the decision to partner with GROW as: “a conscious decision to invest – not just in a tokenistic, bolt-on, let's do a few assemblies or do X,Y or Z. Let's have a meaningful, long-term relationship with an organisation where this is at the heart or centre of the school.”





**“GROW provides such an incredible opportunity for our students to explore their own feelings and the world around them. I have noticed that some of our students who struggle with anxiety are able to use strategies that they have learnt in their GROW lessons, such as breathing techniques and yoga, to help with self-regulation and managing a range of situations.”**

**- Frances Steel, SENCO and Assistant Principal at the Totteridge Academy**





# EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

The school strives for academic excellence and encourages a strong sense of community within the institution where teachers and students share a warm and trusting rapport, and this extends to GROW.

“There was this opportunity here,” Lucy Hollis, the educational manager for the farm project at The Totteridge Academy says. “To provide education around food, around nature, around wellbeing and also provide a community asset to position the school as a hub for other schools and the local community to connect and contribute to their environment – to access organic, local and nutritious food.”

Through its collaboration with GROW to turn a disused field into a 6-acre agroecological farm, the school’s students are able to develop knowledge of organic produce and this education model is incorporated alongside other subjects. In their science lessons, students learn about compost and decay, and in food technology, the farm helps pupils understand how seasonality impacts vegetation. The school’s canteen is one of the keystones of the partnerships between GROW and The Totteridge Academy, with vegetables from the farm used for the school’s meals. During lunch, students often learn about the nutritional value of various ingredients and are exposed to a range of meals that they might not have experienced in their own homes. Senior staff sometimes serve food alongside kitchen staff, reflecting the school’s ethos of inclusivity and equality.

The school runs lunch clubs, which encourage students to come and engage with members of GROW. There are after-school clubs and holiday programmes during Easter, summer and during October.




The programme also includes a range of family events throughout the school year that seek to entice the wider community to get involved, such as ‘pick your own flowers’ events, pumpkin picking, and harvest celebrations.

GROW also launched a 10-week early support programme designed to promote healthy living amongst vulnerable young people and over 100 Totteridge Academy students have participated to date. Designed for children and young people facing barriers to learning and healthy living, the project helps students understand the benefits and value of healthy eating and how to better take care of themselves through plant-based diets.

The school runs timetabled mindfulness and yoga workshops, and an in-house forest school, helping to improve student mental health. The school started implementing teaching techniques designed to show the symbolism between taking care of plants and taking care of the individual, showing that this level of care should be applied to the nurturing of students’ young minds. This philosophy started to engage the students in thinking beyond traditional academia and adopting an attitude that looked to emotional regulation and mindfulness, as noted by one year 7 student who recommended that the GROW programme should be adopted by other schools “because children should know how to grow things, how to cope with emotions and how to be mindful”. All of the school’s students learn mindfulness breathing practices and often use these techniques during tutor time, assemblies, before homework and before exams.







**“GROW is one of the most innovative projects I have seen in a while. It is life-changing for young people. GROW is such an inspiration and I wish more young people had a similar opportunity. GROW has given my son so much.”**

**– A parent of a student at the  
Totteridge Academy**





# OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The partnership between GROW and The Totteridge Academy helped revolutionise the way students relate to their natural surroundings and in doing so inspired them to carry with them an understanding of, and respect for, the land and its qualities for the rest of their lives. The programme brought about strong links to those within the wider school community, including local residents who worked closely with the school faculty to facilitate the project. As noted by one local resident, GROW became vital to “develop practice and dialogue around food and land justice in the UK”.

Survey data gathered by the school shows 46% of students surveyed feel more confident when outdoors and 39% feel more connected to nature. After partaking in a number of modules designed to improve emotional regulation and resilience, students were equipped with the skills to look after their own mental health.

Since GROW started in 2019, over 500 of the school’s students have participated in a GROW programme, with over 50% of participants receiving free school meals.

During the first lockdown, GROW – in conjunction with the school canteen – issued free vegetable boxes to any pupils whose families were struggling, using produce grown on-site. The partnership represented a meaningful collaboration for the school, inspiring trust and generating hope for further collaborations. This has benefited students who have been exposed to a new way of learning. Through yoga, many pupils found ways to reduce stress and anxiety and improve their wellbeing; half of the students surveyed by the school said that they have used yogic breathing strategies outside of GROW lessons, and one pupil mentioned that “breathing is very good for my focus, you can do it during exams and you’re feeling stressed or when you have anxiety or depression. It can help you with anything really”.





