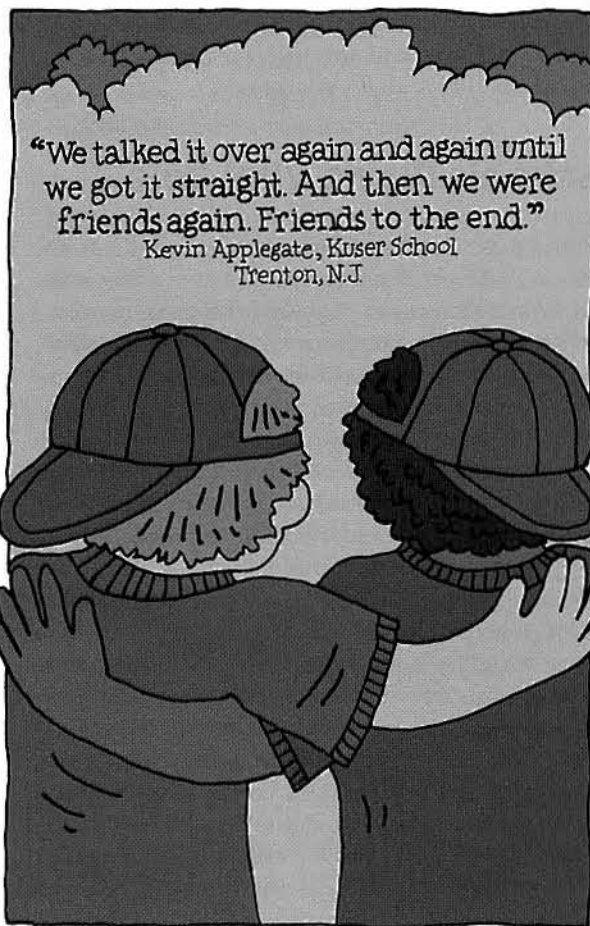


An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Metal Detectors

Linda Lantieri

As a result of several high-profile incidences of school violence, many schools have responded by installing elaborate and costly security hardware because of the perceived threat that schools have become more dangerous. This article focuses on a school that took a different approach. Students and staff members at Chugiak High School in Anchorage, Alaska, chose to wage peace in the school instead of turning it into an armed fortress. They worked to reclaim their school as a non-violent, caring community.



Art and student quotation from a poster created by Ben & Jerry's. ©1996 by Ben & Jerry's. Used with permission of Ben & Jerry's Homemade.

I do not want a new generation of children with high intelligence quotients and low caring quotients; with sharp competitive edges and dull cooperative instincts; with highly developed computer skills, but poorly developed consciences; with gigantic commitment to the big "I," but little sense of responsibility to the bigger "we."

—Marian Wright Edelman, president, Children's Defense Fund (Children's Defense Fund, 2000, p. 11)

Who could predict that the 20th century would end with the senseless stream of violence in our schools and communities that has touched all of our young people, from the poorest to the most privileged? As we enter a new century, we are faced with a great challenge—how to reclaim our schools, homes, and communities as violence-free growing zones for our children. How will we ensure that our young people feel so cared for that they would never wish to do harm to themselves or anyone else?

Note. Adapted from the book *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers*, edited by Linda Lantieri, 2001, Boston: Beacon Press. Copyright 2001 by Linda Lantieri. Adapted with permission.

These challenges offer an unprecedented opportunity. The choices we make now about how to nurture the youth at highest risk will have critical implications for generations to come. At this time, we seem to be doing the least harm to the most privileged (Comer, 1999). Yet, one U.S. government study found that 25% of teenagers, privileged or not, are at risk for failing to cope with the demands in their lives (National Research Council, Panel on High-Risk Youth, 1995).

In our society is a deep current—a belief that something is *not* okay with the way we are living. In the midst of huge advances in technology and brain research, we are strugg-

gling to rescue a whole generation of young people who are growing up without the supports they need. We are facing a deep crisis concerning how to rediscover meaningfulness and purpose, and although we are aware of the void, we have few ideas about what to do.

Schools Play a Vital Role

For more than three decades, I have devoted my life to the important role schools can play in nurturing the emotional, social, and ethical development of young people. I have been attempting to answer the following question: How can schools help reclaim the souls of some of our most troubled youth? I have used my experiences as a former teacher and school administrator while working with a particular initiative—the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)—which I co-founded in 1985 with the non-profit organization Educators for Social Responsibility.

The 175,000 young people in RCCP are not armed with the thousands of guns that are still brought into schools on a daily basis or the daily taunts that so many young people wield like weapons. They use weapons of the spirit—non-violent communication, appreciation for diversity, the ability to center themselves and manage their anger, and skills to resolve conflict creatively. These young people attend schools with an educational vision that recognizes that the ability to manage emotions, resolve conflict, and interrupt bias are fundamental skills—skills that can and must be taught. Our work seems to be making a critical difference in the lives of children at high and low risk and of both genders.

