

THE school assembly hall erupts with laughter and excited murmuring. A police sniffer dog has just walked down an imaginary nightclub queue on the stage and stuck its nose up the head teacher's crotch, before sitting down next to her, wagging its tail and looking up expectantly. A police officer searches her suit pockets and pulls out a bag of cannabis, raising another giggle from the assembly. The officer and headmistress begin a talk about the importance of keeping the school drug-free.

Meanwhile, unknown to the children, another dog is sniffing the schoolbags they have left in each classroom. As the children leave the hall, they are told they must file past the dog and be smelled for drugs. The dog, which can detect traces of cannabis, heroin, cocaine, speed and ecstasy, sits down next to three children, who are taken off, embarrassed, to a nearby room to be searched and questioned. Another pupil is taken out of class after his bag is 'indicated' by the dog. The parents of each child are informed. A search of the assembly hall reveals a lump of hash has been dropped on the floor and another bubble-gummed under a seat.

PACK MENTALITY

Scenes like this, virtually unheard of in UK schools three years ago and regarded by many drug workers as an insignificant rarity today, are being played out in a rapidly rising number of schools in England and Wales. A *Druglink* investigation has revealed at least one hundred secondary schools are now using sniffer dogs to regularly search tens of thousands of students as young as 11, and that scores more are queuing up to follow suit.

Drug dogs, more commonly associated with airports, train stations, pubs and clubs, are currently being used in schools in Kent, West Midlands, Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, Greater London, Leicestershire, Warwickshire, Staffordshire, Devon, Greater Manchester, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Hampshire. Kent Police, which pioneered the use of dogs in schools and are now taking dogs into primary schools for demonstration purposes only,



Class of 2004: going

Is the use of sniffer dogs to search schoolchildren confined to a few classrooms in Kent? **Max Daly** investigates

say 15 other police forces around the country are looking to set up similar schemes.

The scramble to use sniffer dogs as proof of a zero tolerance drugs policy, is, according to one school drug advisor, an "unstoppable force" which will result in the widespread use of dogs in schools. Many headteachers have been encouraged to bring in the dogs by local police forces, security firms, governors and parent-teacher associations. More say they are willing to use dogs because it is now seen as a "soft option" compared to random drug testing, a policy backed by Prime Minister Tony Blair in March. The searching by sniffer dogs of schoolchildren (a strategy banned in most US states) and their unattended school bags was originally deemed "not really appropriate" by the Department for Education and Skills, although its drugs guidance for schools, published in February, watered this

down to a policy that can be carried out by schools "with extreme caution". Like the government, the Association of Chief Police Officers has put the decision to use sniffer dogs in the hands of individual head teachers.

ANYTHING TO DECLARE?

"Sniffer dogs are not over the top. They are a very mellow, humane and civilised response to the threat of drugs in my school," says Annette Croft, head of the Heart of England secondary school near Solihull, which has brought in the dogs twice in the last year. Pupils had their bags and coats searched and were told to line up and be sniffed outside their classes. Croft admits the dogs created unease among her pupils. "Some of the students felt very anxious. They told me they had that guilty feeling of going through customs." In line with most schools which use dogs, Heart of England parents were

From customs to the classroom: dogs' powerful sense of smell is now used in school



to the dogs

asked to sign a letter of consent to allow the searches. Children of parents who do not consent are searched by hand.

So far the dogs have picked out four children at the school. One boy, described by Croft as being "in a very anxious state" when the dog sat by him, said he smelled of cannabis because other pupils had been smoking the drug on the school bus. As a result of the information gleaned from the boy, the school contacted the local bus company. It told Croft they were fully equipped to help out because bus conductors had been fitted with hidden cameras. The bus company agreed to pass on any relevant footage of Heart of England pupils taking drugs on to Croft.

UNDIGNIFIED AND UNRELIABLE

Although searches around the country have been successful in identifying a relatively small number of pupils carrying drugs, the use of dogs has been criticised as an undignified, intrusive scare tactic which is driving pupils' drug problems underground and creating distrust between pupils,

their classmates and teachers. There is concern over the reliability of both the dogs and the information given to police and teachers by pupils found smelling of drugs.

John Franklin-Webb, director of security firm GIS, whose search dogs and handlers are used in 14 schools, admits sniffer dogs can pick out children who have not been near illegal drugs. He says dogs can show "heightened interest" in girls who are menstruating, pupils who have been prescribed the attention deficit disorder drug Ritalin, as well as the smell of some food and of other dogs on children. Franklin-Webb says he is "uncomfortable" with dogs searching unattended schoolbags.

A survey by Kent Police, which has carried out 30 sniffer dog searches using labradors and spaniels on 18 schools and colleges since February 2002, found half the children said they felt intimidated by the dogs. Most pupils told police they were unfazed by the searches, but some complained that they had been lied to about the bag searches, were scared of the dogs and were worried other children may plant drugs in their bags. Of the 85 pupils found smelling of drugs during the Community Against Drugs-funded Operation Caddy, just three pupils have been arrested for supply. "A lot of intelligence comes from pupils grassing up other pupils because bringing in the dogs ups the ante, the kids feel guilty and awkward," explains Kent drug liaison officer PC Paul Brown.

LEARN THE RISKS

"But this is inclusion not exclusion. It is not our remit to nick kids out of school." Pupils caught with Class B or C drugs are not arrested but put on a course to learn the risks of abuse. Class A drug finds are not dealt with under Operation Caddy, but are handed over to regular officers to deal with. PC Brown says schools in inner city areas may find using sniffer dogs difficult because of the higher number of Muslim pupils. The religion sees dogs as unclean animals. Kent police claim a high rate of satisfaction by pupils and parents, a low number of complaints and a 50 per cent fall in drug incidents in the schools since the searches began.

Some police forces have decided against using dogs. A detailed evaluation carried out for Bedfordshire Police found children distrusted the dogs' effectiveness. During one test search a dog 'indicated' one pupil who had not come in contact with drugs, while ignoring pupils who had self reported using drugs in the last few days. It also found dog searches did not make them less likely to carry drugs, concluding that, "walking pupils past the dog added to the costs and risks but added little in the way of benefits". The Metropolitan Police has also decided against using dogs.

UNSTOPPABLE

As yet no member of staff has been caught out by a dog during a school search, although Kent police says its policy is to pull the dog away from an 'indicated' teacher, who will be discreetly questioned later in the day. One Kent teacher had a close shave when a dog sat next to her in an assembly. She told officers it must be because she was wearing the same coat inside which cannabis had been planted during a previous demonstration three months ago, far too long ago for the dog to detect. Teachers' unions have expressed caution over the policy, with NASUWT slamming the use of dogs in schools as an "exercise in intimidation and fear".

Emma Balchin, a schools drug advisor for the Wolverhampton area, where dogs have made three visits to Wednesfield High School, told *Druglink* there is widespread mistrust of sniffer dogs among her colleagues. "I haven't met a school drug advisor in England who supports the use of dogs, but it seems to be an unstoppable force," says Balchin, who has developed a protocol for schools who want to use dogs. "It's just a way of schools saying they have a hard line on drug abuse to parents while driving pupils' problems or concerns further underground. I felt that no matter what we did to advise against it, it was going to happen.

"The only thing the dogs found in our school was some wrapped, crushed up chalk which a child had thrown on the floor for a joke. The only thing found on a pupil, after a dog had sat next to her, causing her great humiliation, was a packet of contraceptive pills." ■

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