

DEFUSING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Setting the Scene

Imagine that you attend a high school in a small city. Most of the students at the school—like their parents—have lived in the city their whole lives. Most of them are white. Then one summer, everything changes. A large group of Somali immigrants move to town. The changes shock everyone.

The local native-born population is troubled and confused by the arrival of the immigrants. Jobs are scarce and they don't want more people competing for them. Most of the local population hasn't had any experience with people from other countries. And most of the people who live in this small city are white. The immigrants, on the other hand, are black. Many of the immigrants are also Muslim, and the September 11 attacks are still a recent wound. A lot of people in the city aren't happy about the new arrivals.

Many of the immigrants have already lived in the United States for a few years, mostly in racially diverse bigger cities. They have little or no experience being the only people of color in town. They're surprised that some of the local residents are hostile toward them. Some of the immigrants have their laundry dumped on the floor at the local laundromat. Some have store clerks refuse to take money directly from their hands, insisting that they put the money on the counter instead. And many of them endure racial slurs.

Tensions in the community make their way into the high school. The new students endure slurs and aggressive actions by the longtime students. Fights break out almost every day.

The situation gets so bad that the school administrators invite an expert in conflict resolution to come to the school. He asks to meet with 25 students. He wants to see students who are leaders of their groups in the high school—and not just the honors students and sports captains. He wants to see not only leaders who make the school a more positive place, but also those who make the school a more negative place. He wants to see the kids who are leaders among longtime locals and those who are leaders among the Somali kids. He wants to get leaders talking.

On the day of the meeting, you are one of 25 reluctant students who enters the lunchroom. You sit on one side of the room with your friends. Students from the other side of the conflict sit on the other side of the room. You're not sure you want to be there.

The mediator asks about what's going on, and you and the other students vent for nearly an hour. You talk about how angry you are, and how you hate coming to school. Some of your peers even head for the door. "I'm not sticking around for this," they say. But the school administrators ask them to stay. "Things aren't going to get any better if you leave," they say.

Then the mediator decides to pair up the students to talk one-to-one. Here's the catch: he pairs each student on your side of the room with someone from the other side of the room. He tells you to sit with your partner and each take a turn answering this question: How did you end up here at this high school? Student pairs will come back to the whole group and share what they've discovered in their conversations.

TEACHING TOLERANCE

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MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

Tension is high as everyone waits for the first students to speak out. Finally, one pair steps forward: Joe, a native-born white student with a reputation for being tough, and Sophia, a black Somali immigrant student. Joe says, “I had no idea what Sophia went through.” And Sophia replies, “I had no idea that Joe cared about what I went through.” Once these two speak up, others join in. The story is the same: the local kids have had no idea the kind of bigotry that the new students face every day. The immigrant kids are relieved to be heard and understood. The conversation has begun.