CONFLICT RESOLUTION EDUCATION
The Need and the Potential

KIDS AND CONFLICT IN SCHOOLS
What's It Really Like?

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Being a kid in today's public schools is a challenge. Rumors, fights, cheating, tattling, bullying, humiliation, and isolation all still exist, often with a new twist. Given the changes that have occurred over the last few decades, many of us may not even know what kids face and feel on a daily basis. Many of us may believe that there has been a dramatic increase in foul language, drug abuse, disrespect, depression, and suicide. One thing we know for certain is that much has changed for kids in school in the last century.

Schools are no longer one-room buildings filled with kids of different ages taking precious time out from working in the fields. Schools are no longer places where all children sit quietly in desks neatly arranged in factory-like rows reading in unison from standard and often biased text books. Schools are no longer places where conflicts stop at bloody noses and bruised feelings. The world of Dick and Jane and *See Spot Run* has changed for good. As a direct result, kids, now more than ever, need skills for living and working together in an increasingly interdependent world—skills in such areas as handling conflicts, managing intense emotions, and making wise choices for themselves and their community.

In this chapter, we look at some of the key issues facing kids today— how schools have changed over time, what life at school feels like for kids, and what experts in the field believe about students and schools today—and set the stage for showing why conflict resolution education is such a vital movement for making peace not only in our schools but also in our world. Having a solid

understanding of where we have come from and where we are heading will give us a larger, more complete perspective for making the best curricular decisions for our children and for ourselves.

Our Changing Educational Models

As our society has changed, so have our schools. Early schools were institutions modeled after the designs and influences of the agricultural age. Short and disrupted school years were created to help socialize children and increase basic literacy. Families valued education, but they also had to balance the needs of the field and the farm.

Later schools were modeled after the industrial age, replete with factory-like replicas of educational efficiency, such as desks neatly lined in rows, standard textbooks, and standard norms taught in a mechanical and efficient way. Discipline was often harsh and obedience swift so as to help establish social norms and social control. At the time, the American dream helped forge a generation of individuals interested in progress, freedom, and tolerance. However, much of the racial, ethnic, and religious diversity that existed in our country was molded into predominantly white, middle-class values. American schools were a melting pot for many cultures and many traditions, and for the time being, the melting pot represented the form that public education followed.

But as times changed, our social structures evolved, and so did school life. The clearly demarcated roles that defined parents, principals, teachers, and children began to erode. The old expectations that boys would be naughty and girls would be nice began to dissolve. The efficient, predictable, factory-like structure of life and school began to complexify, and many of our regular ways of doing things began to change. As we know now, our world and our schools have become "cosmopolitan" in nature,[1] and the computer and the evolving nature of families have forever changed our social and educational patterns of interaction.

Today we are a worldly mix of cultural values and gender roles and expectations, engaged in time-efficient and overlapping activities. We have broken down the timeworn boundaries of the past and created interrelated social structures largely influenced by the information age and its scientific advances. Our simple nuclear families and "nuclear" schools—where all children lived in a predictable family unit and all students learned in a predictable classroom experience—changed. Now we live in multiracial families, single-parent families, and nontraditional families determined not only by blood but also by our interests, our geography, and our creativity. We also live with a multitude of choices in public education, from focus schools to charter schools, from home schools to after-

schools. During this time, we outgrew the influences of the farm life and the factory line and instead have adopted the computer network as our model. Our lives are filled with cross-generating beliefs and endless streams of information. The scientific-material-information age—and "cosmopolitan" culture—has shaped schools inexorably—and our kids face the conflicts, the choices, and the challenges that the culture brings.

A Day in the Life

If we are truly to understand what it is like being a kid in today's schools, we can best do so by putting ourselves in their shoes for a day. Consider a day in the life of a "typical" schoolchild; let's name her Carla.

Carla is a seventh grader living in a middle- to lower-class suburb with her mom, who has recently divorced. Carla attends a junior high school typical of other schools in the country: the building has narrow hallways; brick walls on all sides with small, high windows; bathrooms with few amenities and no art; toilets that are often littered with toilet paper; and outdoor landscaping that looks like it could use some financial help.

