

New school uniform

Mary Hampshire on the impact of police presence in three West Yorkshire schools

July 23rd 2003

[The Guardian](#)

Emma Harrison is beckoned into the head's office as she arrives for her surgery at Greenhead High School. "I've had a call. Some of our pupils have stolen some baseball bats from Holy Family and set a blazer on fire," says head teacher Patricia McCarthy. "Could you look into that? By the way, the student who went missing from school has turned up. Things seem to have improved, so thanks." PC Harrison, 30, is one of the country's first school-based police officers. She divides her week among Greenhead High, Holy Family and Oak Bank comprehensive schools in Keighley, West Yorkshire, which together have 4,000 pupils.

"I'm not here as a heavy-handed teacher to deal with discipline issues," says Harrison, as she strolls through the corridors of Greenhead, her radio, CS gas, a baton and handcuffs slung over her hips. "I don't tick-off pupils about their school uniform, for running in the corridor or for misbehaving in lessons. My job is to create a safe environment for learning. I step in where legal issues are at stake." Her post was created a year ago through the government's neighbourhood renewal fund. It is now funded - at least for a further year - by the three schools, Keighley town council and West Yorkshire police.

There are 100 police officers in place in other schools under the government's Safer Schools Partnerships (SSP) programme. This is aimed at schools in localities identified as having crime problems. The officers are typically stationed full time at a school and work with the teachers, governors and the local education authority.

Although Harrison's appointment did not come under the SSP programme, her approach is similar. The job involves dealing with crime and antisocial behaviour, including assault, criminal damage, bullying and truancy. There have been isolated cases of drug dealing, gang rivalry and offensive weapons, and Harrison has also had to intervene when tensions spill out from school into the community and vice versa.

"It's all about getting in early and dealing with the small stuff before it gets more serious," says Harrison, who trained as a teacher but chose a career in the police force instead. "A lot of young people think they are immune from the law because an incident has happened in school. They don't understand the youth justice system and the fact that they only get two chances - a reprimand and a final warning - before being charged. In the past, they were cautioned several times."

Harrison sits in on meetings with at-risk youngsters facing, or returning from, exclusion. She works with those who have been reprimanded by police for their behaviour on the streets, talking to them about their actions and the effect on their victims. "Emma adds extra clout when students are verging on, or have been involved in, illegal or antisocial behaviour," says McCarthy. "The shared cost is relatively small between three schools and it benefits the community at large. It's part of students' education, understanding their role in society. She has also taken some pupils on a residential to the Lake District, showing that the police are approachable.

"It's really helpful having a familiar face around school and some continuity. It's difficult for officers at the local police station to find the time to come to school, whereas Emma can respond quickly. She can get in touch with teachers and parents easily."

In one instance, a group of boys was causing a nuisance to local residents, throwing stones and damaging property. Initially, the residents called the school, not the police, complaining that the youths were causing mayhem and asking what the school was going to do about it. "I liaised with residents, teachers, parents and pupils after introducing myself as the school police officer," Harrison says. "When the residents described the young people to me, I had a good idea who they were. Two were given reprimands." McCarthy adds: "We can't measure the impact Emma is having. We don't have a control group with an equivalent of her to compare to. But, anecdotally, we are seeing results - for example, in a change of behaviour."

One bright pupil with a good attendance record inexplicably went missing from Greenhead. Harrison went to see the family and found that the child was being kept at home. "Rather than get involved in the reasons why, I explained that by law the pupil was required to be in school and I escorted the pupil back with me," she says. "I don't think the family realised the legal implications of their behaviour. As a result of that intervention, the student did return to school."

During the morning, Harrison's mobile rings. It is the head teacher at Holy Family, asking if she will arrest a pupil. "There's a boy coming in with his parents because he's caused damage to a member of staff's car," Harrison explains after taking the call. "That's a classic example of something that the member of staff would not have bothered making a formal complaint about to the local station." Harrison does not arrest pupils in school unless it is a public order offence, so she says she will arrange to take them to the police station. In her office, she checks her laptop, which has records of all the incidents she has dealt with since being in post.

One file concerns a pupil with an attendance rate of 50%. She makes a quick call to a teacher to see if he is in school. "His mum's very worried," says Harrison.

"She feels she's losing control of him because he's always wagging lessons. He's committed criminal damage, which shows he's taking the first steps on the wrong path. "If he's in school today, I want to sit down and speak to him and explain the direction in which he's heading. His teachers say he likes sport, so one idea I have is to refer him to a community project."

The teacher reports that the youngster is not in school. "I'll have to ring his mum and make an arrangement for them both to come in," says Harrison. "Of course, at some point you have to accept that some young people are not going to engage in their education. But I'm not giving up on him yet. Eleven years old is just too young."