

# Spiri



*All of us are crying out for deeper meaning and purpose in our lives. We are ready to take this on in a deeper way and to advocate for soul in education—for schools with spirit.*

Photo courtesy of Linda Lantieri

LINDA LANTIERI wants every school in the nation to be an “oasis of peace.” She demonstrated how to achieve this in *Waging Peace in our Schools* (1996), her influential book (coauthored by Janet Patti) based on the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program she cofounded in 1985 (see “Before Push Comes to Shove,” Spring 1999). Teachers and children learned the language of mediation to reconcile the needs of even the most entrenched playground adversaries.

*Waging Peace* sounded an alarm: “Our society needs a new way of thinking about what it means to be an educated person.” Lantieri’s vision for schools recognized “that the ability to manage our emotions, resolve conflicts, and interrupt biases are fundamental skills—skills that can and must be taught.”

Resolving Conflict Creatively, a program of Educators for Social Responsibility, was piloted by three schools, one of which was in the Redhook section of Brooklyn, a virtual war zone at the time. RCCP is now established in 400 schools in the United States, with pilot sites in Brazil and Puerto Rico. Every site aims to create “caring, safe school communities in a society that seemed to be abandoning children to a climate of perpetual violence.”

Thousands of teachers and children now “wage peace” in day-to-day life, with powerful effects. In an independent 1998 evaluation of RCCP-Atlanta by Metis Associates, 64 percent of participating teachers indicated less physical violence in their classrooms; 75 percent reported an increase in student cooperation; 92 percent of students felt better about themselves; and over 90 percent of parents reported an increase in their own communication and problem-solving skills. In addition, in- and out-of-school suspension rates decreased significantly, com-

# ed Schools

**Why conflict resolution skills are not enough to keep our schools safe, and what needs to change. Todd R. Nelson interviews Linda Lantieri.**

pared with non-RCCP high schools during the same period.

Despite her program's success, Lantieri says teaching conflict-resolution skills is not enough. She is now calling for the culture of our public schools to make a place for everyone—teachers, students, administrators, staff, and parents—to explore matters of the soul. With her new book, *Schools with Spirit* (Beacon Press, 2001), Lantieri is enlarging “the oasis” to include whole communities. The book's contributors, educational luminaries and practitioners—Daniel Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*), Parker Palmer (*The Courage to Teach*), and others—explore the importance to children of learning self-awareness and reflection while preparing for the brave new world of unfamiliar social and intellectual demands. Lantieri gives us a new vision of how and what schools ought to teach, and shows the value of integrating feelings and spirit with the academic curriculum—even as high-stakes standardized testing, and matters solely of the cognitive realm, are the most prevalent topics in public education.

As Lantieri says in her new book, “A window of opportunity exists right now in the field of education for soul to enter. We need to support and engage each other in this unfolding process.”

Todd R. Nelson, *Hope's* assistant editor and a former middle school principal, spoke with Lantieri about *Schools with Spirit*.

**Todd Nelson:** What's your sense of the crisis and the opportunity for education in our country right now?

**Linda Lantieri:** The crisis is obvious: the way we have been educating our young people is not necessarily preparing them for today's world. We have an opportunity to rethink a very external, outmoded approach to learning. This is fueled by some of the high-profile incidents of violence in our schools—in places where it seems young people have too much with too little meaning. Despite our scientific accomplishments, technical advances, and high levels of consumerism, people are feeling that we have lost some of our humanity. In *Schools with Spirit*, we talk about having a more organic, inclusive dialogue concerning the role of the inner life in education, encouraging a commitment to those matters that help us put our lives and our actions in a wider, richer context.

**TN:** We hear different voices suggesting reforms. Whose voice do you pay attention to?

**LL:** At the top of my list are people like Deborah Meier, Alfie Kohn, Parker Palmer, and Linda Darling-Hammond—voices saying that we must see that the twenty-first-century survival skills require a kind of teaching and learning that does not water down our own humanity. We need information, but we also need wisdom. We know that we live in a world of competition and consumerism, and we also crave community. So we need schools to be places that nurture all of who we are. I am particularly inspired by Palmer's concept of “living divided no more, living on the outside the truth we know on the inside.”

**TN:** If I am a parent who wants to see my child's school become a “school of spirit,” how do I go about achieving it?

**LL:** First, advocate for a vision of education that is holistic and includes the desire for schools to be places that not only pay attention to academic competency, but are also concerned with nurturing the emotional, social and ethical development of children as well. We need to face the fact that education centered on academic achievement, as measured by standardized testing, is not telling the whole story. This approach will not prepare our children for the dilemmas they will face as adults. We have to dismantle the myths of what it means to be an educated person. The direction schools are going is shaped by public opinion as to what good teaching is, so we try to encourage the general public to support educators who define learning as less externally and more internally oriented.

Secondly, we must use the research suggesting that school success isn't an either/or situation: academic competence versus young people knowing themselves and appreciating others. Academic excellence alone doesn't develop a caring and responsible human being. There is a real connection between the work of social, emotional, ethical, and spiritual development and academic competence. One enhances the other.

**TN:** Can you tell the story of how a school became a school with spirit?

**LL:** Public School 15 in Brooklyn, New York, is a “beacon” school. In 1992 it was well into adopting the Resolving

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