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Class Act

John Dean reports on how a police-led initiative is helping schools consign criminal behaviour to the history books.

years ago, behaviour has improved out of all recognition and criminal incidents involving pupils have plummeted.

The BAT team was created four years ago and includes a sergeant, Dawn Naughton, PCs Lynda Sibley and Edward O'Hara and borough council education welfare officer Hannah Gooch.

It was established to work across all the secondary schools in the Redcar borough, targeting offences including assaults on staff by pupils, attacks on each other by students, drug-dealing, possession of offensive weapons and truancy.

Underpinning the initiative has been a determination that young offenders should not be lost to education and that exposure to the criminal justice system early on could prevent them going on to commit more serious offences when they are older.

Instead of exclusions from school, the young people are referred to the BAT team, which is based in Redcar, and whose members regularly visit schools across the area.

Their work includes offering advice and encouragement to wean children off troublemaking but, crucially, also has a hard edge to it. If their transgressions are serious enough, the pupils are taken down to the police station for a formal warning. The team pull no punches: it goes on their record and is designed to act as a deterrent.



Photography: Keith Blundy

The atmosphere in the school dining hall is happy, the children showing respect for each other and the staff as they collect their meals and head for a seat.

There is nothing special about the scene except that four and a half years ago, it simply would not have been the case at Redcar Community College.

Those who remember those days at the school in the coastal town of Redcar, in the Cleveland police force area, recall an ugly feeling of intimidation and a profound lack of respect from a significant number of the pupils.

That the situation has changed so dramatically is just one example of a district-wide initiative bringing together school staff, a team of Cleveland Police officers and Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, the local education authority.

Since the Behaviour, Attendance, Truancy (BAT) team started its work at Redcar Community College four

There are also behaviour workshops for children and, on occasions, the officers will patrol corridors, for instance if some pupils do not report for lessons but instead roam the corridors.

Disruptive parents are also targeted with the BAT team having issued a number of fixed penalty tickets for abusive behaviour on school premises or prosecuted parents via the courts. If the school decides to ban a parent from its premises, the BAT team will deliver the letter by hand because a police officer at the door is seen as more likely to drive home the seriousness of the message.

The overall intention, according to team members, is to deflect young people away from lives of crime and anti-social behaviour.

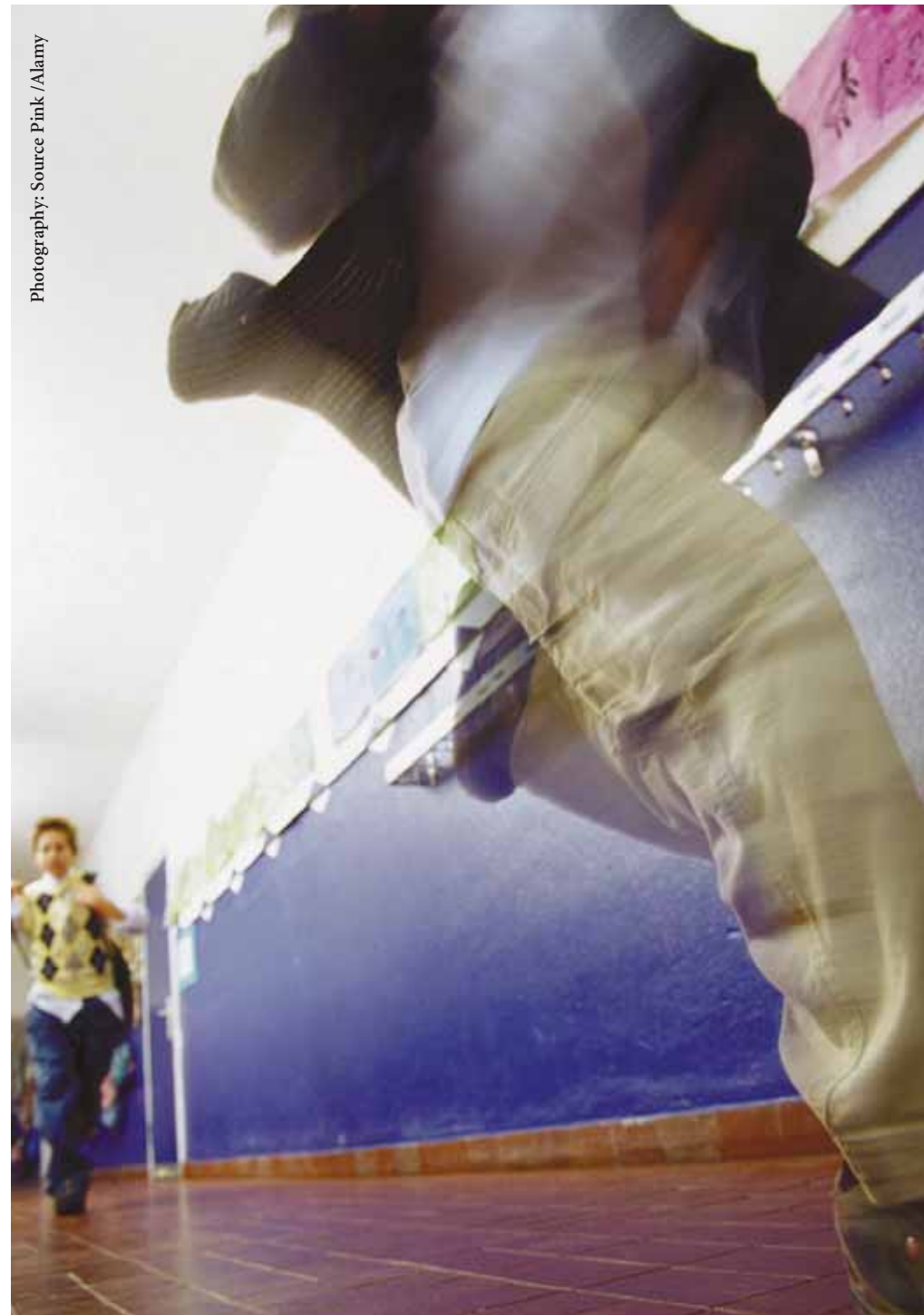
PC O'Hara says: "The team was set up because it was apparent that the young people we saw causing trouble on a Thursday and Friday night in the town were doing the same kind of thing in school as well."

