

## Schools as Sanctuaries

*H. Mark Stanwood and Gini Doolittle*

*The concept of sanctuary developed by psychiatrist Sandra Bloom is applied to building safe school cultures.*

**C**learly, the problem of youth violence reaches beyond the schoolyard and the academic calendar. With diverse causative factors, responses to this complex dilemma can be no less involved. When kids bring guns to school, local officials typically respond by exhorting schools to install metal detectors, set up surveillance cameras, employ security guards, and assign police officers to schools. Senge (1990) cautions, however, the most obvious solutions are often the wrong ones and Nigeria (1995) observes such coercive, get-tough strategies are ineffective since they do not address the causes of violence. Rather, these strategies produce prison-like schools that feel unsafe.

In April 1999, when a group of superintendents in southern New Jersey first assembled to discuss the ramifications of Columbine, we had no vision of safe schools, little understanding of the complexities of change, and certainly no design to create community in our schools. Through months of dialogue and reflection, forged by the power of moral purpose, an image of safe schools emerged.

At the outset, it was clear that no single system held the magic bullet to solving this problem. Therefore, we engaged four different systems to help us begin the change process: law enforcement, mental health, superintendents, and students.

Of the four groups with whom we met, the young adults offered the most interesting perspective. "Metal detectors and cameras don't work," stated one 15-year-old. A young male described how metal detectors present a challenge to him and his friends.

He said there were too few security guards at the school entrance, most of whom were "too old" to be effective. Another offered, "I've seen blades come into school hidden in shoes and under one girl's tongue." One student observed that school rules were directed toward hats and baggy pants, thereby missing more serious infractions. He explained, "We can get through security with a blade, but I have to take off my hat." A final observation was, "Schools should model respect for individuals. We're always supposed to respect teachers and vice-principals .... But they don't respect us." This was the most profound message: "Kids are people, too. We need to be respected. So don't minimize my problems. Please understand that my problems are huge to me, even if they aren't to you!" (April, 2000, student focus group).

Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) captures this mismatch between a typical school experience and the indisputable needs of adolescents. She posits that:

Many ... adolescent difficulties are not intrinsic to the teenage years but are related to the mismatch between adolescents' development ... needs and the kinds of experiences most ... schools provide. When students need close affiliation, they experience large, depersonalized schools; when they need to develop autonomy, they experience few opportunities for choice and punitive approaches to discipline; when they need expansive cognitive challenges and opportunities to demonstrate their competence, they experience work focused largely on the memorization of facts ... (p. 122)."

As a joint task force of disparate systems serving children, we talked about our shared experiences where these disaffected youth were not responsive to traditional prevention strategies, and how schools may contribute to the problem. Gail Furman (1994) suggests additional factors alienating schools from community, including bureaucratic structures and centralized governance. Our group recognized increased academic standards, rigorous high stakes assessment processes, and heightened demand for teacher and administrator accountability as issues exacerbating the problem.

## Sanctuary Emerges

Our conversations eventually led to the discovery of a concept of safe schools called Sanctuary (Bloom, 1995) developed by psychiatrist Sandra Bloom. Bloom's concepts, at least as I understood them at this point, went beyond technical and rational responses to a complex problem. Instead, her work was rooted in systems thinking and second-order change. Bloom stated:

It's not enough just to work with ... kids. We have to work with the people who work with the kids. No genre, no program will work. The problem is too complex. Therefore, the solution, the responding process should reflect those same complexities, but must be manageable.... (personal conversation, October 13, 2000)

She noted that a typical response to an outrageous behavior has been, "What's wrong with you?" In contrast, the Sanctuary model asks, "What has happened to you?" This question assumes there is an explanation for contrary and destructive behavior. It represents an environment that is respectful, not judgmental, of all individuals. Bloom intended to help us move past traditional thinking whereby adopting or installing a program or a curriculum to teach kids new skills and attitudes about getting along represents a solution to the problem. Instead Bloom contends that:

Schools are a terrific place to create community. Kids experience compensatory mechanisms for all things that go on at home and in the community.... Our society systems do not function very well. How do we make it work better? How do we create a normative environment that does not need constant surveillance? (December 4, 2001, meeting)

At first, some were not grasping the model and the depth and breadth of the change in schools Bloom advocated. She then explained the culture shift in terms of a "systems intervention." She said:

Sanctuary is not a program. It does not replace anything. It's about an underlying integration of systems. We take all we know and we integrate it.... Our goal is not more work, but a more efficient system. It's about facilitating a values system that is non-negotiable ... no violence is OK ... verbal, physical, social." (December 4, 2001, meeting)

In an effort to build such a culture, one superintendent suggested we use staff to affect change among staff. Another put it this way, "Let's take those who get it, and form a group to be trained and then go back and train others. We can call them 'key communicators.'" We expanded the idea by creating three pilot projects in three different types of schools: a comprehensive high school, a suburban middle school, and a regional school serving severely behaviorally disabled children.



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Senge (1999, 2000) advocates pilot groups as a high-leverage strategy to forge sustained change. Consistent with Daniel Goleman's (2002) rules of engagement, "to help create a resonant, emotionally intelligent, and effective culture" (p. 218), he suggests, "Start at the top with a bottom-up strategy" (p. 219) in an effort to ensure commitment around the issue. Contending that change driven by authority would likely be short-term in duration or last only as long as authority pushes it, Senge cautions, "Do everything possible to ensure that participation in pilot groups and change initiatives is a matter of choice, not coercion" (p. 249).

We structured five phases for implementation: Phase 1 provided a comprehensive awareness of the program's concepts and goals. Phase 2 led to a cultural assessment of the participating schools and identification of key members for the "Sanctuary Facilitation Team." Phase 3 involved training in the cognitive elements supporting sanctuary, but also incorporated aspects of change. Phase 4 centered on facilitating and integrating cultural change in the schools and Phase 5 established monitoring practices.

### **Assessment of School Culture**

SAGE, an acronym for Safety, Affect Management, Grieving, and Emancipation, focused on four fundamental questions: In the realm of safety, the question was: How safe is your school? To assess affect management, the question was asked: How well are individual and group emotions managed through decision-making, group process, and conflict resolution? The grieving element was assessed with this question: How does your system deal with normal losses and traumatic loss and are there signs of unresolved grief in the environment? Emancipation was assessed by asking: How well does your system promote health for your children and your staff and what is the shared vision of what you intend to accomplish together. Qualitative data relative to these elements was combined with quantitative data in each school as a baseline for later comparison.

### **Building Capacity**

During Phase 3, Bloom asked me to identify members of the Sanctuary Facilitation Team. I invited some of the people because their routine work requires that they travel in wider circles, across functions throughout the organization. Bloom and I

agreed that a critical criterion for selection was "opinion makers who are likely to exert influence on the whole school." Once selected, each member was trained as a trainer and facilitator in eight units designed by Bloom. The training modules were aimed at building the knowledge base about the history and fundamental assumptions of establishing non-violent communities, knowledge of trauma theory as it applies to understanding the most troubled children, and understanding the four stage recovery framework (SAGE). The design led to explicit awareness of participant actions, teacher and student attitudes, language, the meaning of safety to include psychological, cultural, and moral dimensions, and the reduction of blame by relating individual action into community interventions.

### **Preliminary Impact**

My experience as a superintendent of schools serving students in alternative settings reaffirms that too many kids who learn differently, and whose learning differences ultimately result in frustration, end up in alternative settings because the neighborhood schools are ill-equipped to help them learn. Moreover, it is not hard to find illustrations of compliance orientation in our traditional system. The roles of our teachers, principals, and curriculum developers have been clearly delineated in job descriptions, union contracts, and policy manuals. When community began to take hold, however, very different forces drove relationships, making independent work less valued and inconsistent with the mission and goals of our group. Connections among people evolved toward commitments, interdependencies, shared beliefs, and values shared by its members, "creating a sense of 'we' from 'I'" (Sergiovanni, 1999, p. 119).

