

Is Mandy the answer to our problem schools?

Meet the latest weapon in tackling rising crime and violence in UK classrooms

Patrolling school corridors in her police uniform, WPC Mandy Stanswood doesn't go unnoticed. A group of boys nudge each other and stop talking when they see her chatting to passing teachers and offering advice to their fellow pupils.

This is all in a day's work for Mandy, who is based at once-troubled Bridgemary Community Sports College in Gosport, Hampshire. She is one of 300 on-site policemen and women

currently patrolling schools across the UK.

So is it really necessary for police officers to be taken from the streets to work exclusively with teenagers and teachers? It seems so, judging by recent figures that suggest many of our schools have become danger zones.

In 2005, police in Kent and East Sussex recorded more than 4,500 crimes in local schools. Offences included wounding, theft, vandalism and harassment. And in the past four years,

there have been at least four serious knife attacks on school grounds in the UK.

Many teachers don't feel safe either. According to the National Union of Teachers, physical and verbal abuse are now part and parcel of the job, and serious attacks have taken place. In one of the worst cases, in 2004, a 15-year-old boy raped a teacher in the classroom of a London comprehensive.

When Hampshire Constabulary suggested

the idea of an on-site PC to local schools, Bridgemary's principal, Cheryl Heron, was the only one to respond.

'I thought it seemed a great idea. Who wouldn't want to create a safer school?' she says.

By contributing £20,000 towards Mandy's wages, Bridgemary secured its PC in September 2005. Since then, the 200 offences a month that used to take place at the sprawling

school have been reduced to less than 20.

As well as enforcing the law, mum-of-two Mandy, 44, tries to prevent crimes happening in the first place.

'I'm often the first person who has ever encouraged these kids to think about the consequences of their actions,' she says. 'When I tell them the policeman they throw things at in the street



Classrooms have become battlegrounds for some students

DEATHS IN SCHOOL

● Kiyon Prince, 15 (right), died after he was knifed outside his school in Edgware, North London, last May. A 16-year-old youth has admitted the stabbing, but denies murder.



Kiyon Prince

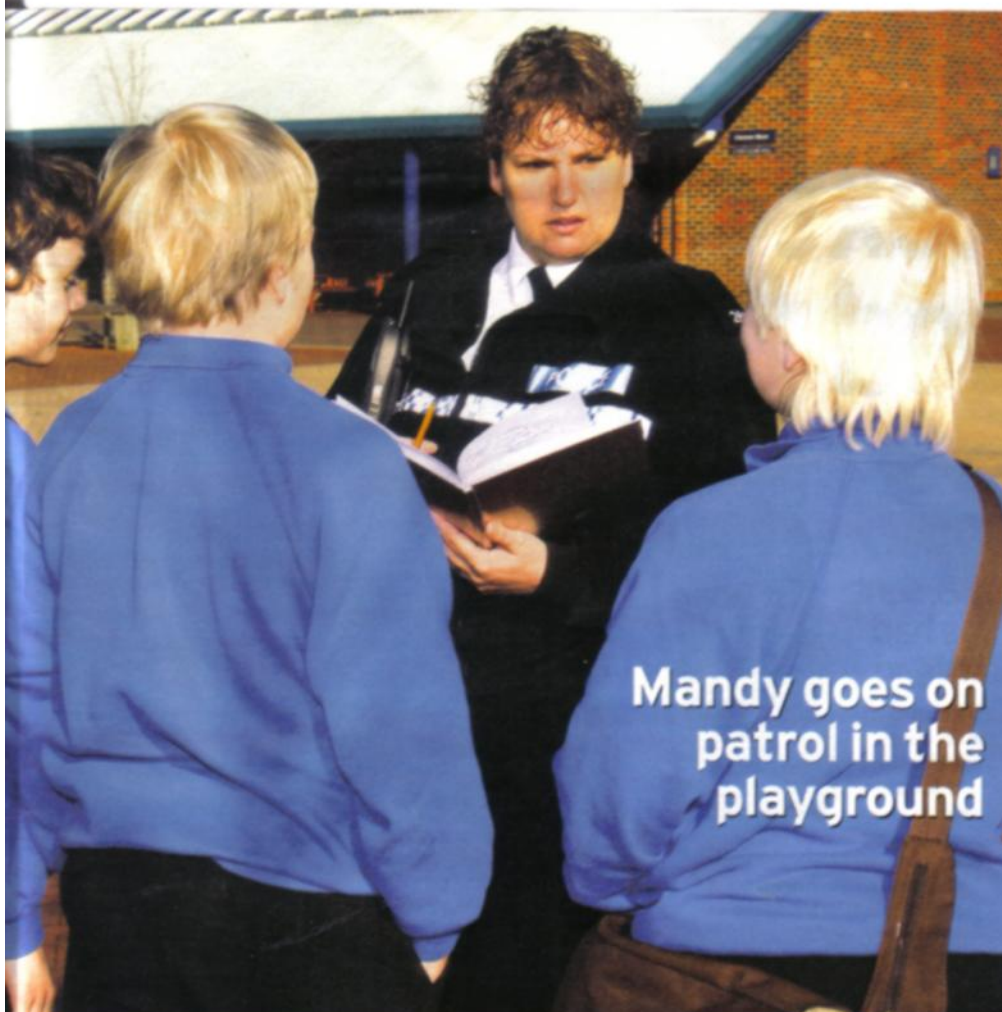
● Luke Walmsley, 14, was stabbed to death by Alan Pennell, 16, at a Lincolnshire school in 2003. Pennell, 16, was detained for life.

