



# Eleanor Smith School

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## **Personal Reflection: Andy Hill**

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*Article by Rachel Unsworth*

### **Falling apart and failing**

The deputy head of Eleanor Smith School (Secondary) had been in his post for a week when the ceiling fell in on his world. Or more precisely, his new office. Tiles had been stolen from the roof, it had rained heavily and for the next six weeks Andy Hill ran the school from the pool table in the hall.

The incident was an unobvious illustration of just one of the problems faced by this specialist school in the east London Borough of Newham, which caters for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. With no leader permanently posted on site, Eleanor Smith Secondary School was in a downward spiral of physical neglect, low morale and frequent absenteeism among staff, escalating behavioural problems and truancy among pupils, and negative inspection reports.

### **Caring for the environment**

Tackling the run-down fabric of the building may have been one of the more straightforward challenges to be met when Andy Hill arrived in September 2005, but it was nonetheless important. Most people feel demoralised and distressed by poor environment; children with emotional and

behavioural difficulties are even more vulnerable to its negative effects.

“When I arrived, this place looked like a building dumped at the end of a cul-de-sac without any thought for its purpose,” says Andy. The school was plagued with break-ins and pupils would arrive at school to find equipment missing and staff attempting to patch up ceilings.

A new fence improved security, and a dedicated site supervisor was appointed to carry out regular repairs. Andy introduced himself to local residents, many of whom were mistrustful of the school and its pupils, and told them to contact him with their concerns. He chatted to local youngsters who he knew were entering the grounds after school hours, and won them round. The result, says Andy, is that pupils now see Eleanor Smith as a ‘proper school’, they treat it with more respect, and behaviour is better. “It’s key to our success. Sending them home is no sanction unless they want to be here in the first place. If the school is a tip and offers nothing but containment, then getting out is a great idea to them. And that’s how it used to be.”

### **Nourishing minds and bodies**

Predictably, equipment that wasn’t stolen by outsiders was sometimes vandalised

**Andrew Hall**, Head Teacher

**Kevin Higgins**, Deputy Head Teacher, Primary

**Andy Hill**, Deputy Head Teacher, Secondary

London Borough of  
**Newham**





by insiders, but Andy lobbied hard for replacements, and took the risk of underwriting purchases with a personal guarantee. The school now boasts an IT suite with eight computers, whiteboards and a kitchen where nourishing goulash and feather-light Victoria sponges are created by adolescents who have been labelled 'unteachable'. There have been no breakages.

Improved nutrition featured large on Andy's change agenda. With no on-site catering facilities, the school relied on a daily delivery of sub-standard sandwiches. As evidence for their campaign for better food, staff took to photographing the sandwiches, which were frequently stale, unfilled and occasionally mouldy. More badgering from the deputy head, and a delivery of hot cooked meals was negotiated from a neighbouring school. Lunch time, the most unstructured period of the school day, is usually the busiest for Andy, but appetising food has improved behaviour so much he is sometimes able to sit down to eat.

### **Working with the mainstream**

The majority of pupils are in years 8 and 9, and attend Eleanor Smith for the first three days each week. Thursdays and Fridays are spent in mainstream schools, with outreach support for at least part of the time from Eleanor Smith staff. Pupils who have moved into their first year of secondary mainstream education may remain in Eleanor Smith primary school for that year, to avoid the potential upset of two major changes. This academic year (2007/8) Eleanor Smith secondary school began providing a key stage 4 curriculum for year 10 pupils, and has linked with colleges that provide training in skills such as construction and hairdressing.

Eleanor Smith School's aim to permanently reintegrate pupils is underpinned by excellent relationships

with staff in Newham's mainstream schools. Andy has taught in the borough for 9 years, and established Learning Support Units at St Boneventure's and Rokeby schools. He believes that education in the borough is strengthened by the large number of teachers who choose to stay in Newham, despite the well-documented challenges of working in a deprived urban area.

"There is a strong sense of being part of a network here. I have never taught anywhere else but Newham, but colleagues tell me other boroughs don't have that. You should always be critical of your employers, but I do think there is a groundswell of people who want Newham to be as good as it possibly can. It's easy to be disparaging because our results aren't as good as Surrey's, but look at where we have come from."

### **Staff matters**

Newham's good record for recruitment and retention of education staff was not in evidence at Eleanor Smith Secondary School before Andy's appointment. There were only five permanent class teachers and assistants, most were on supply and one class had had 17 different teachers in a term. The permanent team is now up to full strength, with Andy Hill as school leader, one senior teacher, four teachers, four classroom support workers and two support workers for PE and outdoor education.

Also on staff are a learning mentor, an artist in residence, a site supervisor and two administrative workers on job-share.

Teaching at the best of times is intense work; in a school for EBD children the pressure is even higher. Andy says, "If we are not at our best, the kids will find the cracks and that's where the problems start. When I arrived there was no feeling that anyone here enjoyed their job."