At 6 A.M., Carla wakes up after some nagging by her mother, spends half an hour dressing, then rushes to make sure she has her books and belongings for the day. Breakfast is on the run, half of it eaten in the car. Carla gets into a conflict with her mom about eating well for lunch and hardly has time to have a real conversation about it because her mom is preoccupied with her own day ahead. By the time she is at school at 7 A.M., she is only half awake and hoping that the conflict that she had yesterday with a friend will go away, that her social life will improve, and that her teacher will notice how much work she did for her project due today.

In the hallway, other students are drifting in. Some arrived before 7 A.M., having been dropped off by their parents who needed to get to work early. Some take advantage of a modest breakfast of white bread French toast loaded with maple syrup provided by the school; others come early to attend a student council meeting or an early morning sports practice session. By the time the buses and parents arrive with the rest of the students, the school starts to hum with activity and the burgeoning social scene. Carla finds her two best friends, Mia and Crystal, and immediately starts talking about her day—the hassle she got from her mom that morning, the assignment she had last night for history, and the overly strict teacher she has to face in math.

Carla drifts from one class to another, each one lasting fifty minutes and separated by a short four-minute passing period. Sometimes her schedule changes

because of advisory period. This is a short morning class meant to bring kids together as a "family," but many teachers don't always use it well, and it often turns into silent reading time. Carla likes a lot of her teachers because they try to help her in school, but she doesn't like all the homework they give. All the students have "time-trackers" in which they keep their class schedule and assignments. More than once she has forgotten to look at it and missed something important.

The hallways are crowded, and stuff happens there that teachers either overlook or can't see—such as teasing, harassment, "dirty looks," and verbal threats. Suki and Jasmine are spreading rumors about Valerie for being "loose." Martin is being harassed again by Jon, Darryl, and Ian. They are calling him "gay" and laughing at him. Carla sort of hates it but figures it's just part of life. Sometimes she even says mean things herself, figuring the person really deserves it or that it doesn't bother him much anyway. Her language arts teacher, Ms. DeWitt, teaches kids not to use put-downs, and it works in her classroom; but outside her class the rules are different. And Carla's mother says that this was the way school was when she was growing up and to just get along because, as she says, "boys will be boys. You aren't going to change that."

Classes often seem like a blur, with one or two good classes or favorite teachers interspersed throughout her day. Her teachers have many different styles of teaching; some are old-style and authoritarian, others more willing to listen. She likes teachers who know how to really listen and who are firm but not mean. She wishes secretly that there were more like them. At her school, over ten different ethnicities are represented, and more than seven different languages are spoken at home. The pressure to perform is intense because her school has lower test scores than other schools in the district. This means lots of homework and not enough time to spend with her mom when she gets home after school—something she sort of misses. She has even heard of an elementary school that eliminated recess so that the kids could spend more time on academics. Her mom thinks that she should do better in school, but Carla doesn't care because none of the subjects interest her except for language arts. The language arts teacher uses really good books with stories that mean something to her and her life. Too many of the other teachers just use standard textbooks and give boring tests.

She finds out later in the day that her close friend Jackson got busted for wearing a ball cap in the school. There is a school rule that says no hats can be worn inside the school. He was walking down the hallway when the science teacher, Mr. Markowitz, yelled at him from behind, told him to stop, and yanked his hat off his head. Jackson told the teacher that he would have taken it off if the teacher hadn't been "such a jerk." That got him sent to the office quick, and he didn't like going to the assistant principal's office because the assistant principal has a "holier than thou" attitude while pretending to be friends with the students. Something

the assistant principal said made Jackson blow up in anger, and he got sent to "in-school suspension." Carla doesn't know what the big deal about hats is when there are plenty of other kids doing drugs, having sex, and harassing other students behind teachers' backs. And a few of the teachers do their fair share of humiliating students as well. All of the students are changing physically and emotionally in ways that some of the teachers have a hard time appreciating.

At lunch, Carla gets into a fight with Kristen over something dumb. Kristen always has to be right, and the argument really seemed to be about something else, but the bell rang and everybody starting talking about going to the next class, and the two of them never got it resolved.