● In March 1996, 16 pupils and their teacher were shot dead at their school in Dunblane, central Scotland, by Thomas Hamilton, who then shot himself.



Philip Lawrence

● Headmaster Philip Lawrence, 48, was knifed to death trying to protect a pupil being attacked by a gang outside his school in Maida Vale, London, in 1995.



Mandy goes on patrol in the playground

is a dad with two kids, they tell me they'd never seen past the uniform before.'

But the job hasn't all been plain sailing for Mandy.

'When I was at school in the 1970s, we'd go quiet when a teacher came into the room, but when I walked into the classroom for the first time with a teacher, the kids were throwing things or talking on their mobile phones,' she says. 'I couldn't believe it. But I've had to accept change.'

Within hours of arriving, her presence was the talk of the school and the mere sight of her uniform was enough to silence a whole corridor. 'The effect was quite sudden,' she says. 'I think it's because they're very aware of my authority.'

Part of Mandy's role is to offer support to teachers,

too. 'I couldn't do their job,' she says. 'There's no way I could stand up in front of those kids and teach, so when there's a problem in the classroom, I'm there straight away.'

Mandy works with the

'How can kids study when there's a fight in the corridor?'

school's student support team of attendance and behaviour officers. 'It's easier to tackle truancy when there are a few of you. If they don't turn up, we go and find them. Between us we know the places they're likely to go to.'

Changes have also been made to the curriculum,

with extra classes in martial arts, tae kwon do and t'ai chi now on offer.

'A lot of the kids don't know how to count to 10 when they're feeling angry, so these forms of martial arts seem to teach them an

element of self-control that's often lacking.'

When her position was announced to the parents of Bridgemary pupils, some reacted badly and saw it as a reflection of the school.

'They were suspicious,' says Mandy. 'They said things like, "Is the school really that rough?" One

even said the £20,000 being spent on my wages would be better spent on books. But how are the kids supposed to study at all when there's a fight in the corridor?'

Now the tide has changed. Jane Archer, 42, a foster mum to 16-year-old pupil Emily*, says there have been dramatic improvements.

'Lesson times used to be mayhem,' says Jane. 'Emily used to find it hard to concentrate and wouldn't sit down in class, but now she's a different person. She knows that if she needs someone to talk to, Mandy is always there.'

WE ASKED YOU

Should all schools employ a police officer?



Pamela Crisp, 56, retired mum

'I wouldn't want my children to go to a school that had a police officer stationed on site.'



Alexis Hynds, 27, youth justice worker

'I think it's a shame that you'd need to have one in the first place.'



Nikky Butler, 44, mum of two

'Placing police officers in schools could be beneficial to the wider community.'



Rosie Wilkinson, 27, social worker

'If it helps children to learn about what police officers do and not be afraid of them, they should have them in all schools.'



Marajke Post, 33, social worker

'It makes you wonder what kind of school it must be to need a police officer on site.'