

Just before 10 a.m. on a Friday morning in September, the blacktop at Norwood Street Elementary School in Los Angeles was swarming with children. Recess seemed woefully understaffed, with just three adults monitoring more than 100 students. But, almost miraculously, even those adults seemed unnecessary. The scene was one of peaceful and happy chaos.

"Look at this: all these kids and they're just playing," said Meghann McMahon, one of the adults on hand. "Where else can you see that many kids and not one fight?"

For McMahon, this phenomenon was as gratifying as it was remarkable. She is the Los Angeles Site Director for Peace Games, a program that she has helped implement at Norwood over the past three years. In that time, she's witnessed a sea change in the way Norwood's students relate to themselves and their peers.

In third- and fourth-grade classrooms, students are taught communication and cooperation skills for resolving disagreements and celebrating cultural differences. Games for this age group include "Trust Walks," in which one student leads a blindfolded peer through an obstacle course, and the "Community Power Game," which has students assume the roles of city councilmembers, business leaders, parents, and members of other groups to find a commonly agreeable solution to a problem.

In the later years of the curriculum, students discuss gender and cultural identities and learn how they can work to promote social justice and social change. Games for these students include "Build a City," where students in three groups are given a set amount of funds and materials for an imaginary construction project. The students are not told that each group has started with a different amount of money until the end of the game, when they discuss the effects of social and economic inequality on a community.

Volunteer Arameh Anvarizadeh tutors a student at Peace Games' Norwood Street Elementary School site in Los Angeles.



Matthew Wheeland

Gaming the School System

by Matthew Wheeland

Thanks to one program, students have found that resolving their differences can be all fun and games.

Peace Games is built on the foundation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), also known as Social and Emotional Education (SEE). The guiding principle of both Peace Games and SEL is that raising children's awareness of their emotions—and how to communicate them—will help them become more caring and conscientious people. Peace Games' curriculum develops this emotional awareness through structured and engaging activities that focus students on celebrating diversity and resolving conflict in nonviolent ways.

The program began at Harvard University in 1992 as a one-day, student-run project. In 1996—after its methods had been analyzed, refined, and expanded—it became an independent, non-profit organization and has since grown into a year-long curriculum for students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The program now exists on both coasts, serving 12 schools in Boston, three in Los Angeles, and three in Alaska. Peace Games is also starting to create a program in New York City.

In the early years of the curriculum, children learn to appreciate their unique qualities and the unique qualities of other people, and also learn to recognize and communicate their emotions. They engage in exercises that encourage self-reflection, such as writing about the traits that set themselves apart from everyone else. Among the games for young Peace Games kids is "Blob Tag," where one student pretends to be a slimy green blob determined to take over the Earth. Each child that this student touches becomes a part of the blob and must link arms to tag others, emphasizing teamwork and communication.

Peace Games students of all ages are also required to spend part of each school year working on a community service project, a way of encouraging the kids to apply their peacemaking skills. Last year, Norwood students visited a nearby senior center and wrote oral histories of residents.

"Peace Games believes that the best way to deal with the twin problems of youth violence and disengagement is to prepare them at an early age to be thoughtful and engaged peacemakers," said Eric Dawson, executive director of Peace Games and one of its founders. Dawson gives three reasons for the program's success. "First, we meet people where they live. Second, we focus on relationships—that's the only way real social change happens. And finally, we walk our talk. We teach by doing."

Dawson said his 12-year history with Peace Games has allowed him to witness its long-term effects. He cited the story of Chiké, who was 10 years old when Dawson met him and was discouraged by the feeling that he was "just not good enough" to make it in society—a message, said Dawson, that is repeatedly conveyed to young people, especially people of color, throughout their lives. After participating in Peace Games, Chiké went on to college and now has returned to his own elementary school to help teach the program himself. "To watch him develop some deep immunity to those pretty horrific messages and then want to give back to other young people was a real powerful thing to watch," Dawson said.

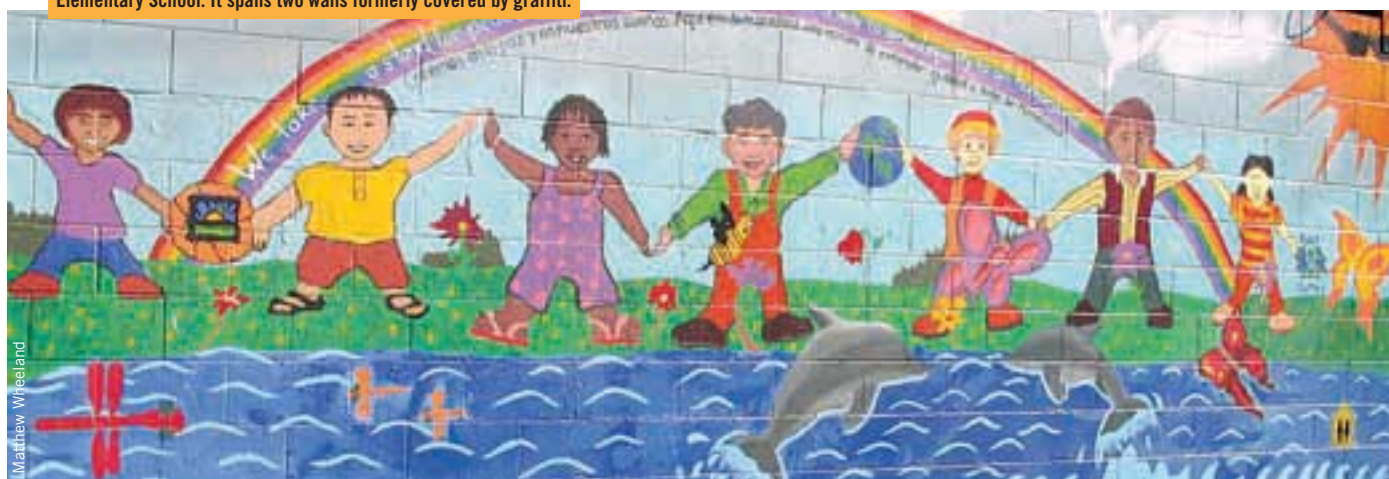
A mix of playful methods and serious messages increases the effectiveness of social and emotional learning programs such as Peace