Carla is on the soccer team, so after school she spends the next couple of hours in practice. Thankfully she doesn't have to deal with bullies on her way home. They love harassing kids when teachers aren't around. Then she goes home and finds her mom there frantically preparing dinner for her and her older brother, who is in high school. Dinner has to be quick because there is a parent evening at school that they have to attend. Carla decides to stay home and do homework, but ends up talking with her friend on the phone for forty-five minutes before actually sitting down to read her assignments and do her homework. She goes to bed at 9:30 P.M., feeling a little overwhelmed and empty inside.

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Carla is only one fictitious student similar to millions of students around the country. Her story is representative of the daily activities and conflicts in her intellectual, social, spiritual, and physical life. Indeed, this story shows only the point of view of the student and lacks many other, sometimes more mature, perspectives and realities. Yet for her there are many daily conflicts that exist in a school modeled after both factory-like education (desks always in rows, classes moving in a predictable and clockwork schedule, and standardized textbook learning) and computer- and cosmopolitan-like education (many ethnicities; busy, overlapping schedules; Internet-based learning).

Life for children in our nation's schools is complex and difficult to manage. They grow up in a fast-paced world where some parents are often too busy seeking the American dream to provide them with the time, the authority, and the attention they so desperately need—or their parents provide them with too much from the American dream, causing the kids to be spoiled and weak in character. It has been said, and is likely true, that children have been a challenge to their elders since the beginning of time. But if we are to create present-day solutions, we have to understand the present-day problems kids are facing: they are rushed; they live in a violent world; they live in a world that is very different from that of

their parents; they go to schools that have complex and competing interests; and they live in a world still filled with prejudice, white privilege, and a wide gap between rich and poor.

Kids in a Rush

Chip Wood, a well-known and respected educator and the author of the recent book *Time to Teach, Time to Learn,* said this about rushing our children: "We need to stop hurrying children. Our school days require time. Time to wonder, time to pause, time to look closely, time to share, time to pay attention to what is most important. In school we must give children the time they need to learn. To hurry the day, to hurry through classes, grades and a timetable of achievements, is contrary to the nature of children and will do irreparable damage to their minds and souls."[2]

The speed of the Internet and the "always open" 24/7 lifestyle that we have created for ourselves in the name of progress has often created lives that move too fast, and we have trouble adjusting to the constant demands and stimulation of input. Simply put, we have trouble setting appropriate boundaries on our time. And the predicted increase in leisure as a consequence of mechanization has not materialized. Instead we have only increased our capacity for wanting more. Our ability to control our drive to have, buy, and be is not yet strong enough to withstand the pressures of speed and created wants and needs. Kids today find themselves rushing to catch up, often at the expense of the slower pace needed for in-depth learning; for the authentic resolution of conflict; and for the development of social, emotional, and ethical intelligence—what some call wisdom.

Our minds may move fast, but our hearts and emotions need time to experience the depth, richness, and complexity of life. As Mary Pipher points out in her book *The Shelter of Each Other,* "There's too much information and not enough meaning."[3] When we lose this time, we lose a part of ourselves, and when we lose this meaning, we lose a part of our souls. Teachers may instinctively know the importance of fostering meaning and connection in students' lives. With the increasing pressures placed on teachers to raise test scores, they have had to cut many experiential activities, and quantitative results take precedent over qualitative results. By focusing on social and emotional learning and conflict resolution, we help create a learning environment in which students and teachers can slow down the pace of life. When we can slow down the pace of our emotional and conflictual situations, we are better able to get at the root cause of them, which is key to using the critical and creative thinking necessary for understanding and resolving life's conflicts.

Kids in a Violent World

Even though the United States may be one of the most civilized and even gener-
ous countries in the world, we remain, unfortunately, one of the most violent
and punitive. We have the highest rate of incarceration in the world. Today the
United States has approximately 1.8 million people behind bars; we imprison
more people than any other country in the world—perhaps half a million more
than Communist China.[4] By the end of elementary school, the average child will
have watched one hundred thousand acts of violence, despite the fact that media
researchers have repeatedly shown evidence linking media portrayals of violence
to aggressive behavior.[5] Domestic violence continues to be a significant problem
in our culture. In terms of dating violence, one-third of all teenagers report having
experienced violence in a dating relationship.[6] Perhaps most telling, our military
budget is larger than all other categories of spending combined,[7] showing that we
still believe in, and have to live in, a world where violence is a significant strategy
for handling conflicts.

