

# Safer Schools Partnerships

Jon Burgess, a police inspector seconded as a policy advisor at the Youth Justice Board, reflects on the merits of police work in schools.

In this age of inspection, performance monitoring and league tables, any help with lowering levels of disruptive behaviour within our classrooms, improving safety within the school environment for pupils and teachers, and reducing truancy rates and increasing levels of GCSEs achieved by young people is welcome.

Teachers and staff are keen to work in productive environments; focusing more time on teaching and less time spent on tackling conflict and unacceptable behaviour. Safer Schools Partnerships (SSPs) are an effective example of how partners can work together within schools to help achieve this.

## SSPs: fulfilling a need

The need for such an intervention is clear. Evidence shows that early identification of, and positive work with, children and young people at risk of crime and disorder can significantly reduce their chances of coming into contact with the law. The Mori Youth Survey 2004 commissioned by the YJB shows that

if a young person has not offended by the age of 14 then they are unlikely to start.

But there are many factors which can lead young people into trouble, whatever their age. We know, for instance, that young victims of crime or bullying are far more likely than other young people to go on to offend or bully others. Furthermore, a young person exposed to poor parenting, a lack of direction and support, offending siblings and peers, is more likely to end up in trouble than those with more stable family lives. And if a child lives in a disadvantaged area, where drugs are easily available and where there is a high population turnover, they are more likely to be disruptive within school or to commit crime. Such factors can lead to poor educational attainment or, in some cases, exclusion.

This highlights the importance of identifying young people at risk of crime or disorder early on and providing interventions tailored to their needs. Such interventions, to be completely successful, are contingent upon partnership work: police and schools should work with representatives from health, social services, Children's Trust arrangements, local housing, local authorities and the voluntary sector to create Safer School Partnerships which aren't just about having a police officer within a school. Strong links to feeder primary schools and the community beyond can be achieved. As well as reducing risk factors associated with crime and disorder, SSPs also aim to bolster protective factors (i.e. positive elements in a young person's life to help to reduce the likelihood of them offending or reoffending). The presence of a staff member at school who positively engages with a young person, for instance, can contribute to a young person staying out of trouble.

**Safer School Partnerships, developed by the Youth Justice Board (YJB), Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), are currently running in over 400 schools across England. Following their success, the DfES has recently announced that SSPs are to be mainstreamed.**

### Case study: SSP in action

PC Mike Ward patrols Parklands High School and the surrounding area in Speke, Liverpool on a full-time basis. As Parklands serves the second most deprived ward in the country, many pupils are particularly at risk of social exclusion and crime. Recognising this, the SSP team – in partnership with other agencies – is dedicated to getting young people off the streets and involved in interesting and rewarding activities. A breakfast club, after-school youth club, and school discos on nights notorious for mischief, such as Halloween, are some of the activities on offer. PC Ward deals with all types of incidents in the school, ranging from bullying to drug problems. His aim is to curb crime and anti-social behaviour within the school grounds, and encourage better behaviour from disruptive pupils. As a result, staff are much less likely to exclude pupils. Since the SSP began, the school has reported an increased confidence and calm in the classrooms and corridors, and pupils feel safer not only in the school but also on their way there and back. As PC Mike Ward says; "We want to make the school a place where children feel they want to come to, not just rather than a place they feel they have to come to."

## Fitting into the education agenda

Recent evaluation of the SSP projects has shown encouraging results: three hundred SSP schools were compared with a control sample of one thousand non-SSP schools. The results showed significant impact in the SSP schools with academic achievement rising, being measured in the number of students obtaining GCSE grades A to C. This rise was apparent in the non-SSP but with a greater increase within the SSP schools. The impact on truancy was also greater within the SSP schools compared to the control sample of schools.

The programme has been welcomed by a large number of staff and young people.

- One deputy head talked of a complete turnaround in their attitude to SSPs soon after the scheme was introduced at their school, saying: "I was very



against having a uniformed presence in the school, now I can't imagine what it would be like without one."

- 73 per cent of young people asked from within SSP schools stated that they felt safer since having a police officer within their school. This was in relation to being victims of bullying, assaults, thefts and encountering problems from 'non-school' people attending the school without authority.
- 82 per cent of teaching staff stated that they thought the partnership was a good idea.