Games, according to Jane Perry, a childhood education researcher at the University of California, Berkeley. "Kids are naturally inclined to keep games going," she said. "They'll work really hard at a task if it's part of a game or challenge."

Diane Levin, a professor of education at Wheelock College in Boston who studies how games can build peaceful skills in children, also commended the Peace Games curriculum. She said it teaches students vital lessons that many public schools currently neglect. "Increasingly, schools focus on one thing: getting students to pass tests," said Levin. "In the process, the school is cutting off options for kids to get involved with social activities."

The task—and cost—of broadening these options has fallen on local school districts and dedicated educators. Peace Games came to Norwood largely through the initial efforts of Naya Bloom, who directs the school's Healthy Start program, a state-funded grant intended to help

The "Peace Mural" painted across the street from Norwood Street Elementary School. It spans two walls formerly covered by graffiti.



schools connect local families with community-based social services. Following an increase in violence and racial tension at Norwood, which is a predominantly Latino school, Bloom sought out ways to address the problem before it got worse, and she asked Peace Games' staff to make a presentation at the school. With financial help from a three-year, \$325,000 grant from Los Angeles's School Community Policing Partnership program, Peace Games was launched at Norwood in 2001.

Among the first things one notices while wandering Norwood's hallways is just how prevalent and visible the Peace Games program is there. From the "Peace Mural" painted across the street to the "What Makes Me Happy" posters decorating the walls, Peace Games has established a physical presence all around the school. And Norwood's administration has worked hard to spread the program's social messages.

"There's a near-universal level of knowledge about different strategies for how to resolve conflict [at Norwood]," said Dee Dee Lonon, who has been the school's principal for three of Peace Games' four years there. Constant budget pressures aside, Lonon said she and the rest of the Norwood staff are committed to keeping Peace Games at the heart of their school. The administration recently instituted a biweekly "Peacemaker Award" for students who put Peace Games skills to practice outside the classroom. "I've seen a definite change within the school community," said Naya Bloom. "There's more talk about being peacemakers, there's an openness and a friendliness here now, and it's among the teachers as much as the students."

The Peace Mural has made these changes at Norwood especially evident. It covers two brick walls that were previously plastered with graffiti from the neighborhood's two rival gangs. With an immense amount of coordination that involved Norwood and Peace Games staff and the Los Angeles city attorney, students from Norwood and nearby Crenshaw High School came together to paint a scene of children who were, as described on the mural, "taking a stand for peace and our dreams."

By creating a culture of peace, Peace Games helps counteract the messages of a popular culture steeped in violence, according to Diane Levin. "Children don't learn positive social skills by osmosis," she said. "When surrounded by violence on television, in movies and video games, children become socialized to resort to violence and aggression in the face of a conflict."

Internal studies reveal just how effective Peace Games has been in teaching children different strategies for dealing with conflict. An internal evaluation of the entire program for the 2002-2003 school year found

that 84 percent of teachers at a Peace Games school said the program had improved communication among their students; 74 percent of teachers said Peace Games had helped their students get along better. When the lessons began at Norwood in 2001, there were 260 office referrals for physical aggression. Just two years later, that number had dropped 36 percent to 166. Similarly, racial and ethnic conflicts dropped by between 50 and 70 percent in those years. Most impressively, in the 2002-2003 school year, there was not a single referral for abuse toward a teacher or for defacing property; there were 26 such incidences in the previous year.

But the responses from Peace Games students and alumni might tell the biggest story. On that Friday at Norwood, after recess had ended for those 100-plus students, Naya Bloom sat at her desk with a book of laminated drawings before her. The drawings were made by a first-grade class Bloom had worked with on Peace Games material. Among the many declarations of thanks and love were examples of what the kids had learned. One student, Zulema, wrote, "I learned to be fair. I learned not to fight." Another student, Clark, wrote, "I learned to de-escalate (sic) the problem."

"The most powerful piece of Peace Games is that kids really take ownership of the program, of their role in it," said Bloom. "They see themselves as peacemakers."

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