
Excerpts from CHANGING WAYS / *Building Skills*

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Exploring conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Maine schools

Spring 1998

Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

As I write these remarks, we appear to be headed for spring, certainly a welcome relief after a long, trying winter. I hope you all managed to weather the Ice Storm of '98 without too much hardship.

For me personally, those difficult January days were also filled with many wonderful experiences of *community*: that sense of belonging and concern which gives such meaning to our lives. We are excited to feature an article in this newsletter that focuses on building a similar sense of community within schools. Mary McGrath of the Brewer School System describes how all of the schools in her district have become "Communities of Caring," a program that promotes values of "respect, responsibility, trust, caring, and family." If any of you see the potential for such a program in your own school district, Mary has kindly agreed to answer your questions. We would also like to announce that during the August 12 conference tentatively titled "Whole School Approach to Conflict Management," we will begin to map out the goals and structure of a statewide conflict resolution organization. In the Spring 1997 newsletter survey, many of you thought such an organization could benefit teachers doing conflict resolution work in terms of promoting C.R. principles and practices, networking with other educators, lobbying for state funding, etc. If you did not receive that newsletter issue and are interested in helping to initiate this organization, please contact Peace Studies.

We thank all of you who contributed to this newsletter, and wish everyone a pleasant spring and a warm, peaceful summer!

Ironman by Chris Crutcher

Book Review By Nancy Scovern, Penquis Dispute Resolution Center of Penquis C.A.P.

I am choosing this book to review because it is so highly recommended by several high school teachers and administrators. I need to rely on these individuals' comments because, if truth be told, I've yet to read this book myself! After "researching" this book review, though, I can say that *Ironman* has moved to the top of my "to read" pile.

I was first turned on to this book by JoAnn Joslyn, a sophomore English teacher and the Peer Mediation Coordinator at Penquis Valley High School in Milo. JoAnn and her sister Mary Shapleigh, the MS/HS art teacher in Milo, team taught an anger management class last year to a group of their HS students. Photography equipment and other resources, bought for MSAD #41 with dollars from Penquis C.A.P.'s Youth Violence Prevention grant, were used in this creative effort to teach conflict resolution skills and concepts to high school students. Along with other materials and activities, Mary inventively used photography to teach anger management, while JoAnn used *Ironman*. JoAnn spoke very highly of the book, the ease of connecting it to the theme of anger management (an anger management class is part of the story line), and its usefulness in generating group discussion.

I later had the good fortune to speak with Kevin Ritchie, the Assistant Head Master of Lee Academy, who was also very enthusiastic about this book. According to Kevin, *Ironman* is heads and shoulders above most adolescent literature. He went on to say that HS age students relate readily to the dialogue and relationships developed in the

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book, and that ***Ironman*** skillfully handles the topic of individual differences. He continued that the book is a quick read, very compassionate and fair-minded, with believable and engaging characters. Kevin thought that upper lever HS students would be able to make best use of the book, because of their greater ability to understand and discuss the range of issues raised.

Ironman (paperback) can be ordered from any bookstore for \$4.50 [ISBN #: 0-440-21971-X]. Check it out!

Emotional Intelligence: Why It Matters

The concept of what it means to be smart has traditionally focused on cognitive skills and knowledge. However, research studies now show that emotional intelligence—the ability to manage distressing feelings, control impulses, and get along with others—is a far stronger predictor of achievement in school, on the job, and in life, than IQ.

Why does emotional intelligence have such an impact on how we live our lives? According to Daniel Goleman, author of the bestseller *Emotional Intelligence*, it's because our thinking brain—the cortex where analytical and verbal tasks take place and where our working memory resides—is always influenced by our emotions. To neglect the development of the emotional brain, he cautions, puts us and our students at peril.

Here's why: All emotions, including the proverbial “fight or flight” response, are controlled by the limbic brain that sits between the cortex and the brain stem. In the middle of the limbic area, just behind our eyes, are two almond-shaped organs called amygdalas, whose function is to scan everything happening to us from moment to moment to determine if anything that happened in the past to distress or anger us is similar to what is happening now.

