

Helen C. Castonguay

THE LEAGUE OF PEACEFUL SCHOOLS: A DREAM SHARED

*A dream that you dream alone remains a dream.
A dream that you share can become reality. Anon*

The League of Peaceful Schools is a dream shared. With the inspiration of Hetty Van Gulp, Don MacLeod and Frank MacCormick literally breathing life into the idea, the League was dreamt into being in 1998 in Halifax, Nova Scotia by educators who wanted to celebrate and support the many schools committed to building and maintaining a culture of peace in schools, communities, and the world. The rapid expansion of the League to over 200 members within a few years is a clear indication that the dream of peace is on many minds and in many hearts. The League continues to expand today with members and interested schools and communities from sea to sea to sea, from British Columbia to Nunavut to Newfoundland.

As you approach the school, you notice the bright yellow and green flag that designates this school as an active member of the League of Peaceful Schools. Immediately you begin to see evidence of a community that believes we are all connected and peace can be found everywhere. The outdoor gathering areas honour the cycles of nature and the needs of children and adults. Green spaces and sitting areas, cooperative play and learning spaces are maintained and in use by children, youth and adults.

A WELCOME sign greets you as you enter the door and signage throughout the school is clear and inviting. Student artwork representing Peace, Respect, Cooperation, and Community adorns the walls and people are talking to each other in friendly and helpful ways. A conflict arises at the water fountain and both students take responsibility for their behaviour when addressed by a parent volunteer. Two students, unable to resolve their conflict without assistance, are waiting for Peer Mediators in the Mediation room.

KEEPING THE VISION ALIVE AND GROWING

The day-to-day operations of the League of Peaceful Schools are managed by the Executive Director and governed by the Board of Directors, with funding from the Nova Scotia Department of Education, school membership fees, and income generated from annual conferences and donations. In October 2002, the League initiated a network of Regional Facilitators to increase its capacity to support schools and share information, ideas, and inspiration.

In response to our expansion and to expressions of interest from across Canada, the Board of Directors is developing a Licensing Agreement for Provincial Affiliates, thereby ensuring that the integrity of the vision and philosophy of the organization are maintained, while allowing other provinces to support schools who wish to become members of the League. Recognizing that schools cannot build a culture of peace in isolation and must work intimately with families and community members in support of children and youth, these facilitators will offer guidance and encourage schools to develop strong and equitable links with their immediate communities.

VISION

The League of Peaceful Schools embraces the hope that our young people will grow up experiencing less violence (intimidation, harassment, discrimination, sexism, heterosexism, racism, poverty) and, as a result, be empowered to undertake greater civic responsibility. Thus, our young people will have enhanced opportunities to achieve their potential and grow in appreciation of the richness and fulfillment of fostering caring human relationships and respect for the environment.



MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA

The criteria for membership reflect the characteristics and components essential in creating and maintaining a peaceful school:

- ✓ A written school wide Discipline Policy developed with input from students, staff, and parents/guardians
- ✓ Regular review of the Discipline Policy
- ✓ Classroom rules and consequences developed with input from students
- ✓ Evidence of involvement in programs which promote positive social behavior
- ✓ School policies which promote effective alternatives to punishment
- ✓ Evidence of a problem solving approach to the management of the school
- ✓ An active Peer Mediation Program
- ✓ An effective Crisis Intervention plan
- ✓ Professional Development for staff focused on improving school climate

RENEWAL CRITERIA

After three years of flag bearing membership schools make a commitment to the following criteria which reflect the characteristics and components essential in creating and maintaining links with the community which support a Peaceful Schools/Peaceful Communities social justice approach to education:

- ✓ Evidence of community involvement in programs which support a commitment to peace and social justice
- ✓ An active Service Learning program that links students with community projects focused on building peace
- ✓ An active 'Elders' program designed to bring members of the community into the school to share their skills, knowledge and wisdom
- ✓ Evidence of curricular initiatives that link local issues of social justice with global issues of social justice such as weekly scheduled school wide Peace Education classes
- ✓ An annual peace celebration that recognizes school and community efforts and accomplishments in creating a culture of peace and justice

Through service learning and Elders programs, schools can offer our children and youth models for building healthy relationships, at the same time acknowledging and honouring the interdependence of schools, families and communities.