Since 1987, the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department
of Education has conducted a study of school problems. Every three school years,
the staff asks a representative sample of some fifty thousand public school teachers
to rate specific problems in schools depending on the degree to which they occur in
their schools. What has risen steadily since 1987 as being serious or moderately seri-
ous in their schools are physical conflicts among students, robbery or theft, student
possession of weapons, vandalism of school property, and verbal abuse of teachers.[8]
Dell Elliot, of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence in Boulder, Colo-
rado, refers to the increase in youth violence in our schools and in our communities
in the last decade as an epidemic—the social response to which has largely been
limited to "increasingly harsh and lengthy sentencing with little evidence that this
approach is deterring violence or rehabilitating young offenders."[9]

What many of us know is that the violence of our youth is a response to and
reflection of what is happening around them. Our culture has glorified violence
in our movies, our games, our heroes, and our values. Being strong is more often
equated with being aggressive, bullying, and violent than it is with demonstrating
impulse control, emotional honesty, and direct nonviolent communication.

As weapons have become easier to access for young people in the last decade,
fights that in earlier years resulted in black eyes and bloody noses now result in
serious injury and death. Easy access to guns and knives, a pervasive culture of vio-
lence, and inadequate emphasis on the skills of conflict resolution and the means
to create safe, caring communities have resulted in the escalation of conflicts to
an epidemic level among our nation's youth.

Eighty percent of adolescents report being bullied during their school years; 90 percent of fourth through eighth graders report being victims of bullying at some point in their school experience; and 15 percent of students are bullies or are long-term victims of bullies. Children who have been identified as bullies by age eight are six times more likely to be convicted of a crime by age twenty-four and five times more likely than nonbullies to end up with serious criminal records by age thirty. Students reported that 71 percent of the teachers or other adults in the classroom ignored bullying incidents.[10]

There is evidence suggesting that this epidemic may be overstated, however. A report from the Center for Disease Control studying the period from 1991 to 1997 showed a decline in the percentage of student reports of physical fights on and off school grounds and showed no significant increase in the number of youth who reported feeling too unsafe to go to school.[11] The good news is that school continues to be one of the safest places for children, and youth and school crime rates are declining.[12] Still, the overall rates are too high for a society that prides itself on being a leader in the civilized world. Violence in our society and violence in our schools have the potential for slowing the advancement of civilization and inhibiting the creation of intelligent and compassionate youth. Civilization depends on the advancement of social as well as economic and political progress, and a violent culture denies our ability to handle social problems "in a civilized manner." Violence in our schools, our neighborhoods, and our homes remains a shadow on our greatness that must be addressed, and one of the best places to address it is in schools where students and staff can learn nonviolent ways to resolve conflicts.

Kids in a Radically Different World

Many factors have contributed to a world that is radically different for our children than it was for those of previous generations. Not only have computers, the Internet, and travel compressed and changed our world and our schools forever, but the core elements that we used to depend on for social stability and civility—such as the extended family structure, respect for elders, and sharing of communal wisdom—have been significantly altered, causing many families and social institutions to lose the basic keys to social survival. At the end of World War II, there was a mass migration from small towns and farm communities into urban and suburban environments, and an entire culture was disrupted. This was largely due to the Industrial Revolution, the G.I. Bill, reaction to the depression, and technology. As close-knit communities broke down, their wisdom dispersed and people became isolated. In this isolation, people covered their feelings of inadequacy

and their lack of knowledge about what to do with a false sense of pride in handling their own problems. Guilt, stress, and denial began tearing at parents when they were unable to turn out the superkids that society seemed to expect. Children who were born after World War II started a downward trend in achievement and an upward trend in crime, teenage pregnancy, clinical depression, and suicide.[13] As traditional family life changed, so did children's lives.

Fewer than half of the children in the United States live with both biological parents, and 59 percent of all children will live in a single-parent household before they reach the age of eighteen.[14] The rise in the number of single-parent and working-parent families increases the number of latchkey kids left at home after school, many faced with a TV or computer as a babysitter. However these children spend time after school, it is unsupervised by adults. In the 1970s and 1980s, the divorce rate in America was around 40 percent. At the turn of the millennium, it is now purported to be close to 50 percent.[15] As a result of this and other social and cultural factors, many children have been raised desperately lacking in emotional wisdom and conflict competence.

