

Raising the alarm

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Schools should not be jails, but how do you keep pupils safe? Madeleine Brettingham reports

Before 1996, most schools had more pressing things on their minds than protecting themselves from intruders. But the Dunblane massacre changed all that. In one bloody day, 16 children and a primary teacher were gunned down by Thomas Watt Hamilton, a former Scout leader. The incident was a wake-up call. Suddenly headteachers were wondering how they'd protect their staff and pupils if the same thing happened to them.

School shootings are rare, but a reality. There have been more than three dozen school shootings in the US in the past 10 years and two in Finland in the past 12 months - both by disgruntled teenagers who ultimately turned the gun on themselves. Dunblane accelerated the take-up of CCTV in the UK, but in America measures have been more drastic, particularly in the wake of the Columbine school shootings in 1999. Security guards and metal detectors are commonplace in inner-city schools, and earlier this year, one school board in Harrold, a small town in Texas, decided to let some of its teachers carry handguns.

David Thweatt, Harrold School's superintendent, told The TES Magazine: "I think a lot of schools are either optimistic or pacifist, but we are neither. We prepare for fires and tornados, but not this, and it's happening more and more."

While the decision was condemned by the US media - one local teachers' union complained it was "absurdly dangerous" - it represents the extreme end of a trend in which schools are being pressed to consider security. This doesn't just come as a result of school shootings, but the costliness of vandalism and arson in buildings equipped with expensive computer equipment, and concerns about child protection. Whereas once schools were open campuses, which parents and dog walkers could stray on to at leisure, that is increasingly a thing of the past.

Heads have a legal duty to consider the security of staff and pupils as part of their health and safety policy, and introduce all measures that are, in that awkward phrase, reasonably practicable. Not only must they ask themselves the question: "How can I protect my staff and pupils?", but also: "How can I afford it?" and "What are the downsides?"

Historically, uncertainty has prevailed about where to strike the balance between these three. In 1989, St Brigid's, a Catholic primary in Merseyside, became one of the first UK schools to adopt hi-tech security measures, belting itself in with a nine-foot steel stockade, steel doors and infra-red alarms. One education official remarked at the time: "Visually, it's on the edge of being a prison."

Nowadays, heads are more pragmatic about the need for these measures, especially if they've been subjected to repeated attacks. Maurice Hicks, head of Holyrood School in Somerset, says that the installation of steel-barred perimeter fencing at his secondary, which in the past endured smashed windows and multiple arson attacks, has been a success. The Pounds 160,000 cost was split between the school and local authority. "Obviously it's an expense when you'd rather spend money on teaching and learning," says Maurice. "And we were concerned about the overall appearance and the subliminal message it would send out, as we're a community school in a semi-rural area. We didn't want to import an inner-city mentality. But now it's one of those things I wish I'd done years ago."

Thanks to a coat of green paint, Maurice says that the fence is not an eyesore and as a result of thorough consultation it has avoided becoming a source of resentment among pupils and teachers. "You've got to make

sure everyone's aware of the situation and what you're trying to achieve as it can easily be misunderstood," he says. "Is it there to keep the children in? No, it's about protecting the pupils. The local crime prevention officer told us that major incidents of arson are often preceded by small fires and I said to the parents: 'We shouldn't wait for a disaster to happen'."

However, ramping up security can create mistrust, especially if CCTV cameras are involved. A survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers earlier this year found that more than 80 per cent of schools have CCTV, and more than 20 per cent of teachers were concerned about hidden cameras monitoring staff. Paranoid? Maybe. The experience of being watched in the workplace is discomfiting for most people. As one head told *The TES Magazine*: "We don't want to go down that route (of installing CCTV in classes), it's intimidating for teachers."

There are also doubts about whether CCTV is cost-effective, especially since staff can only respond to incidents if there is someone watching the monitors all day. Hamish Chalmers, head of Safe School Technologies, which supplies cameras and other products to heads, says that their main use is as a deterrent. "Normal zoom cameras require someone to be viewing them live and schools don't have that facility. But you're trying to make it as scary as possible for those thinking of committing crime. Of course, pupils can work out where the blind area is and go there for a fag, so they're not fool-proof. As a deterrent, they're a powerful thing."

There isn't much research evidence to back up the effectiveness of CCTV. Just 3 per cent of street robberies in London are solved using CCTV evidence, according to Scotland Yard. A 2002 report for an offender rehabilitation charity showed the installation of cameras slashed crime in half of areas, but increased it in others, suggesting that some criminals had simply moved elsewhere.

Chris Keates, general secretary of the NASUWT teacher union, is concerned that schools think security begins and ends with closed-circuit cameras, when there's a range of other, cheaper options open to them. "Some of the most effective measures are not expensive at all, such as making sure exterior doors can't be opened from the outside, or commonly-used routes around the school don't take pupils to isolated areas," she says. "A lot of schools think they have to get CCTV, but in our view that's one of the least effective ways of going about it. We've got to get past the barrier of schools thinking they can't afford security, because as more school sites are used for co-located services, with members of the public coming on to the site, it has to go to the top of the agenda."

Kate Broadhurst, a researcher at the University of Leicester, who worked with the NASUWT on the Government's Safer Schools and Hospitals project, agrees that CCTV can be a classic mistake, with cameras being sold to schools when they're not the best option.