Pupils were also noted to have increased their concentration in developing their critical thinking capabilities, personal confidence, capacity for empathy and communication skills through another module run by GROW as noted by another student: “I think the point of GROW is about changing our mindset.”

Parents of students noted a marked change in behaviour and general outlook. 60% of the parents surveyed said that GROW helped their child with their overall wellbeing, while over 45% of parents described how their child has developed mindfulness tools. One parent says “what a fantastic initiative for young people to be involved in. GROW teaches such an important message to its participants and I have seen a huge change in my son’s outlook and engagement since he started”.









# Key Steps



## PARTNERSHIP WITH GROW

The school forged links with the educational charity GROW, which approached the school as a potential host for its services. GROW would come in and do a bit of work with the school's students on their mental health, healthy eating and wellbeing. The school then decided to utilise the derelict land on the school premises to accommodate its promotion of healthy living, believing that it could be used as a farm that could directly link to the kitchen, the curriculum and the school at large.

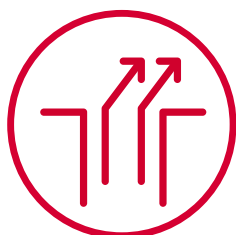


## FARM WORK

The farm would be trimmed down and cultivated with the intention to grow food that would eventually be used in school meals served to students, teachers and other members of staff in the canteen.

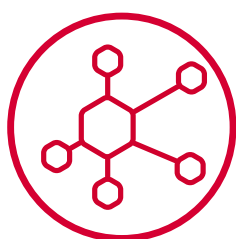


In the first year of the school piloting its first GROW educational offering, it hired a farm manager to help develop the farm and launched a promotional event to raise funds for the project from the wider community.



## **GROW AS A CHARITABLE ENTITY**

GROW then moved onto the school premises and began to work with some of the most vulnerable pupils. Over time GROW developed into a charity, employing a number of staff and volunteers who worked on the farm and reached out to the community in order to help cater to the needs of students and locals.



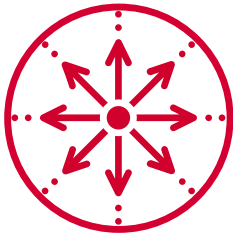
## **SUPPORTIVE PROGRAMMES**

The school launched the 10-week early support programme to support some of the school's more vulnerable students; the initiative sought to help students cope and manage underlying mental health issues such as anxiety, wider behavioural issues, and their relationships.





The school set out to create a full learning and development ecosystem by offering access to high-quality, creative enrichment opportunities that would celebrate members and organisations within the wider educational community. In doing so, the school is currently in the process of receiving bids to revitalise its ailing theatre. It has begun by painting the stage floor, rehanging stage curtains and refurbishing the theatre's seating.



## **EXPANSION**

The next step was developing a school-wide curriculum that could reach many more pupils than the most vulnerable ones in the 10-week programme. After gaining the funds, the school initially implemented the programme with Year 7 and Year 8 centred around the farm. The lessons focused on food, nature and personal wellbeing; alongside this, the school started running after-school clubs related to the overall theme of healthy living and eventually holiday clubs.





## DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

In February 2022, GROW ran a teacher training programme at the school. This welcomed 12 teachers, food growers and outdoor learning facilitators from across London to learn about the GROW philosophy, how to set up outdoor learning and food growing projects in their settings, and how to apply the GROW approach to their classrooms.





# Advice and Guidance

Due to the external stressors and unique demands that are placed on a school and its staff, it's important that everyone within the wider school community has access and the time to engage in opportunities that are offered and the school has to help facilitate this. For instance, The Totteridge Academy tries to weave healthy living and mindfulness into the everyday life of the school community, for example doing a breathing exercise with staff during the morning faculty meeting. The programme should also be sustainable in that it doesn't rely on one individual. Describing the problems that come if an initiative ends when a member of staff moves on to a different role, Lucy Hollis, asserts that it is vital to create a culture and legacy "that comes from everyday routine and habits, it comes from everybody... not just from the top".



## More information

 [@totteridgeacad](https://twitter.com/totteridgeacad)

 [@totteridgeacad](https://www.instagram.com/totteridgeacad)

 <https://www.thetotteridgeacademy.org.uk/>

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