The lack of a permanent school leader on the site had contributed to the sense that Eleanor Smith's secondary school was the poor relation of the primary. The resentment no longer festers, says Andy, as head teacher Andrew Hall has given his full backing to all the improvements instigated by his deputy. Andy began the delicate task of restoring morale among staff he wanted to retain by organising the working week so that teaching was done on the first three days of the week. Staff then knew that by Wednesday, the toughest part was over, leaving Thursdays and Fridays for outreach work, planning, assessments and cosmetic improvements to the school.

With the deputy head permanently on site, he was constantly prepared to join staff on the frontline. From the first day, Andy kept his office door open so he could see any difficulties as they occurred. "The school was very confrontational at the time," he says. "A lot of restraint was being used, which was quite legitimate, but I don't think it's the right way. Gradually staff realised that I wasn't going to hide in the office but would be with them at the front."

"There is a wonderful staff here with fantastic skills and ideas. It's my job to remind them what good work they are doing, and to show them appreciation."

Debriefing sessions are held at the end of each day which usually end on a humorous note and the school's improved employment relations are paying dividends. There a strong permanent team in place, and when it recently advertised for support workers there were 97 applications; a triumph for a school which survived on a head-spinning turnover of supply staff.

### **Improving behaviour, praising achievements**

New strategies for behaviour management emphasise the importance of praise for achievements, individual responsibility for actions and family involvement. "Active relationships with parents are essential. We are prepared to badger them to make them engage with us, even if they don't want to at first," says Andy. Many of the pupils endure chaotic home lives, and disruptive behaviour is frequently discovered to have been triggered by family issues. It is therefore vital to understand what is happening at home.

Andy emphasises to pupils that he will advocate for them, but will not defend the indefensible. "I am prepared to exclude them or send them home if I think that is part of a long-term solution."

When pupils are sent home, reintegration meetings follow with parents also in attendance. Andy begins the session with a welcoming handshake, positive comments to the parents about their child, and perhaps an account of an activity that the pupil would have enjoyed, had they been in school. The behaviour and why it happened is discussed, and a way to put it right is agreed upon, usually an apology to staff and other pupils. "I always insist that children speak properly to their parents in these meetings. I may have to say they are not ready to return, and please try again later. They invariably come back and apologise, because they want to be in this school."

Pupils are encouraged to view themselves as individuals with an aspiration of normality – one reason why the school is part-time. Andy sees no merit in applying a rigid set of sanctions to children whose extreme circumstances differ so widely, and he tells them not to compare themselves and how they are treated to each other. "Applying a massively



regimented structure might make our lives easier in the short term, but it wouldn't exist outside this school. We have to teach them to take control of themselves; sometimes that means letting them make mistakes and then discussing what the consequences of that would be in the outside world." he says.

This philosophy is the reason that Andy refused a request from some of the pupils for a punch bag to vent their frustrations. "We are not talking about infants here, but 14 year old boys, and if the only way they can deal with their anger is by beating the living daylights out of something, then it's a worry."

Food and drink brought in, along with mobiles, MP3s and other distractions, are handed in to the deputy head's office every morning. A letter was sent out explaining the new rule and most pupils routinely co-operate. For those who don't, a reminder of the reason for the rule is usually sufficient. Smoking, wearing hats inside, t-shirts with slogans and low-slung trousers are similarly discouraged. "In some quarters the view might be that as long as they are not on the streets it doesn't matter if they are in here drinking coke with their feet on the tables," says Andy. "That's not good enough for us. We are adamant we want to mirror, and in some cases better, what mainstream schools can offer."

The most satisfying praise that the team can receive, says Andy, is when visitors say that Eleanor Smith looks like a 'proper school', and staff and pupils have done much to earn this accolade. The hall and classrooms are alive with rich displays of highly accomplished creative work. Captioned photographs illustrate successful outings and outdoor activities; hugely significant for children who have probably never been allowed to go on a school trip before. Certificates announce a

wide variety of pupil achievements, awarded every half term.

### **Future hopes**

Despite the fact that they will never enjoy the instant gratification of great exam results at Eleanor Smith, the staff are no less ambitious for their school and its pupils. Andy sums up, "We want this place to be the best it possibly can be, to work with children and their families and be a positive part of the community.

"We want our links with mainstream schools to be even better, and for them to see us a centre of expertise.

"I want staff to stay, to grow into their work and develop their ideas and skills.

"And we want the kids to have the best possible opportunities we can offer them. They are all struggling; many of them are sad and exhausted because it takes a lot of energy to be badly behaved. They need someone to step in and help them do better. We can do that at Eleanor Smith School, but we won't always be in their lives. We have to show them how to take responsibility and give themselves chances and choices."