A recently completed study of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program provides new evidence of the potential of school-based programs for preventing violence and reaching out to angry and hostile youth (National Center for Children in Poverty, Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 1999). We have found that when schools are willing to sustain a comprehensive and systematic approach to nurturing the social, emotional, and ethical development of young people as a basic part of their education, students not only do well academically, they also learn how to be gentle and caring. At a time when our schools are scrambling for ways to stop violence and aggression, the RCCP study provides compelling evidence that school-based violence prevention programs are an effective way to curb student aggression and teach youngsters positive new skills they can use for a lifetime. We have known for years that RCCP can transform classrooms and schools—we've seen it with our own eyes. However, it is extremely gratifying to have our experiences backed up by one of the most comprehensive, scientific studies ever conducted in the field.

As the principal investigator, Dr. Lawrence Aber, said, "We found out that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of metal detectors" (Aber, 1999). Two years of teaching the 5,000 young people in this study concrete skills in managing their emotions and resolving conflict actually deterred the developmental pathways that could lead to later violence and aggression. When I had the privilege of being on a panel with Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the International Hague Appeal for Peace, he smiled joyously when he heard of the study results and said,

By the looks of things, we could be in deep trouble. Imagine these peacemaking skills being incorporated throughout a child's entire education. I'm not sure we would have enough people in the world who would be willing to kill or be killed in wars or even would want the job that has the power to press the button that could cause a nuclear holocaust. (Tutu, 1999)

What an elegant and powerful vision of our evaluation results! Being anointed by his words strengthened my convictions about what we can imagine and create for young people.

Until now, however, RCCP's success in nurturing an ethic of caring and nonviolence had been most striking in the elementary and middle schools we serve, but not in the high schools. So, in the shadow of the first anniversary of the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, I was eager to accept an invitation to visit a high school in Alaska that was engaged in this work. I was told that the concept of a "peaceable school" was taking hold at Chugiak High School on the outskirts of Anchorage, Alaska. I also had heard that the principal, teachers, and young people at Chugiak had responded to the tragedy at Columbine quite differently from other high schools across the country. They had not spent the year turning their school into an armed fortress, where electronic searches of students and lockers are the norm and armed police and surveillance cameras define the landscape. They chose instead to courageously wage peace in their school and reclaim it as a place of learning and growth. I was eager to find out how they went about working as partners in developing a caring community of learning.

Nurturing a Culture of Nonviolence

I was not quite prepared for the first glimpse of Chugiak High School, even as the pristine Chugiak mountain range silhouetted the tan, sprawling edifice. To my surprise, the Chugiak campus was laid out almost identically to that of Columbine. My psyche could not help but be flooded with the riveting images of students breaking through windows to escape the carnage in Littleton. As I walked through the

entrance of the school, I realized that even the school colors were the same. Chugiak, like Columbine, is a typical U.S. high school in many respects: The average teacher sees 150 students a day, S.A.T. scores are important, and athletics appear to occupy a high rung on the prestige ladder.

As I was greeted by one of the teachers and brought into a room to meet with staff members and students, I realized that everyone present had not missed the ironic similarity in appearance to Columbine High School. As people introduced themselves, most expressed, in some form or another, "but for the grace of God, it could have been us." The more I listened, however, the more I began to understand that such a tragedy was not likely to happen at Chugiak. Instead of elaborate security hardware, I witnessed touching gestures of kindness and forgiveness. A spirit of belonging was evident in the way in which each person shared his or her story with me, talking about settling arguments by talking things out and asking and seeking forgiveness. The focus did not seem to be on how schools fail to identify the warning signs that perpetrators exhibit but rather on the context in which these acts can occur.

Concentrating on looking for the warning signs of individuals who will be perpetrators and victims diverts us from looking for the warning signs of an entire social climate where bullying, intolerance, and violence are the acceptable norms. Before Chugiak High School embarked on this school culture shift, they had begun to notice that a more important warning sign was when one young person wouldn't let another young person be different without taunting or bullying him or her. Other warning signs: students could not speak openly about issues that concerned them, and adults did not have the time or the resources to connect to young people personally. Chugiak staff members wanted to know how they could nurture students' social, emotional, and inner lives and move beyond conflict resolution into healing and reconciliation. Staff members and students shared how their work was not about attempting to stop individual violent acts or identify the next "young predator" but rather about dismantling the cycle of violence they saw every day.