Although this program originated in Nova Scotia, education ministries in other provinces will soon be able to support and develop a licensed provincial affiliate that will link directly with the League of Peaceful Schools in Nova Scotia. We are already working with Prince Edward Island to develop such an agreement and hope to work with other provinces in the near future. An Associate Membership Policy is also being developed for schools without a provincial affiliate and for individuals and community members who would like to support and be part of the League's work.

Schools that wish to become members of the League agree to work toward the specific criteria outlined and commit to building and maintaining a culture of peace within the school. Beginning in 2002-03, schools will be asked to renew their commitment every three years and to work toward new criteria that draw them more deeply into links with community and

with global issues of social justice. The purpose of developing Renewal Criteria is to maintain an awareness of the need to for a deepening and ongoing commitment to developing and maintaining a culture of peace within the school and in the community.

The renewal criteria provide direction for schools as they develop school improvement plans and professional development.

These criteria also clearly indicate the commitment on the part of the League of Peaceful Schools to continue to support schools after they meet the membership criteria.

PEACEFUL SCHOOLS/ PEACEFUL COMMUNITIES

Schools that have been successful at sustaining the vision are those in which all children know what it means for their school to be a member of the League and in which all children understand that they are central to building a culture of peace in school and in the community. All members of the school community develop a sense of meaning and a sense of purpose related to building and maintaining that culture.

The Community Bulletin Board holds notices of a peace walk that is held the third Sunday of every month at the town commons; a new energy efficient light bulb that the Youth for Social Justice club is selling as a fund raiser; a community forum on water quality and its impact on communities; a cooperative games picnic sponsored by the local service club; and an organic gardening workshop being offered free of charge by the high school biology club.

The deeper commitment to social justice issues expressed in the renewal criteria gives rise to many questions that help children understand the world and how they can make it a more just and peaceful place: What does poverty look like right here in our school, our community, our province, our country, and throughout the world? How is our water usage related to just distribution of water throughout the world? What do conflicts in the schoolyard tell us about world conflicts? Indeed, responses to these questions lead us to other questions: what role can each of us play in the eradication of poverty, in disarmament, and in the building of right relationships with natural resources and with each other? In a world often driven by forces of separation, competitive individualism, inequitable valuing of human lives, and economic and political greed which manifest themselves in many forms of violence from domination-based video games, to bullying, to international warfare, we need to acknowledge that peace will not be revealed without a concerted effort on the part of everyone.

Because we believe that sustainable school improvement comes from within, each school is encouraged to define what 'building a culture of peace' means for it and what living peace will look like.

A Peaceful School honours learning as the core activity for all members of the community and offers support to students, staff and community members as they seek excellence. A strong and healthy sense of belonging supports all efforts toward building a culture of peace in our lives, our schools, our communities and the world. We all belong in a Peaceful School.

EN BREF

La rapide expansion de la Ligue des écoles pacifiques à plus de 200 membres en quelques années à peine est une indication claire que le rêve de la paix réside dans de nombreux esprits et cœurs. Les écoles membres acceptent de travailler en vue d'atteindre certains critères précis et s'engagent à bâtir et à maintenir une culture pacifique au sein de l'école. Cela ne signifie pas qu'il y ait une absence de conflits, mais plutôt qu'il faut les résoudre selon des façons qui sont respectueuses, éducatives et restauratrices. Conscientes que certains conflits sont inévitables, les écoles pacifiques ont mis en vigueur un programme de médiation par les pairs et ont accepté d'élaborer des règlements disciplinaires qui offrent des solutions de rechange à l'approche punitive.

