

Tackling Knives and Violence in Schools

(March 2008)

There is little doubt that knives and violence are a serious issue for many of our UK schools, which is why the government are proposing the radical step of introducing the use of search arches and hand held security metal detectors in schools.

To put the issue into context however, although by reading the press and watching TV news bulletins, you could be forgiven for thinking sometimes that every child in the UK is a problem child, in reality, only a very small minority are. The difficulty is that it only needs one or two unruly pupils to disrupt a class or even a school, which can have a devastating effect on the rest of the pupils and the staff.

We cannot afford to be complacent however. As reported by Steve Sinnott, General Secretary of the NUT (National Union of Teachers), following their recent annual conference; in 25% of our schools, violence is a daily occurrence and over the last year, 22% of their members had encountered pupils carrying knives, whilst 19% of their members had encountered pupils carrying drugs.

Although it has been widely reported that 25% of older teenagers admit to having carried a knife to school over the last year, we must not forget the younger pupils, (children as young as 9 have been known to attack a fellow pupil with a knife).

Permanent and Temporary Exclusions from School

In an environment of zero tolerance of bad or violent behaviour in schools, pupil exclusion or suspension (permanent or temporary) is the normal penalty for the perpetrator. According to the DfES (Department for Education and Skills), last year;

9,170 pupils were permanently excluded from school, and
343,840 pupils were excluded from Secondary Schools alone for fixed periods

note: according to one national newspaper (22/03/08) some **82,480** of these exclusions resulted from children attacking a fellow pupil.

Whilst these figures are startling in themselves, they are unlikely to include figures relating the Governments many flagship London Academy schools, as this information has only recently become available after specific questions / requests in parliament made by interested MPs. According to Londons "Evening Standard" and as also published on the "thisislondon" website, one London Academy alone issued 332 temporary or permanent exclusions last year (when fully occupied, this Academy is intended to accommodate a maximum of 1450 pupils).

Question: ...with over a third of a million exclusion in just 12 months, there is obviously the serious issue of how to deal with pupils during the exclusion period to consider. Government proposals for "mentoring" could be a step in the right direction, but have we got enough skilled mentors, in the right place and at the right time? ...if not, what should be done in the short term?

Which Schools are at Risk from Pupil Violence?

Without question, there are certain areas such as some of our deprived inner city areas where schools will inevitably be more at risk from knife crime and pupil violence than others. In some communities for instance, gang culture is a way of life that is hard for anyone outside of the community to identify with or understand, yet for many youths it is a daily challenge. Even in those areas where gang culture is at its strongest however, surveys indicate that a great majority of youths (even those already in gangs) would prefer to have nothing to do with it.

It is not surprising therefore, that it is in this type of area in our major cities, that the government propose to supply the Search Arches and hand held security metal detectors as a deterrent to carrying knives to school or generally in the community. **But...** as evidenced over recent years by fatal stabbings of pupils, even in rural schools with no previous history of violence, **No School is Immune to the problem.**

So What Should Schools be Doing Right Now?

According to Jim Knight (Minister of State for Schools) - they should be instilling the “**3 Rs**”; **Rules, Responsibility and Respect** (obviously parental participation will be key to widespread success in this area).

The government are also recommending a **Zero Tolerance** regime, to include violence, carrying of knives or other weapons, carrying or using drugs, bullying, etc.

What Help is Available for Schools?

Special new police & community task forces are planned for some areas, whilst schools not already doing so, are expected to work closely with existing resources such as police neighbourhood schools liaison / community support officers, etc. Educating children about the risks associated with carrying a weapon is considered one of the key elements in tackling the problem and an obvious area where police involvement in the classroom can help. Many youths say they carry a weapon for protection, others to make them look big, obviously the reality is somewhat different.

Limited government funding for security metal detectors and search arches is available in some areas (initially, funding of; 100 Search Arches and 400 hand held metal detectors is planned – it appears at this point that the police will be the custodians of this equipment, which will be used not only in schools, but also generally within the community).

Schools looking to purchase scanning equipment for themselves, are advised to take expert advice on; the best type of unit for their needs, which products are reliable, how to use metal detectors effectively, etc. (*free practical advice and a review of current products is available at; <http://www.insight-security.com/metaldec.htm>)*

In 2006, the ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers) produced a guide for their members covering issues such as dealing with violent pupils. For details of the ATL, visit; http://www.atl.org.uk/atl_en/default.asp