She says that a well-publicised security policy is one of the top things for schools to have in place. "What we found is if measures don't go hand in hand with a strong policy it doesn't work," she says. A security team made up of a senior member of staff ("the clout") and someone with good working knowledge of the school, such as a caretaker or facilities manager ("the eyes and ears on the ground") is ideal, as it combines a good working knowledge of the school with decision-making power. Perimeter fencing and security badges are helpful, but schools can make big improvements without spending any money, such as altering the flow of pupils around the building.

Collecting information about the problem is also essential. Sadly, most schools, local authorities and even the Government don't gather statistics on school crime. Here, the Home Office crime reduction site (www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/toolkits/ssh04.htm) is a useful resource. It recommends carrying out three tasks before you draw up your policy: compiling figures on the nature of security breaches, the perpetrator and the time of day, which should help you spot patterns; walking around the building and grounds to spot vulnerabilities, and talking to staff and pupils about their concerns; and finally drawing up a risk matrix.

This will help you to work out which risks you should be tackling first - which are most likely or stand to have the biggest impact.

Ian Carter, who is responsible for the children and young people's section of the Association of Chief Police Officers, advises schools to get in touch with their local authority's school security adviser and neighbourhood police force, which will be able to suggest improvements.

"We'll be able to give you crime prevention advice and will have an architecture liaison officer who can talk about where to use natural barriers, such as bushes, instead of locks," he says.

Alerting the local community to potential threats is also an option. "Using schools for community events on one hand can increase the risk because you have people coming in and out without being vetted, but on the other hand, they will take an interest in what's going on around the school," Ian says.

As to priorities in terms of basic security, Maurice Parsons, head of the Buckingham Security consultancy, says that the perimeter and entrances are the two main areas to secure. "You should have fencing all around the grounds with only one or two access points, and make sure the entrance to school is controlled by guards or a buzzer and that doors are locked to the outside while children are in school," he says. Concentrating on the busiest periods of the day is also helpful.

But what about the threat of an armed intruder or school shooting? An unlikely event, true. But, after the tragedy of Dunblane and this year's Finnish shootings, most heads will have given it some thought, especially since school security measures have proved ineffective in preventing previous tragedies.

Ken Trump, the US-based author of *Practical School Security and Classroom Killers?*, advises schools that are worried about the matter to practise a security lockdown - in which pupils are guided into safe, locked areas until the police arrive. "You need a school crisis plan, staff who are trained in best practice, and the testing and exercising of these plans - not every day, but several times throughout the school year. Staff should go through hypothetical scenarios. The problem we find most often is that plans are there, but they're gathering dust on a shelf."

Although schools now have the power to search pupils for weapons without consent (see panel on previous page), this is only likely to be used in rare instances. Ken isn't a fan of the less physically intrusive equivalent - metal detectors: "You have to operate them 24/7, work out a way to do that in a time-sensitive manner, and even then they're not a 100 per cent guarantee. Prisons have the most punitive restrictions and searches and yet you still get gangs and guns in there. The knee-jerk response isn't always the best," he says. "You need to strike a balance between prevention and preparedness."

The raft of new schools being built means this preparedness can be designed into schools from the start, a trend exemplified by the new Queen Elizabeth High School in Carmarthenshire, which has enjoyed a Pounds 26.5 million revamp. As well as CCTV in corridors and entrances, which senior staff can monitor from their laptops and a screen in reception, the school operates tight controls over entrances and exits. Doors are locked during the day, and can only be opened by staff using an electronic card. And the main entrance includes two reception hatches, one on either side of the glass door, so that members of the public must present themselves at reception before being buzzed in.

"If we have an angry parent wanting to see a member of staff, we have an interview room outside the doors so that staff can be called down and talk to them there," says Alan Carter, acting head.

But keeping staff and pupils safe doesn't have to involve budget-busting technology. Investing time in evaluating the threat, drawing up a security policy and changing the flow of bodies in and around your school

can prove equally helpful, and cost a fraction of the amount. In areas of high crime or vandalism, barriers such as fencing can be a boon. But with the right approach, your school can be safe without becoming a prison.

WHAT COULD PUPILS CARRY INTO SCHOOL TODAY?

Teachers gained powers to search pupils for weapons last year, but few are learning how. Michael Shaw took the UK's only accredited training course in search techniques for teachers. Here he shares his experiences.

"I am a 16-year-old pupil with a small gun strapped to my ankle under my sock. Two school security staff have been tipped off by another pupil that I am carrying a weapon and are now checking me from head to toe with a handheld metal detector.

"Moments after the detector beeps, they find the concealed pistol and call the police. But there is another surprise that they only discover during a subsequent pat-down search: the knuckleduster in my back pocket. Unlike the gun, the knuckleduster is real and did not show up because it is home-made, from Pyrex.

The role-play is part of a day-long training course in searching and screening pupils for weapons, the only accredited one currently being offered to teachers and lecturers in the UK.

The scenarios are not exactly realistic: a pupil would be extremely unlikely to carry one such concealed weapon, let alone two. Peter Smith (pictured), the course leader, shows us a range of unlikely weapons, including blades hidden in hairbrushes, amulets, lipstick and a pound coin. A slingshot constructed from a plastic bottle top, ball bearing and a condom is surprisingly effective, while a cigarette lighter with a built-in flick-knife is simply nasty.

The main point of the course is to help teachers find more mundane weapons and deter pupils from bringing them to school. Peter is concerned that schools are not prepared enough. Although dozens of FE colleges have now had staff trained, only nine secondary schools have participated so far.

The course stresses that searches, particularly those involving physical contact, should be a last resort and that it is always important to talk with pupils first."

Details on search training can be found at www.statustraining.com.