RESOLVING CONFLICT

A culture of peace does not mean an absence of conflict, but it does mean resolving conflicts in ways that are respectful, educative, and restorative. Member schools agree to develop and abide by discipline policies that are proactive, educative and formative, thus providing alternatives to a punitive focused approach. This means that responsibility, reconciliation and restoration of right relationship are guiding principles for all disciplinary decisions. These practices teach self-discipline and emphasize our interdependence, thus preparing students to become thoughtful and engaged citizens who are aware of both their rights and their responsibilities within their community.

Eddy, a student at Annapolis East Elementary School (a member of the League of Peaceful Schools) appears in a joint Triad and NFB production, "Learning Peace." He has been in many conflicts and is responding well to the efforts of the school to help him develop a sense of belonging and responsibility. He sits down beside a little boy who is being disciplined for his behaviour on the bus. Eddy casually asks him why he did what he did, talks to him about the possible consequences of his actions, and then talks about his own experiences. Eddy – sounding very much like an elder – tells him about times when he caused disruption himself, and how he had to take the consequences. He assures the young student that he can change his behaviour and gives him a specific plan for his next bus ride. The connection Eddy develops with this child allows him to help the child find other choices and realize that what he did had an impact on others.

The implementation of a Peer Mediator Program is a central criterion for all LPS schools. It prepares staff and students for the important work of being fully present to and resolving the inevitable conflicts that arise in any community. This program teaches us to listen carefully to each other and models peaceful and respectful ways of being with each other in times of disagreement.

Brandon comes down the hall clearly distraught. He sees the Principal and School Liaison officer in the distance and runs up to them in tears. The Principal compassionately asks what has happened and Brandon replies 'I need to speak to Patrick and Maggie'. Patrick and Maggie are Peer Mediators, and even though

Brandon had the full attention of two adults who would have been able to support him, he sought out his well-trained peers. Once reminded of how to request the mediation, Brandon followed through and Patrick and Maggie brought the situation to a well-mediated conclusion.

Peer Mediation benefits all involved when students are well trained and staff fully support the program. Students learn how to resolve conflicts and when to call for adult assistance. Whenever a Peer Mediator is not comfortable with the process of a mediation, he or she calls the mediation to a close and refers the students to adult intervention. Many schools train all students in the processes of mediation, as well as offering more in-depth training for Peer Mediators.

Reading essays from grade 4,5, and 6 students explaining why they feel they will be strong Peer Mediators, I pause to reread a statement: "I want to help new children enjoy coming to our school as much as I do." These students, most of whom I have taught, represent the success of our school's journey toward all students becoming Peace Makers. This peaceful focus has been broadened and sustained by membership in the League of Peaceful Schools. The flag flying over the front door of Springvale Elementary School is a concrete demonstration of the commitment of our students, staff and community to building a culture of peace. People frequently notice and comment on our flag even though it's faded and certainly showing its age. This flag holds special memories for many of us as it has travelled the journey from the creation of various peace helping groups toward considering all students P-6 as Peace Makers who help create and sustain peaceful learning environments.

**Reflection of a Regional Facilitator, Sandra McLeod,
Springvale Elementary School, Halifax**

BUILDING A CULTURE OF PEACE

Those who choose to be members of the League of Peaceful Schools choose to lead by example, or as Mohandas Gandhi said, to "be the change we want to see in the world." That is our challenge: as adults, to be the compassionate and critical thinkers we want our children to become; as educators, to be the passionate learners we want our students to be; as schools, to be the model of the community we want for all children; and as world citizens, to live a culture of peace based on social justice so that all can live in peace. The hard work of building peace calls to each of us, and a good place to start is with ourselves, in our schools and in our own communities. 🌱

Helen C. Castonguay is the Executive Director of the League of Peaceful Schools and the Safe and Inviting Schools Program Implementation Coordinator for the Halifax Regional School Board. She has been a teacher and school administrator within HRSB and is a Part Time Faculty member at Mt. Saint Vincent University where she teaches courses related to Holistic Education.

hcastonguay@hrsb.ns.ca

All membership information may be found at www.leagueofpeacefulschools.ns.ca