

Sniffing out trouble

Schools are not bringing in sniffer dogs and drug tests purely to catch out their pupils. They have a reputation to nurture, says **Amy McLellan**

SCHOOLS are under scrutiny as never before. The new political mantra of parental choice means our schools are increasingly hamstrung by targets and record keeping so their 'customers' can make informed choices.

But schools are not only expected to deliver year-on-year academic gains in published league tables: teachers are increasingly charged with making sure our children attend breakfast clubs, clean their teeth, avoid the turkey twizzlers and stay out of the sun. Their performance against a whole range of measures is paraded in the full glare of publicity, be it league tables, Ofsted reports, local newspapers or online parent groups.

One by-product of this information blitz is increased competition to get pupils into the 'best' schools. These schools are increasingly selective, either by design or by default as affluent, in-the-know families move into the catchment area. It is little wonder that schools are increasingly mindful of their brand. They are keen to deliver a service that meets the checklist of the more discerning parent – good exam results, extensive extra-curricular activities and a secure environment – aware that slippage on any of these points could drive away these desired customers and engender a vicious cycle of decline. And in a world in which schools are encouraged to engage in partnerships with the wider community – for which read local businesses that can provide leadership and sponsorship – reputation really matters.

This helps explain the growing use of sniffer dogs and random drugs tests in our schools. The visible reinforcement of the "no drugs here" message obviously appeals to parents and potential partners. Headteachers that back these measures agree a key benefit is the reassurance provided to pupils, their parents and the wider community.

Peter Coates, head of Wednesfield High School in Wolverhampton, brought in sniffer dogs three years ago. "We had heard too many rumours that children were taking drugs and bringing them into school," he says. "We decided to either put the rumours to bed or find out what kind of problem we had so we could deal with it."

The dogs have now been in ten times and have yet to find any drugs. Coates says schools quickly get labelled 'good' or 'bad' - the dogs are, he says, a way to take control of the "myths and legends" that can surround schools. Yet are there wider benefits beyond reputation management? Annette Croft of the Heart of England School in Solihull, now in its third year of using dogs (again, no drugs have been found on the premises), points to improved behaviour. Exam results and behaviour have also improved at Abbey School in Kent since random drug

testing was introduced, while at Wednesfield relations with the local police are better, both in and out of school. All point to widespread acceptance of the measures among pupils, who find the threat of random tests counters any unwelcome peer pressure.

Many schools that have pioneered the use of dogs or tests have done so in a very careful and controlled manner, aware of potential controversy and the potential of legal action. Parents, teachers and pupils are kept fully informed, parents have the right to opt out and, in case of a positive test, the response is not punitive but one of support, involving parents and school counsellors. Drugs education is also high on the agenda.

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School drug dogs: a valuable PR tool?

But as these measures become more widespread, will these careful controls be maintained? Will private security firms operating sniffer dog schemes understand the sensitivities of operating in a school environment? How will this be resourced? Abbey School controversially used funding from the Murdoch newspaper group and other schools use donations from parents and charity events. And doesn't this detract from some of the more pressing problems facing our schools, such as improving academic attainment for those from low income backgrounds, stretching the brightest pupils and providing for children with special educational needs?

"I can't help feeling this is a sledgehammer to crack a nut," says one teacher in a school that has yet to adopt any testing measures. "Alcohol is a much bigger problem in this area but nobody ever makes the same fuss about drinking."

In the meantime, the debate has moved on. Sniffer dogs and swab tests sound relatively benign and unintrusive compared to the random airport-security style checks now mooted to deal with knives and other offensive weapons that are, apparently, rife in our schools. ●

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