

# A VERY SPECIAL SCHOOL



**BUSINESS MANAGER**  
Terry Gillard

Ian Mikardo High School in Bow, East London is a special school for boys with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), that has gone from being in special measures to being rated outstanding, in just four years. Emma Mills went to meet peripatetic business manager, Terry Gillard, and headteacher, Claire Lillis, to find out what their magic formula is.

Walking into Ian Mikardo school is a unique, and initially daunting prospect. As a special school for around 40 boys with SEBD it is a challenging environment, and one very different to that of a more mainstream school. Some of the boys here are known to the police and the young offenders team, have been excluded from mainstream schools before and struggle with difficult home circumstances including drug and alcohol abuse and serious poverty. Yet despite this, Ian Mikardo is one of the most hopeful and inspiring schools I have visited.

Brought in initially to organise the school finances, business manager Terry Gillard has been at the school for nearly four years. "They asked me to stay, and I get on very well with the staff here. I think we can all see the value

of what we're working on and it's very, very challenging to keep it moving forward. You've got to keep coming up with new ideas so that it doesn't stagnate. But that makes it exciting," says Terry.

For Terry, despite the particular nature of the school, many of the challenges he has found have been financial ones. The school places a high-value on its pastoral and supportive care, and as such has around 40 staff – many students have their own specialist support worker. Funding this, or juggling the budget, as Terry calls it, can be a colossal task. The school is funded for the number of students with SEN statements, but the funding is based on a teaching assistant in mainstream schools who works only 25 hours contact a week. As Terry points out, the staff at Ian Mikardo work a full-time week, usually a minimum of 40 hours.

"We are funded, as usual, by the local authority, but much of what we do is outside the range of the normal education budget, which can cause problems. What's needed is recognition, and by that I mean financial, as well as actual recognition, of the other support work that we do. It's not every school where you have to make sure that the children have got their own clothes and toiletries. We also aim to ensure they are well-fed throughout the day. Many come into school early in the morning for breakfast; it's difficult to concentrate when you're hungry."

The school staff also take the boys on regular outings, even sometimes to local shops,

allowing them to do 'normal things' like buy a sandwich or order a coffee. However the trips also have a more serious cause, as school can sometimes become a volatile or stressful place to be. "We take them out much more than a normal school would. The police do have to visit here quite regularly, for instance, and we would aim to remove the children from that situation if possible. Vulnerable young people are often upset by these sorts of events."

However, events like this makes it very difficult for Terry to organise the school's finances in the same way that

he does with other schools. "It's a pressure on the budget, but it is something we have to commit to doing because it works."

Funding is clearly an issue, but recent initiatives means there is hope. The Every Child Matters agenda, for instance, has meant that all the authorities have changed the way in which they operate, so that education is no longer seen as a separate service, but part of children's services. This means that, in time, there is the likelihood that the school will receive funding for the services it provides, not just the education. →

## FACT BOX

**SCHOOL:** Ian Mikardo High School

**TYPE:** Special secondary 11-16 SEBD

**PUPILS:** 40

**LOCAL AUTHORITY:** Tower Hamlets

**BUSINESS MANAGER:** Terry Gillard

**TIME IN ROLE:** Four years

**BACKGROUND & TRAINING:**

BSc and MSc Chemistry; Diploma in management studies; Diploma in marketing; industrial chemist, paints and resins, 1978 to 1989; self employed 1989 to date.



**HEADTEACHER**  
Claire Lillis

“At the moment we try to build things like outdoor trips into the budget, because we feel they’re essential.” This decision on what is ‘essential’ has really been a whole school effort, with all staff submitting their budgetary thoughts for the following year. Terry attends the regular meetings of the finance committee of the school’s governing body to look at what can realistically be achieved with the school’s budget.

The school is also looking forward to benefiting from BSE. “We want to develop the space that we have for both students and parents. The idea is that, in addition to the traditional school buildings, we’re going to add facilities to provide extended school support for parents.”