Yet this is not just an American phenomenon but a global trend. As competition drives down the cost of labor and the dream of a materially rich life becomes the norm, economic forces press on family members and cause them to spend more time working and less time with each other, their community, their schools, and fulfilling their responsibilities for civic engagement. Even though we claim to value youth and say they are the future of our country, the unfortunate fact is that we often neglect their real needs: for safety, belonging, love, and supervision, among others. As the communal fabric of society unravels and reforms itself, we find ourselves faced with increasing pressure to be selfish, violent, and neglectful, if not mean.

All of this desperately calls out for us to counter the trend toward isolationism by exposing our children to more altruism, self-restraint, and compassion. What we are discovering is that some biological parents are unreliable, immature, or too irresponsible to handle this crucial task by themselves and that—more than the family—the extended, meaningful community, or "tribe," is the key to preserving civilization. For those of us concerned with the future of our society, the lack of skills created by an individualist culture is a clarion call for us to heed.

According to Patricia Hersch, author of *A Tribe Apart,* the distinguishing feature of today's youth is not their technological prowess but rather their "aloneness."[16] Teens spend more time alone than any other generation. They lack a coherent sense of community. However, the good news is that kids and families are resilient and increasingly are finding ways to counteract these pressures, often through conflict resolution programs that teach them emotional management, authentic communication, and collaborative problem-solving skills.

Kids in Schools with Competing Interests

As our social and economic structures have evolved, so have the purposes of education. Do we educate our children to be skilled workforce members fit for economic progress? Do we educate them to be productive citizens in a democracy? Do we educate them to prepare themselves for higher education? According to John Gatto, former New York State and New York City Teacher of the Year and author most recently of *The Underground History of American Education: A School-teacher's Intimate Investigation into the Problem of Modern Schooling,* "There are three major purposes that human history has assigned to schooling, in every part of the world. One is to make good people. Another is to make good citizens. The third is to make people their personal best. There is a fourth purpose, which comes in around the turn of the century: to turn people into resources for the disposition of government and the corporations."[17]

In an effort to build one of the world's most powerful economies, we have created schools that overemphasize the productivity of the student to prepare for the workplace, rather than the inner wisdom of the student to prepare for a creative life of diverse purposes. The underlying structure and philosophy of education have a tremendous and sometimes not so subtle impact on kids in schools, especially when it comes down to teaching styles, discipline, and punishment.

The factory-like education of yesteryear provided equal if not biased education to many students, but the instruction from this method was often painfully dull. Teachers standing at the front of the room, commanding attention with strict obedience and harsh punishments, left little room for individual creativity or personal learning styles. Some still believe that school should be a place where order is achieved through social control; others believe it to be achieved through social empowerment; still others believe there should be a mix of the two. The social and educational bias toward social control and obedience has deep roots in Western civilization and a significant impact on school life for children of all countries. One of our country's most eloquent speakers on youth issues, Larry Brendtro, author of the book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk,* explains that unlike Native American traditions of belief in the natural trait of independence, Western civilization built itself on the belief that obedience is natural if not ideal. Obedience is deeply ingrained in our social life. It served as the fundamental bond of the Europeans—vassal obeyed lord, priest obeyed superiors, subject obeyed king, slave obeyed master, woman obeyed man, and child obeyed everybody. Most approaches to child rearing and education were influenced by the predominant belief about obedience.[18]

Although it is essential to have influence over children as they grow and learn, influence need not be in the form of giving orders. Instead, it can be achieved

through developing mutual respect. The youth work pioneers of the European tradition as well as the untapped heritage of Native American philosophies have shown that responsibility is not taught by disciplining for obedience. As Brendtro says, "Children who are docile when little grow up to be dupes as adults."[19] Learning how to be responsible, competent participants in a civic society requires experience, natural consequences, peers, and authoritative rather than authoritarian elders.