Keeping them in school was seen as vital and Hannah Gooch says: "We know that if young people disengage from education, there is a risk that they can become involved in crime such as vandalism and drug abuse, can turn to abusing alcohol and can become truants. We see the BAT team as an intervention to prevent that happening to these young people."

Dave Lister, the Attendance and Welfare Manager for the council, and a former Cleveland police officer, says: "We have set out to show these pupils the consequences of their poor behaviour, to show them that this kind of behaviour is not tolerated on the streets and that it will not be tolerated in school either. We set out to reduce the number of exclusions from schools because we know that if pupils are excluded from school, they are exposed to all kinds of crime.

"We feel that it can be effective that they are warned about their behaviour by a police officer.

"We also consider the victim. If there is a case of serious bullying, we do not just deal with the offender but also talk to the victim, to make sure that the child feels



Photography: Source Pink / Alamy

The presence of police officers has reduced truancy

they are being supported."

In addition, the BAT team runs a series of initiatives to reward children who behave properly, including awarding them gift vouchers.

Mr Lister says: "It is important to recognise pupils who behave, who come in every day and get on with their schooling. The feedback we get is that our approach is welcomed by the

schools."

Good in theory but does it work? Well, perhaps the most eloquent testimony possible comes from those who have been involved with the improvements at Redcar Community College, a senior school of more than 800 pupils in one of the UK's most deprived areas.

Speaking as the pupils queue for their lunch in a lively but cheerful and



Photography: Keith Blundy

Officers challenge poor behaviour at Redcar Community College

respectful manner, Bill Ashton, the assistant head teacher and the school's Lead Behaviour Professional, highlighted the pleasant atmosphere and says: "If you had come here four and a half years ago, it would have been very different. The school was very noisy, lessons were disrupted and there were pupils who challenged authority, even at a senior level. You had a gang-type culture. You had gangs roaming the corridor, wearing caps and with their hoods up, dressed deliberately to intimidate. And at lunchtime they would be all over the place."

Mr Lister recalls: "I would come to the school and within a minute I would get a headache."

There were problems out of the school as well with gangs roaming the neighbouring area at lunchtime, intimidating local people. Many of them left the school premises to smoke.

The response from the school and the BAT team was strong, including barring all but year 11 pupils from leaving school at lunchtime and reinforcing the concept of respectful behaviour within the corridors.

Police officers supported it and PC O'Hara says: "We would go out and take cigarettes off the children and send them back into the school. And in serious cases of offending, we would take the young people down to the police station."

The effect has been dramatic, a success mirrored across the borough, including a greater willingness of schools to seek police help.

"Now it is unusual to have a serious incident, crime has dropped and we don't get teachers being assaulted. The BAT team has made a difference and let the school get back to what it is supposed to do, to be a safe learning environment."

Dave Lister says: "There was an issue with schools. They felt they should not call the police because they would be seen as failing schools, but that has changed in the past four years. The young people overwhelmingly say that they like the presence of police officers in their school."

He said that, in 2002/3, the school had 220 pupil exclusions, often the same pupil being repeatedly excluded for bad, even very serious, criminal behaviour. In the first year of the BAT team operating this figure fell to 33 and in the last academic year, 2006/07, it had fallen to only six pupil exclusions.

Bill Ashton says: "The children and staff

have responded and welcomed the involvement of the BAT team. They feel more supported than ever before.

Now it is unusual to have a serious incident, crime has dropped and we don't get teachers being assaulted. The BAT team has made a difference and let the school get back to what it is supposed to do, to be a safe learning environment."

"It reassures well-behaved young people, who view the police as there on their behalf.

"There was perception before within education that you do not call the police, that we could criminalise these children and that the school was not a place for police officers. That has changed and what we are seeing here is the well-rounded police officer, encouraging children, advising them and taking action when needed. It is the full range."

And PC O'Hara, recalling days when weapons were more common among the pupils, adds: "We are not getting a lot of knives either."

Parental behaviour is changing as well and Bill Ashton says: "We used to get parents coming in and shouting at the receptionist and the teachers. That is not happening now."

Truancy is also well down with attendance at the school up to 94 per cent. Police reinforce that message by co-ordinating regular joint council/police operations and intervening during their daily duties.

PC Sibley says: "When we are driving between schools, if we see children out during lesson time we challenge them and then we drive them back to school."

The team is realistic enough to acknowledge that BAT cannot solve everything; there are still problems with some young Redcar people, and there are issues about under-age drinking and anti-social behaviour.

However, the BAT team feel they are sowing the seeds of success for the future by making pupils aware of their responsibilities, and also creating relationships between children and authority figures.