Positive relationships cannot be legislated through structure but instead are discovered through dialogue and the value of internal motivation for guiding the behavior of adults and kids. If relationships distinguish community, then we should pay attention to the message we heard from kids during the focus group discussion. Student (and adult) behavior will not be effectively controlled by rules. Such external influences drive compliance, at least in the presence of authority, but have little impact on cooperation among members of a group. Such a system relies upon a manager, or some third party to enforce the rules. Our work toward safe schools was

aimed toward self-management, where community norms, focused on moral purpose, govern behavior of all the members.

## Policy Implications

Surely, we cannot coerce Sanctuary, or the elements thereof. We can, however, encourage a participatory constitutional process designed to establish and institutionalize the underlying principles of safe schools. Bloom (1995) suggests the goals of education must reflect the needs of our students today, addressing the health of all individuals. If the system of school is dysfunctional, "the members of the system cannot provide an environment for learning" (p. 413). Bloom suggests schools might accomplish such a goal by teaching emotional literacy. She reminds us that few incidents of violence are directly related to limited skills in reading, writing, and computation, but rather, limited emotional literacy. Without fundamental ability to get along with others, academic skills are not very valuable to our society.

## Leadership Implications

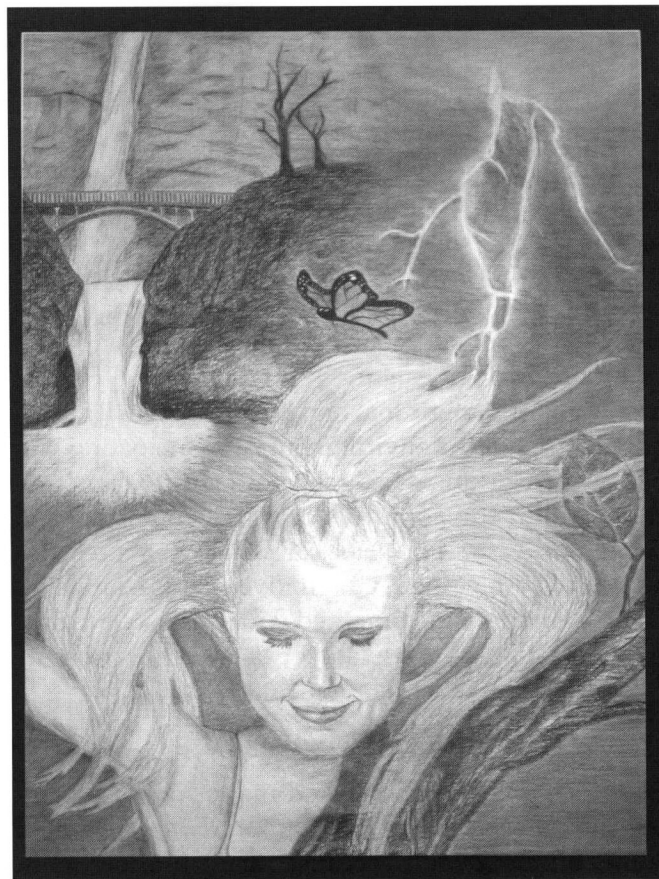
We learned that there is no recipe for community; it cannot be installed or borrowed (Sergiovanni, 1999). Community is grown, not unlike the garden metaphor used by Senge (1999) to illustrate change in a complex environment. Senge points out how ineffective and ridiculous it is for a leader to assert himself with loud voice and aggressive action to influence the growth of his plants. The garden is most productive when the environment is adjusted to ensure the right temperature, PH, moisture, nutrients, and light. Likewise, the role of the leader is to build commitment through moral purpose, build relationships among individuals and groups, share and create knowledge, and help others understand the complex change process (Fullan, 2001), all the time expanding the circle of participants.

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