DIFFUSING THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE THAT EXISTS IN MANY URBAN COMMUNITIES CAN START IN THE CLASSROOM.
While places of learning, these schools also carry the burden of being synonymous with tragedy. Now adjectives in today's culture, they refer to unthinkable violence, perpetrated in what was long considered a safe zone for kids: the classroom. In 2012, there were two homicides and four violent crimes committed per 1,000 primary and secondary students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Extrapolated nationwide, such statistics reveal a school homicide and violent crime rate that is alarming.

Yet, as federal and state legislatures grapple with reforming laws that balance both gun rights and protection of our nation's students, those on the ground, school administrators, can't wait. It's not just the larger, well-known attacks that strike fear into students and parents, but the everyday acts that threaten, such as bullying, that can inhibit a student's ability to learn—behavior that tips the scales dangerously toward a perpetual cycle of conflict.

The focus of some educators and administrators is shifting away from traditional zero-tolerance policies on violence to a more holistic approach. Rather than regulate behavior through federal law or school rules, they are looking into the community and family for answers.

As a veteran school administrator and now interim CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, Tisha Edwards '01 has firsthand experience with some students who engage in many kinds of violence. Such behavior doesn't happen in a vacuum, she contends.

“School violence is about community violence,” says Edwards. “Many kids grow up in families and communities where the expression of emotion comes through in a violent way, so it shapes who they are and how they deal with anger, disappointment, and betrayal.”

Research shows that students who have been suspended are three times more likely to drop out by 10th grade, and dropping out triples a student's chances of being incarcerated later in life.

If children experience yelling and disrespect at home, and then have the same experience at school, they lose the chance to learn problem-solving and communication skills that will help them make positive choices across a lifetime. The lack of these skills has potentially dire consequences, says Barbara Sugarman Grochal, director of Schools Conflict Resolution Education Programs for UM Carey Law's Center for Dispute Resolution (C-DRUM).

"Many [students] don't have the skills to talk through what's going on. If they're not learning it at home and schools aren't teaching it, then they may experience considerable challenges in conflict management throughout their lives," Grochal says.

School conflict resolution programs are one important part of C-DRUM's broader effort to provide training, grants, and hands-on assistance to support an array of conflict management programs that help to create safer environments in schools across Maryland. C-DRUM works in partnership with the Maryland Judiciary's Mediation and Conflict Resolution Office and the Maryland State Department of Education.

Deborah Eisenberg, associate professor of law and C-DRUM director, says that Maryland Carey Law students in her Mediation Clinic often experience a "culture
of toughness” even among elementary schoolers, who may learn it from older siblings and the communities where they live. Kids who grow up seeing the world in terms of victim versus aggressor often learn to approach any interaction on the defensive, she says—a survival instinct to avoid becoming the next victim.

“The law students working in the schools often see kids—sometimes as young as fourth and fifth grade—under pressure to have a tough exterior as a defense mechanism. The goal of the Mediation Clinic’s involvement with the school conflict resolution program is to teach children more effective ways to communicate and solve conflict,” Eisenberg says.

“I think safety happens when kids feel part of a community enough that they’ll speak up,” Grochal adds. “The question is how to create a caring community. Building rapport is a huge piece of it.”

It’s easy, for example, to deal with a student by suspending him for wearing headphones in class or cussing out a teacher. It is much harder, however, for a harried teacher trying to meet standards in algebra or English to stop, try to understand that student, and figure out the root of the behavior.

But Grochal says research shows that teachers often spend 30 percent of their classroom time on discipline, so preventive approaches that head off the issues that can spiral into conflict become an investment.

The Center trains school staff to talk with students about what’s going on in their world, to identify underlying reasons for misbehavior, and to hold students accountable for their actions.

“For kids with poor attendance, forging positive relationships with teachers can become a reason to come to school. In Baltimore City Schools, 13.2 percent of elementary students and 15.9 percent...
of middle grades students missed more than 20 days of school in 2011-2012. This is a critical issue, as research has shown that Baltimore sixth-graders with attendance below 80 percent have on-time graduation rates of just 5 to 13 percent.

“Attendance fundamentally underlies the success of schools and underlies the real life of the community,” says Stacy Smith, C-DRUM’s director of special projects. “Baltimore can’t thrive if we’re not educating our children. It doesn’t matter how big our port gets; there aren’t jobs for children who don’t have a high school education. Everything about our economy is moving past these kids.”

In C-DRUM’s attendance mediation program, which began in 2007, elementary and middle schools make referrals when students have six or more absences, or chronic lateness. Mediators facilitate conversations between families and school staff designed to uncover and address the issues keeping kids out of school. Overwhelmingly, Smith says, those issues are related to health and mental health issues for children and/or their families. The conversations have the added benefit of fostering better connections between the child’s family and school, making families more likely to take advantage of available resources.

“We can save them from being suspended a lot, and perhaps walking into that [school-to-prison] pipeline,” Grochal says.

It Takes a City to Stem School Violence

“VIOLENCE, to me, is just a symptom of aggression, lack of a connectedness, an inability to communicate, and an inability to cope,” says Tisha Edwards ’01, interim CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools. Schools are a direct reflection of their communities, says Edwards, who served as principal of Baltimore Freedom Academy (a high school in Upper Fells Point that partners with UM Carey Law) for four years. “We live in a culture of violence, and schools are just a place where it plays out,” she says. “Schools get a bad rap because people try to pinpoint it and make it about the school … but kids come from somewhere, from families, from communities, from a world that sensationalizes violence and aggressiveness.”

The whole concept of school violence is deeply complicated by issues of race and class and place, Edwards says. The 2012 killings at Sandy Hook, she says, are not referred to as school violence, but an issue of mental health. But when a group of Baltimore teens fight downtown, she says people tend to want to criminalize the behavior. However, both instances are rooted in feelings of isolation and lack of connection.

Kids need adults to model communication and problem solving that isn’t based on violence, but most teachers aren’t equipped to make that constant effort, Edwards says. Doctors who go into emergency medicine are trained to work in environments of chaos and trauma. But teachers often aren’t familiar with their students’ emotional issues, and may wonder how they’d respond, for example, if a student says she didn’t turn in her homework because she’d been raped. “You’re asking me to go in a place where I may not have solutions,” is how Edwards says they may feel.

While teachers don’t usually receive formal training to deal with violence, many receive support through other channels, which helps schools redirect violence, helps kids succeed, and is deeply rewarding, she says. The good news is that the solution to violence is within reach; it doesn’t depend on money or technology, but on the interactions of people. Everyone has a role in making communities healthy, she says. “You can overcome those issues for children, and you can help them break the cycle of aggression and violence and unhealthy interactions and relationships. It is possible, and schools do it every day.”