Parents, policymakers, and educators today often fall into the trap of emphasizing obedience over respect. The guilt that can be born when we avoid strict obedience often allows permissiveness and overindulgence. However, neither of these are part of the balanced approach necessary for learning and growing— especially in a democracy founded on participation and empowerment. Kids today face this ongoing conflict among child-rearing styles daily as it is played out by classroom teachers and school disciplinarians. Some teachers adhere to a strict model of teaching and discipline in which the teacher is in command at all times. Other teachers follow a more permissive approach, seeing students as friends and exercising lax discipline. Still others seek the middle path, seeing students as friends but also setting clear limits and modeling good character. Although each teacher needs to find his or her own style, students can receive mixed messages about relationships, power, and responsibility by having to move from one class to another.

Most conflict resolution programs seek a "both-and" approach that combines a high-control style with a high-nurturance style. This authoritative approach seeks to provide guidance with independence and serves as a component of the empowerment model used by conflict resolution practitioners who work with youth.

The complex and competing interests in schools have created many myths regarding the state of schooling today. Different groups often use these myths to support their own beliefs about the state of education and the need for change according to their own theories. For example, while some traditionalists decry the fall of education since World War II, many facts bear otherwise. Children spend more hours in the classroom than the children in all other G-8 countries except France. Our primary teachers earn more than their counterparts in any G-8 country except Germany. And our fourth graders perform better on international reading tests than fourth graders in all of the other thirty-two countries tested except Finland.[20] Perhaps the problem is that although we have made education available to all children, we have not tried to educate them all equally or individually. As we try to educate them all, we have found that our educational practices need reform, and this is a part of progress—one that can be supported by conflict resolution programs that emphasize diverse, student-centered classroom practices with clear adult guidance.

Kids in an Increasingly Diverse World

Demographers predict that students of color will make up about 46 percent of the U.S. school-age population by 2020.[21] Approximately six to fourteen million children live in families headed by gay or lesbian family members, and between 10 to 20 percent of school-age youth identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. Students live with a tremendous array of diversity within their school, although their parents and teachers may not have caught up with the cultural or educational needs of these diverse students. The old way of teaching all children in a standardized pedagogy is quickly receding as the country is willing to teach and reach all children, not just middle-class white ones. Students have become accustomed to increasingly differentiated teaching. The factory-like model of teaching in which teachers stand in the front of the class is giving way to the computer network–like model of teaching in which teachers employ cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and multilevel teaching.

Discrimination and conflicts between racial groups are also a part of every-day life for young people. However, as time goes on, students are increasingly exposed to, if not tolerant of, diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Although we may have had a great deal of diversity in our schools in the past, much of it was subtly and overtly oppressed. Today's youth are learning how to work together in diverse groups, and students are struggling to deal with the natural conflicts between groups that can arise as whites no longer lay claim to being the dominant cultural group with the dominant cultural norm.

What These Social Changes Mean for Us Today

In this chapter, we have seen that some timeless, inevitable relationship problems among our youth still exist, such as rumors, escalating anger, bullying, and verbal and physical fights. We have seen that our modern, scientific, material, information age has created some life-altering changes in the family, in the school, and in the community. We have seen that students' learning and growing are diminished by a fast-paced world. Students are not fully able to slow down enough to resolve more difficult issues and attend to more complex feelings.

At the same time, parents, teachers, and others place high expectations on students. This often causes conflicts in a student's life, as the support may not exist to meet these expectations. We have seen that exposure to unproductive conflict and overt and hidden violence is damaging and sets up unhealthy and sometimes contradictory models for behavior. We have seen that a lack of adult supervision

and personal connection can lead to diminished emotional wisdom and conflict competence; that conflicting child-rearing styles often result in inconsistent and confusing messages for students; and that teacher-student conflicts may increase along with students' frustrations over these conflicting ideals. Finally, we have seen that an increasingly diverse society has added more stress to the school environment and conflicts to the school day. All these factors, and others, make daily life in schools, with all its conflict and choices, a personal challenge for every young person.

Understanding what it is like to be a kid in school today is important. It gives us real-life clues to the changes that may have occurred since we were kids. It gives us greater empathy for the daily struggles children face. It leads us to wiser judgments as we make decisions that affect all young people in schools. We all strive to provide the best education for our youth. If we are to do so, however, we must listen to both our elders and our youth—our elders will tell us some of the best practices from the past, and our youth will tell us how life's changes may require different strategies for handling the problems of the present. Both require us to listen respectfully and find collaborative solutions to raising a generation of youth prepared to make peace in our schools, in our communities, and in our world.