

Despite government guidance advising "extreme caution", British schools increasingly invite police with sniffer dogs to detect and deter illegal drug use. In the first UK evaluation, Bedfordshire Police commissioned research at two schools. In both they demonstrated the work of the dogs, but in one pupils leaving assembly also had to file past a dog trained to identify anyone on whom they detect drug-related odours ❶. The evaluation incorporated before-and-after surveys of pupils. Its conclusion was that "**walking pupils past the dog added to the costs and risks but added little in the way of benefits**". Costs included time spent securing parental consent, extra police time, and the need to work out how to handle the situation if a pupil is picked out. At both schools, after the events 25% more pupils thought the experience would make youngsters less likely to carry drugs outside school, but the proportion who thought the same about inside school fell by 9% in the 'sniff-search' school. Why this happened there but not in the demonstration-only school is attributed to pupils' realisation that the dogs were fallible, having wrongly picked out one pupil but missed others in contact with drugs. Though this fell slightly, contrary to explicit police objectives, after the event 41% of pupils who walked past the dog still believed one aim was to catch them out, compared to 7% in the other school.

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In both schools a substantial minority of pupils felt they should not be made to walk past sniffer dogs, touching on another concern – that such tactics could counter-productively alienate some pupils. What researchers have termed 'connectedness' to school (especially relationships with teachers, including feeling treated fairly ❷) has emerged as potentially one of the most important safeguards against unhealthy development, including substance use, while severe school drug policies have no protective effect ❸ and may (along with other harsh disciplinary policies) actually diminish connectedness to school ❹.

❶ Matrix Research and Consultancy. *Evaluation of drugs dogs events in Bedfordshire's schools*. 2004. Copies [www.matrixrcl.co.uk](http://www.matrixrcl.co.uk).

❷ McNeely C.A. et al. "School connectedness and the initiation, escalation, and reduction of health risk behavior among adolescents: a comparison of teacher support and social belonging." *J. School Health*: 2004, in press. **DS**

❸ Resnick M.D. et al. "Protecting adolescents from harm." *Journal of the American Medical Association*: 1997, 278(10), p. 823–832. **DS**

❹ McNeely C.A. et al. "Promoting school connectedness." *Journal of School Health*: 2002, 72(4), p. 138–146. **DS**