They were not talking about preventing a shooting from happening in their school. Unlike the 71% of Americans who believe a shooting is likely to occur in their school—despite the fact that there was actually only a 1 in 2 million chance of anyone being killed in a school in 1998–1999 and there has been a 40% nationwide decline in school-associated deaths from violence (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 1999/2000)—they did not believe that violence was a necessary risk in going to school. Instead, these folks were talking about the way in which they were creating "a culture of nonviolence" in which there was the realization that the most important skills needed to navigate their so-

cial world were being able to engage in thoughtful decision making, understanding signs of one's own and others' feelings, listening accurately, communicating effectively, and respecting differences. They were struggling with the kind of school reform and renewal that changes school culture by addressing relationships.

So how exactly did Chugiak High School go about becoming such a model of nonviolence? The staff members and students were guided through this process by Carol Lieber, Educators for Social Responsibility's (ESR) director of Partners in Learning (ESR's program for high schools). In the early stages of her work with Chugiak staff members, Lieber expounded on a key concept—high school students are developmentally ready to think on their own and work collaboratively with others. Adolescents are becoming autonomous and need to feel they have a stake in their actions and in the community they create. Because high school cultures are often shaped by content choices and subject matter, adolescents usually are not given the chance to contribute to their classrooms in any significant way. Lieber believes that this status quo can be changed. She has seen that treating teenagers with respect, expressing a personal interest in them, and giving them choices increases their ability to become peacefully engaged in their community, whether it is the school or the larger society. Stated Lieber,

One important student/teacher outcome I look for is the building of more positive student/teacher relationships—especially with young people who are not the star students, who are used to being ignored or invisible. Imagine that youth are like Web sites. There are some young people in every high school who are getting positive social and academic "hits." Then there is the invisible middle: the young people who get no "hits" at all. I ask my teachers, what can you do to give a young person a 10-second hit? Comment on their clothes, ask about their family, or anything personal. Relationships mean everything, in terms of motivation. Students want to mean more to you than just their grade. They want you to know them. (C. Lieber, personal communication, March 14, 2000)

During our sharing time, I noticed that the Chugiak teachers understood that each student is a unique individual, and they knew how important this was in building a peaceable community. Allowing students the autonomy to make choices about the things that will affect their daily lives is another crucial component. Lieber believes that part of building social and emotional competency is building greater social responsibility among students:

When you empower young people to make more choices and to take more responsibility for learning, they inevitably need to use more effective communi-



Linda Lantieri

education and problem-solving skills to do that. In the process, the teacher/student relationship is improved, because youth begin to like and trust the person who respects them enough to give them a chance. What emerges is the beginning of a collaborative learning community. (C. Lieber, personal communication, March 14, 2000)

It was evident in talking to Jan Christensen, principal of Chugiak High School, that under her leadership both students and teachers had a sense of fairness, belonging, and the ability to effect change. The school safety committee that was created also played a critical role in change. Made up of teachers, students, parents, and representatives of other key constituencies, this committee made recommendations that were taken seriously and often adopted. The morale of staff members and students was high, partly due to democratic processes in place at Chugiak.

The safety committee is committed to openly seeking information from everyone regarding the functioning of the school as they identify problems and concerns. Through a school climate assessment process, the committee secured feedback from the school community and attempted to prioritize issues and determine which concerns needed the

most attention. The community of collaboration that is created when students share responsibility with teachers for the way their school feels and operates is also mirrored in the teachers' collaborative relationships. The teachers at Chugiak model many of the collaborative techniques they encourage their students to use. Teachers share agendas and instructional strategies with one another, problem solve together, and team teach.

The Current Educational Climate

As some of us attempt to create in other schools this new version of places that educate the heart and spirit along with the mind, we can't forget that there is a dramatic social and political climate that deeply affects the likelihood of this vision becoming the norm. The equation currently operating in schools could be stated as follows:

education reform = state standards = high-stakes tests.

Clearly, a struggle is under way in this country about what it means to be an educated person and, therefore, about what a good education entails. This debate is being carried out on the terrain of school curriculum and pedagogy. Back is an emphasis on cognitive development that places primary value on mastering skills and the content of traditional academic subject areas. This translates to a movement toward state standards and testing, which are determining what can and cannot be done in schools.

It is not that explicit standards in and of themselves are problematic. In fact, the school reform movement, as well as the whole field of social and emotional learning, is about standards. Setting clear, compelling, and measurable improvement goals that guide our actions is always helpful to the learning process.

The problem lies in determining whether children are learning solely through testing of easily measurable and easily forgettable extraneous knowledge, which emphasizes memorization over critical thinking. This knowledge has very little connection to what employers want or need, or for that matter, what young people need to be personally and professionally successful. The use of testing has become a large national industry that has greatly influenced what happens in classrooms today. This is a problem! Social and emotional learning, conflict resolution, and violence prevention can play an important role in helping to define what young people really need to thrive.

