

# Emotional Safety Missing Factor in School Reform

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Educators and administrators across the country are overhauling school environments to raise the bar of academic success. Small school projects and school-within-a-school models aim to create a culture based on relationships, safety and relevance. Just this year the U.S. Department of Education will award \$142 million to support the creation of smaller learning communities.

Yet are these frameworks really doing the job? Not quite, claims a *2003 Early Report on Comprehensive High School Conversions*, published by the Small Schools Project. Small school models studied in Washington state measured only 6 out of 10 students graduating high school. While stats like this are preliminary, they beg the question — are small learning communities missing something?

“What’s missing is emotional safety,” say Sura Hart and Victoria Kindle Hodson, co-authors of *The Compassionate Classroom*. Hart and Hodson agree that smaller class sizes, or school-within-a-school models are definitely showing marked improvements in the way schools are run. Yet these benefits are significantly undermined by the communication styles, the punishment/ reward systems, and the power-over teacher-student relationships still present in many schools.

Something as simple as how teachers communicate to their students can create an environment that counteracts the impact of class size or even socioeconomic barriers that so often impede learning. And the key is to start early.

As author Daniel Goleman argued in his landmark book, *Emotional Intelligence*, contemporary brain research confirms that students need to feel emotionally safe to learn.

In *Words Can Hurt Forever*, James Garbarino and Ellen deLara have shown, “Many schools inadvertently support and enable hostile and emotionally violent environments.” While the motivation to contribute to the well-being of their students is crystal clear, educators often use counterproductive methods for doing so.

According to Hart and Hodson, the promise of reward, the threat of punishment, and even grade-based comparisons are all fear inducing. Goleman proves that such behaviors actually create a physiological reaction that shuts down a student’s reasoning capacity — putting them in fight, flight or freeze mode. In this state, students simply cannot perform.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is intended for reprint purposes and may be adapted to suit your needs or reprinted as is. For an electronic version of this feature, or for additional feature options, please contact Publicist Tiffany Meyer at [tiffany.meyer@comcast.net](mailto:tiffany.meyer@comcast.net) or 503-880-5308. Word Count: 520

THE COMPASSIONATE CLASSROOM, RELATIONSHIP BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING, October 2004, PuddleDancer Press, 190 pages, \$17.95, ISBN#1-892005-06-9.



These fear inducing behaviors exist in most public school settings. They are behaviors that until recently were considered beneficial — even necessary — for student learning.

“The point is really this — there are much more effective methods to motivate children to do their homework or speak at a level we enjoy in the lunchroom than by instilling the fear of punishment in them,” say Hart and Hodson. Trust and emotional safety, partnered with skills for communicating observations, feelings, needs and requests offer this alternative.

“Establishing safety first engenders the trust necessary for each learner to take risks and to be vulnerable enough to participate in the learning process,” say Hodson and Hart.

In *The Compassionate Classroom*, Hart and Hodson offer a how-to guide for putting emotional safety first. The book offers dozens of activities for teaching the simple yet powerful process called the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process. Using the NVC process helps educators build trust, connection, compassion and empathy between teacher and student.

While smaller learning communities offer the structural support for emotional safety to thrive, the NVC process may provide the key skills to make emotional safety a reality. The key -leave the judgment, evaluation and power-over strategies behind.



## About Nonviolent Communication

From the bedroom to the boardroom, from the classroom to the war zone, the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process is changing lives every day. NVC provides an easy to grasp, effective method to get to the root of conflict, violence and pain peacefully. By examining the unmet needs behind what we do or say, the NVC process helps reduce hostility, heal pain, and strengthen professional or personal relationships.

The NVC process is now being taught in corporations, classrooms, prisons and mediation centers around the globe. And it is affecting cultural shifts as institutions, corporations and governments integrate NVC consciousness into their organizational structures and their approach to leadership.

International peacemaker, mediator, author and founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg spends more than **250** days each year teaching the NVC process, including some of the most impoverished, war-torn areas of the world. More than **180** certified trainers and hundreds more teach this life-enriching process in **35** countries to approximately **250,000** people each year.

## About the Center for Nonviolent Communication

The Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) is an international nonprofit peacemaking organization whose vision is a world where everyone's needs are met peacefully. CNVC is devoted to supporting the spread of Nonviolent Communication training and consciousness around the world.

Access local, national and international training opportunities, download trainer certification information, connect to local NVC communities and purchase a variety of other NVC learning materials at:

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