Despite its troubled intake the school is well supported in the local community. Local housing associations are starting initiatives to improve adult skills; the proximity to the Olympics means more opportunities for the school; and there are a number of regeneration and development groups that are committed to improving the area. The school plans to be a big part of that, developing its sporting and community areas heavily. The changes are likely to take around five years, but, says Terry, it will be worth the wait. “I think we’ll see a completely different place, a better one. But with the same vision, which is Claire’s vision – of supporting our young people.”

Claire Lillis, the head teacher, has clearly been a driving and influential force for the school.

**RIGHT**  
Graffiti on school walls is done by pupils and counts as their coursework

**BELOW**

The school works hard to incorporate the children’s interests into their learning, including using their photos and artwork as classroom decoration.



“The sorts of people that want to work in a school like this are people who recognise the need not to give up on students like this”



“My background is in mainstream education and prison education,” she says. “And I found that working in prison, it felt like it was too late. You need to catch young people earlier and not have them getting into a cycle from which they simply cannot escape. And that’s what we are trying to do here. The driving vision is about supporting young people at an earlier stage.”

The support staff the school employs are local people who relate well to the students. They are also vibrant and exciting individuals, including pupil supervisor Susan Shaughnessy (pictured below), who won the NBA Award for Pupil Supervisor of the Year 2006, applauded for her dedication to the students, which even sees her helping



them throughout the school holidays. “The sorts of people that want to work in a school like this are not usually traditional teachers. They are people who recognise the need not to give up on students like this,” says Claire.

Recruitment and retention should be a struggle at this school, but it doesn’t seem to be. →

"We don't chose our staff, they tend to chose themselves," says Terry. "And anyway, keeping good staff is all about good leadership. Claire takes a real interest in everybody and if there's an issue, she wants to help deal with it, whatever it might be. And I think that that is one of the things that helps it all to come together. Because it is a very challenging environment to work in, but everybody is interested in everybody else, making sure that they're happy with their work."

And in a school such as this, that kind of support is vital. "You never know what's going to happen," muses Terry. "Some days are calm and orderly, whilst others are the complete opposite. And that's just how it is."

For any bursar or business manager there is a need to be flexible and receptive to instant and constant change. But for Terry and the rest of the staff, this is even more acute. "You do have to be open to changing everything at the last minute and just dealing with whatever comes your way."

Terry is no stranger to working with schools in dire straits. "In the secondary school I was at previously, which was in special measures, a new head arrived and said that he didn't know much about the finances. So we worked on

Artwork on the school's frontage, done by pupils



the budget together, asked the staff for their input and developed a robust plan that the head could understand and that would set the school up to get it out of special measures."

According to Terry, the key to making schools work is to put a strong budget together and understand what the costs are. "It normally takes me two years to get a real view of what the costs are when I go into a school. You need to ascertain what's going to be left after those main costs, such as staffing, to enable you to decide on what you're going to deliver. But unless you've got those core costs sorted out you can easily get caught out."

Staffing seems a recurrent theme, but something that Terry warns can cause real problems. "The biggest cost is staffing, without a doubt, and if you haven't got that right or there's wastage or duplication it can end up costing serious money."

At Ian Mikardo Terry is trying to take a more proactive strategic role than he would normally, helping the school to develop its outreach service and identify fundraising and sponsorship, helping Claire to secure this for the school. He is also working to try and bring the school's transport in-house as they accept children from a wide-ranging catchment area.

"At the moment a lot of our pupils come here in cabs, but we're looking into other options, including running our own vehicles. It would help the attendance, but it's also about providing learning opportunities earlier in the day. Plus it's currently very costly, and not ideal. We'd like to have more control, with our own staff bringing the boys back and forth to school. It just completes and enhances our service a bit more."

The school seems to really have a grip on the service it's delivering, and Terry is obviously very proud of it. "There are lots of positive things happening at the school and it's been really exciting being part of that." ♦

The school's music editing suite is very popular with the pupils

