



# Paint job puts a different gloss on graffiti-stained footbridge

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Section: Secondary

## **Pupils' walkway makeover brings upbeat message to neighbourhood scarred by sectarian scrawl**

The footbridge near Bellahouston Academy used to be a daunting prospect. Extreme sectarian and racist graffiti defaced its 80m span. Gangs hung around, claiming the bridge as their territory. Every so often, the yelps and thuds of a teenage scrap could be heard.

This is the route to school for many pupils crossing from the old tenement blocks around Paisley Road West. The only other pedestrian access involves a big detour and a risky junction - but to many, that seemed far more appealing.

Something had to be done, a group of Bellahouston pupils decided. So they took matters into their own hands and have transformed the bridge, eased fears about getting to school - and won the respect of vandals.

About 40 youngsters were involved, including S1-3 pupils, some of whom were disruptive and disengaged from other aspects of school, and S5-6 mentors. They worked with the Iona Community, an organisation which has had links with the school for about 25 years and strives for the personal and social transformation that spring from the vision and values of the gospel.

Their efforts, unveiled by Community Safety Minister Fergus Ewing last month, have been a long time in the planning. Two years ago a local newspaper reported that Bellahouston pupils were painting murals to try out ideas for the bridge.

Their commitment to the project, which received £10,000 from the Lottery's Awards for All scheme, has been impressive.

Every Monday lunchtime, pupils would meet and discuss ideas. When painting began earlier this year, they were working five days a week, at lunchtimes and after school.

They painted dozens of metal panels on the bridge, creating a giant mosaic of primary colours and upbeat messages.

The school is in Rangers' heartland, and one of the pupils' main priorities was to tackle sectarian divisions. A CND symbol is filled with green and blue, and someone has written 'Why the divide?'

Other key words include: community, belonging, solidarity, love, peace and one world.

Several religious symbols adorn one panel, reflecting the school's diverse mix. The pupils have left their collective signature on another section, with dozens of handprints.

The bridge's transformation sends out a profound message, says principal teacher of RE Eleanor Dyce: "It gives an impression of a place where people are interested in their area, rather than a place that's been left to go downhill."

Even vandals are impressed, Laura McAleese, a youth project worker with the Iona Community, believes. Since painting began, only a little graffiti has appeared. But rather than the hate-filled messages that once marred the bridge, this has been restricted to people's names, and only then in the blank spaces away from the pupils' work. That might, she says, be partly because some youngsters in the project were among those who used to deface the bridge.

Head boy Scott Heron, who mentored younger pupils, has detected a greater "sense of security" about walking to school. S2 pupil Ryan Whitelaw says pupils are "not afraid because the bridge isn't dark and dull."

But Miss Dyce stresses that the changed feelings about the bridge are not just the result of a makeover, but also about who was responsible. She does not think the project would have worked as well if a "fancy-schmancy" artist had been involved. She believes the sense of pride and ownership would have been far less strong,

"It matters to them," she said. "I see pupils going up to the bridge and putting their hands on their own handprints. They see the bridge as theirs."

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