In the midst of this struggle to redefine the basics of a good education, it is the courageous few like Deborah Meier, one of my "she-ros" and principal at the Mission Hill School in Boston, who is able bravely to say to her students' parents: "We don't intend to teach your child the things they will be examined on, because we have more important

things to teach them" (Bogen, 1999, p. 11). Meier's past experience as principal at Central Park East High School in East Harlem confirmed to her that her students wouldn't be penalized for this kind of education philosophy. Central Park East still has better than a 90% graduation rate, with more than 90% of its students going on to college.

Emotional Intelligence Is Important

What skills do our young people need to be successful in the 21st century? In his groundbreaking 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, social psychologist and mental health writer for *The New York Times*, made the convincing argument that EQ, or "emotional quotient"—a way of describing people's human skills—may be as important as IQ for success in life. Well-implemented programs such as RCCP effectively give young people the social and emotional skills they need, preparing them for both work and life. This new kind of schooling is possible. Amidst the despair, I find great hope.

In my long-term vision for this work we are doing in schools, I see children entering kindergarten and immediately beginning to learn that differences are accepted, feelings are okay, and nonviolent approaches to conflict are the norm. By the time they are in first or second grade, they will almost automatically choose to use conflict resolution skills to mediate disputes among classmates. As they enter high school, they have the courage and skills to stand up to bigotry and violence and to work for a more peaceful, just, and caring society.

We adults have to dramatically change our education priorities for this to happen. We are a country that has let its priorities become so skewed that we spend \$4 billion in medical care each year to take care of gunshot wounds and still don't guarantee every child health coverage. In fact, among all the industrial countries, the United States ranks first in military exports and defense expenditures and last in protecting children against gun violence. A gun still takes the life of a child in this country every 2 hours. We are living in a country that spends millions of dollars on national security rather than investing in the support communities need to decrease the statistic of one out of five children growing up poor: In other words, 13.5 million children in this country grow up in poverty. We are living in a country that spends more money on prisons than on education, that guarantees young people the availability of a prison cell but not a college education. And the wealth of only three of the richest people in the United States exceeds the gross national product of the 32 least-developed countries. The annual budget of the Head Start programs is equal to 1 week of military spending (Children's Defense Fund, 2000).

What would happen if we took the \$4 billion we spend each year treating gunshot wounds and instead used it to implement a comprehensive program in the approximately 90,000 U.S. schools to nurture the social, ethical, and emotional development of our children as a regular, natural part of a young person's educational experience? That \$4 billion would allow us to implement a comprehensive violence program in every school in this country for 1 year.

Will we learn from the mistakes of the past so that we can avoid losing more of our young people? More and more schools are making significant long-term commitments to creating cultures that emphasize caring, respect, and safety. Our willingness to turn schools into caring communities rather than armed fortresses may determine the future of young people in far greater ways than we know. As 1999 drew to a close, I had the extraordinary opportunity to be present at the final meeting of the century of the United Nations' General Assembly. It was inspiring to witness the Assembly declare the first decade of the new millennium would be the Decade of the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. Our work is clearly cut out for us in meeting this challenge.

While visiting one of our RCCP elementary schools recently, I witnessed two fourth-grade boys in an intense conversation as they were walking in front of me, oblivious that I was behind them. One of the boys had his arm around the shoulder of the other boy, who was visibly upset. "He said those mean words to you?" asked the one boy. "Yes," the other one nodded. "And he even almost hit you?" Another affirmative nod from the troubled youngster. "I know what must be happening," said his friend. "That mean boy is probably new to the school. He doesn't know that we don't do things like that around here." The power of nonviolence had taken hold so strongly that these students could not imagine why someone had been acting mean except that "he was new to the school." What we need is to give peace not only a chance but also the resources, time, and commitment it will take to create peaceable schools all over this world that are the norm, not the exception.

*Linda Lantieri has more than 30 years of experience in education as a teacher, assistant principal, director of an alternative middle school in East Harlem, and faculty member in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hunter College in New York City. Currently she serves as the founding director of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), National Center of Educators for Social Responsibility, which supports the program in 400 schools at 14 sites in the United States. Started in 1985, RCCP is now one of the largest and longest running researched-based school (K-12) programs in social and emotional learning in the country. Ms. Lantieri is co-author of the book *Waging Peace in Our Schools* (Beacon Press, 1996) and editor*

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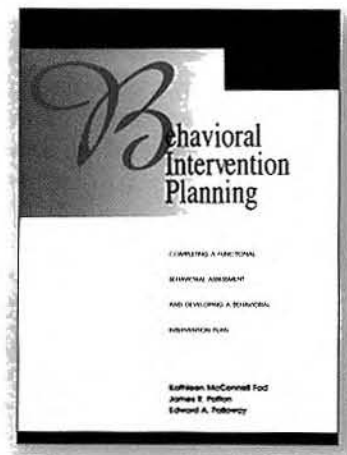
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