Recognising the success of Safer School Partnerships and their impact on the education system, the DfES officially mainstreamed SSP in March 2006. Comprehensive guidance has been issued, demonstrating a menu of options available in the setting up of a partnership and the benefits to be gained.

The vision is to increase the number of Safer School Partnerships across England, introducing them to a range of schools, including feeder primaries. This is particularly welcome news in the light of the prominence of *Every Child Matters*. Indeed, joint area reviews (JARs) and annual performance assessments (APA) will be looking and assessing schools on the five outcomes – namely, being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and economic well-being – outlined in this Green Paper. SSP can contribute to these outcomes, and may well be a feature of the JAR.

### Programmes within SSP

Close SSP partnership between schools, policing staff and youth offending teams can complement the work of other crime prevention schemes such as youth inclusion programmes (YIPs). Targeting the 50 children and young people aged between 13 and 16 deemed to be most at risk of offending, truancy or social exclusion, YIPs provide positive activities – such as art-work, sport, IT-skills and drama, which are all delivered by mentors and strong role models – which aim to address offending behaviour. These programmes are delivered either

through youth offending teams or other organisations tasked with crime reduction and community safety work. A high proportion of participants are disengaged from school (excluded or persistently truanting) or exhibiting challenging behaviour that could result in exclusion.

YIPs can work with disruptive pupils over the short term as part of the Safer School Partnership and help to ease young people back into the mainstream. SSPs would be wise to reap the benefits of YIP and other such programs that work to reintegrate young people into mainstream services.

### Examples of methodology – resolving the issues

As part of their aim to encourage healthy relationships within schools, many SSPs now advocate the use of restorative justice, a technique supported by the DfES, Youth Justice Board and the Association of Chief Police Officers. Restorative justice brings together – under the supervision of a trained mediator – two or more people in dispute. It aims to encourage a dialogue, allowing the victim to explain the impact of the offender's actions, and enabling the perpetrator to apologise and – where appropriate – make reparation for some of the harm they caused. This method has been adopted by many schools to resolve unacceptable behaviour, truancy and bullying, and to facilitate the reinclusion of previously excluded young people.

Other very successful methods have been used within schools to tackle disruptive behaviour, bullying and truancy alongside routine staff and police intervention, one of which has been the introduction of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs). ABCs are voluntary contracts where the young person, school and parents are involved. Causes of behaviour are identified by the young person and parties involved. The contract is signed, with an agreed cause of action planned and agreed. Consequences of the behaviour are explained and a clear

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picture given of where such behaviour could lead. Failure to adhere to an ABC could lead to an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) being granted, although these orders should be seen as a last resort. An example of this system working is in Essex, where six hundred ABCs were drawn up with only three of these young people going on to receive an ASBO.

### A flexible approach

There are varying models of SSP according to the needs of individual schools. This may range from a full-time police constable attached to that school – supported by a policing team, a full-time project worker and administrator with secondees from other agencies – to a less intensive version requiring occasional input from the police and with direct links to other agencies, giving the opportunity for intervention if necessary. The role demands a highly motivated, confident and dynamic person who understands the needs of young people, as the new mainstreaming guidance makes clear.

The intensity of the SSP is decided between school governors, school heads, local policing commanders, the local authority and other partners. Local needs such as levels of problematic behaviour, truancy and crime will be a main influencing factor.

Shared aims and objectives of the partnership are agreed and signed up to by partners. Bullying, behaviour and truancy protocols are drawn up between the parties involved to establish a clear focus and direction. Partnership steering groups with additional strategic groups are formulated for well-run and efficient SSPs.

The SSP is funded in different ways, for example by local authorities, through Youth Offending Team prevention funds,

and in some cases, part-funded by the schools. The police force in a majority of cases pays the officer's wage, whilst the school provides facilities such as office space and access to data systems such as school registers and discipline protocols. An open and transparent relationship between all partners involved is vital for a successful SSP.

Those who work in schools have the some of the greatest opportunities to influence, shape and educate children and young people. Safer Schools Partnerships – by providing a significant level of support to pupils and staff alike – help to ensure that such responsibility does not become a burden. By introducing SSP into the mainstream, the benefits of the programme will be extended even further, not only to children and young people, but also to teaching staff, and the wider community.

*Jonathan Burgess is a Police Inspector and a member of the ACPO Youth Issues Group. He is a lead for the Youth Justice Board on Safer School Partnerships within the prevention section.*

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