Should this occur, the amygdala takes only a split second to sound the alarm, sending us into a “fight or flight” response before our cortex—the thinking brain—can even figure out what's happening. This constant interference by the amygdala, which Goleman calls akin to emotional hijacking, can get us into a rage and make us do something we might later regret.

However, a “fight or flight” response by the amygdala can be immobilized by developing a mature, healthy connection between our emotions and our analytic thinking. Such a connection puts the cortex back in control and tells us to forget the “fight” message. While everyone gets angry, not everyone reacts violently.

Says Goleman, it is vital to incorporate the five dimensions of emotional intelligence (see related article) into everything we do at school, for both adults and children. By doing so we can raise the emotional intelligence of our students and become more emotionally healthy ourselves.

Source: Carolyn R. Pool, “Up With Emotional Health,” *Educational Leadership*, May 1997, p. 12.

Brewer Becomes A Community of Caring

By Mary McGrath

The Brewer school community, the Brewer business community, parks and recreation and several local churches are collaborating to integrate the Community of Caring Program and its values as a way of life for the citizens of Brewer.

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Through a total community approach, the Community of Caring hopes to create a respectful and caring environment that supports the development of positive values in our young. These include the universal values of respect, responsibility, trust, caring, and family. Unlike other programs that may be designed to address behavioral trends, the Community of Caring recognizes the whole person and not the “issues” of the individual.

The following excerpt from “How To Create A Community of Caring School” prepared by the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions describes the philosophy of Community of Caring.

The Community of Caring believes that teaching values in the school can contribute to the personal well-being of the students and the social health of society. This is a large and sweeping claim. We do not make it naively, and we acknowledge up front that there are limits to how much the teaching of values in school can help with our problems.

We acknowledge the limits for two important reasons. First, other influences have a powerful impact on children’s behavior. Setting out to combat a difficult home situation, an unsafe neighborhood, peer pressure and unwholesome media messages, a school may seem like a pygmy tangling with giants.

Second, even the saints experience backsliding. No one always lives up to his or her highest principles or standards. All of us fail to measure up to our ideals; no one’s family is just what it should be; care and respect, trust and community are more easily paid lip service than life service. Temptations and failures are very familiar experiences in human life.

Despite these challenges, we believe that the best option for schools is to try to reconstitute themselves as communities of caring, to teach worthy values and to show their commitment to family, caring, responsibility, respect, and trust.

What alternatives do schools have? Schools cannot afford to do nothing; they must respond with fundamental and profound reform. They must approach the education of children from the start with the goal of preventing the development of destructive behaviors rather than designing ways to remediate antisocial conduct.

But responsible reform must be consistent with the objectives of the schools themselves. At least two of these objectives are clear:

1. Schools exist to educate for citizenship. Citizenship has value components. We cannot credibly say we are educating good citizens if we do not help our young people to think seriously about matters of value and create for them a community in which they can discover themselves.

2. Schools in a free society are committed to the proposition that persons must be responsible for themselves. If we are really committed to freedom, we must create an educational climate that is neither chaotic nor oppressive. Freedom requires a community of caring.

Community of Caring is not a quick fix attempt to change behavior. Rather, it is a shift in the school and community’s attitude; a reframing of how we think and hold ourselves and our children accountable. This program does not usually enjoy early success and completion. It is more a process that requires patience and perhaps ten years before an attitude shift can be measured.

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In Brewer, the Community of Caring consists of a coordinating committee with members from the school, parent, and business communities that meet bimonthly to oversee activities. All schools in our system have adopted the Community of Caring program. Each school has its own committee with a lead teacher to determine the action plans for that school. These plans include ways to integrate the five values in the curriculum, and to seek volunteer opportunities in the community and activities that involve the civic community to be integrated into the schools.

As individual schools decided to join the Community of Caring, two-days training was provided to all staff. Representatives from the business, civic and religious communities were invited to join administrators, teachers, support staff, custodians, bus drivers, and food service personnel for this training.

Finally, the success of this program does not depend on the efforts of a few individuals. It does not “die” because key people have moved on. The heart of the program, community ownership, keeps the spirit of Community of Caring alive. Even though it is difficult to measure attitudes and values, we recognize their existence and this program offers the hope that a revolution of caring may actually be possible.

For more information on the Community of Caring program, contact Mary McGrath at 989-3760.