



Play it again, Sir

The youth of a Cornish town used to have time on their hands, but now a dance club is keeping them on their toes. Fran Abrams reports



Underneath a disco ball in a cavernous function room, two boys are slowly spinning on their heads. Nearby, a group of girls co-ordinates dance moves as a heavy bass beat fills the air.

It's dark and no one is in school uniform, but most of the 20 young people would say this regular Wednesday night activity is making a big difference to their education. They are the dance leaders for a remarkable troupe called the TR14ers, which has swept up the youth of Camborne, a former mining town in Cornwall, in a frenzy of street dance and hip hop.

The group, which runs two-day workshops every school holiday as well as these practice sessions, has pulled in no fewer than 400 members and three-quarters of them attend the town's 1,400-pupil secondary school.

The TR14ers, named after the town's postcode, is much more than just a dance group. In the two years since it started, it has, according to backers, led to a dramatic drop in youth crime and antisocial behaviour. At the Camborne Science and Community College, staff say they have seen impressive results, too.

"Pupils are much more alert and ready to learn," says Craig Martin, the school's deputy head. "Their confidence has improved and they are engaged in a way they weren't before. We have seen the results of that in behaviour and attendance, which has helped us to achieve our value-added targets for exam results. It has been a hugely positive experience for the school."

Three years ago, just before the TR14ers was launched, the school recorded an average of 90 behaviour incidents per week. Now that figure has fallen to 42. Attendance over the same period has risen by 1.5 per cent to 93.2 per cent and the proportion of pupils getting top GCSE grades in science and maths has gone up from 35 to 48 per cent. And although the dance troupe cannot take all the credit, staff say it certainly deserves a large portion of it.

Three years ago, Camborne was a town in trouble. Its raison d'être – its tin mines – had long since closed and the economy was in the doldrums despite its proximity to Cornwall's up-market holiday trade. The police were bringing up to 100 truants back to the school each



JIM WILEMAN

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month and there was a major problem with under-age drinking, antisocial behaviour and criminal damage in the centre of the town.

According to David Aynsley, who became neighbourhood beat sergeant for Camborne four years ago, the reason for the town's troubles was glaringly obvious – its youth viewed both the police and the education service with suspicion, plus they had nothing at all to do.

Almost as soon as he took up his post, he began building bridges, first by working with the local primary care trust to run street games for young people on Camborne's housing estates. Then he began working more closely with the school, building relationships with staff and even stationing two officers near its gate as the pupils arrived and left. He feared youngsters and parents might view this with some alarm, wondering

what crime was being committed to provoke such a presence. But gradually a bond began to grow.

"A deprived community has lots of deprived children and it's the coalface workers, the teachers and the police officers, who take that on the chin," he says. "All of us, as professionals, have to collaborate rather than sit in our comfort zones. These are good teachers, it's a good school. But we had to build a relationship. When we realised we wanted the same thing, it started to build."

The big breakthrough came in the Seven Stars pub in the nearby village of Stithians, where Sgt Aynsley got talking to the nephew of a friend. He turned out to be Danny Price, a choreographer who had worked with Madonna and had appeared in West End shows including *Oklahoma!* and *Starlight Express*. By the end of the night, the TR14ers was born. Soon it was a town-wide effort. The Corn Exchange lent its function room; the local Aldi supermarket provided free fruit for every dance session; the school gave leaflets to all its pupils and liaised with the group on a daily basis. The change came more quickly than anyone could have hoped.

"We started in October 2005 and by Christmas we could see a real difference in the town," Sgt Aynsley says. "Lots of these kids have been in trouble with the police and more than 20 are on the child protection register. But not one has ever had an Asbo and I think the TR14ers can

claim credit for that – they think they won't be allowed to be part of the group if they misbehave. So while we used to bring 100 truants back to the school every month, now it's less than 10. OK, we're not teaching them the Three Rs – that's not our deal. But we are socialising them and I think any teacher would agree that that's very much part of their education."

Beatrice Dyer, assistant head at the school, says the situation a few years ago was "very depressing". But the school's new partnership with the police, developed through the TR14ers, has made a massive difference. "The police have started to come into school all the time. They know the pupils by name and children will go and talk to them, which they would never have done before."

There are wider benefits for the school in helping it to meet its obligations to work more closely with other agencies under the Every Child Matters agenda. "Fifteen years ago, if I'd walked down the

corridor with a policeman, everyone would have been asking what had happened. Now it's just commonplace," Beatrice says. "Now a police officer comes to our regular education welfare and pastoral meetings and we get feedback which is absolutely vital. There's a very open dialogue – we exchange information far more freely than we ever did before and that can only be good for the youngsters."

The group is helping the school teach pupils about the social and emotional aspects of learning, with dance leaders being asked to act as facilitators. Several members have become peer mentors or pupil representatives and 20 of the school's 52 prefects are TR14ers. But it is the dancers who provide the best testimony to the troupe. During their training, they queue up to talk about how dance has changed their lives.

Jodie Baxter, 15, is in Year 10. Now she seems confident, authoritative even, and has spoken in the group's meeting

tonight about the recruitment of new leaders. But it was not always so, she says.

"I had nothing to do before and I ended up getting in trouble with the police because of drinking. Everyone knew Camborne for all the wrong reasons, but now they know it because of what we're doing for the kids. Everyone enjoys it and it stops people doing things like drinking and smoking." She beams with pride. "And our year group is expecting the best exam results ever."

For Chevaughan Goldsworthy, who is 14, life has also been difficult in the past. "I have been upset and angry because of problems in my family," she admits. "But I just love dancing. When I come here I feel happy – it affects everything I do. It's made my life better. I used to answer back at school, but here I've learned not to do that. Now I don't do it at school any more, either. And it's made me more energetic. Normally I'm lazy, I don't do anything. But now I'm bouncy. I go to school feeling bouncy." ■