

## Preface

Almost everyone has a story about a time when they were bullied and didn't want to go to school. For me, it was seventh grade, when I made the mistake of wearing some of my grandmother's old bell-bottom pants to school. They seemed cute and fashionable at the time, and the fit was fabulous. Unfortunately, my peers did not find them as stylish as I had imagined them to be, and by the end of one school day, I couldn't walk down the hallway without students, many of whom I had never even spoken to, chiming, "ding-dong, ding-dong" when I walked by. The chiming did not stop, even long after I had stopped wearing the pants, and I remember begging my parents to either let me stay home or buy me new clothes so the harassment would stop. It was unbearable. This was one moment when the fact that my father was in the military and we were required to move every few years probably saved my life. At the end of that school year we moved, and my bullying nightmare was over.

Most young people are not so lucky. When bullying happens, they are stuck in their community schools; when they are lucky, the adults intervene, and when they are not, it can turn into a life or death matter. In a 2010 article for the *Independent*, Matt Dickinson shared the results of a study in Britain which found that at least half of suicides among young people were related to bullying.<sup>1</sup> This is only one small portion of the alarming statistics about bullying. Studies done by the US Secret Service and the Department of Education revealed that in two-thirds of school shootings, where the shooter survived, he or she named bullying as playing a role in motivating the attack.<sup>2</sup> And students who experience bullying are more

likely to drop out of high school.<sup>3</sup> The problem of bullying felt personally urgent when I was a child, and as I watch the news and listen to the current stories of young people who have experienced bullying, the problem feels even more urgent today.

In 2004, in Milwaukee, we were given the chance to imagine what school could look like if things were different—*if bullying wasn't the norm*. I was a young teacher when a representative from TALC New Vision, the organization that was managing the Gates Foundation grants to start small schools in Milwaukee, came to one of our staff meetings and said, “If anyone has ever thought of starting a school, now is your chance. We are accepting proposals to start schools in Milwaukee.” The opportunity was astounding to me. I had been a teacher at a large, central-city high school for five years, and while I loved teaching, I wished *school* could be different.

In my teacher preparation program, I had imagined that school was different. I had fallen in love with A.S. Neill's description of Summerhill School, digested with enthusiasm John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, and wished Howard Gardner had been around when I was in high school so that the idea of multiple intelligences could have been part of my learning experience. Yet, to my dismay, when I entered the classroom, school didn't look much different than it had when I was in high school—the desks were the same, the books were the same, the rules were the same, and the lessons were the same.

The other thing that hadn't changed was the relationships in school. Adults were still in charge, some students still bullied others without consequence, and students were still separated by race, ability, income, and social group. There was no denying this, yet many well-meaning adults also didn't seem to believe any other way was possible. I believed this current reality wasn't serving students. It was unjust, and it was causing harm. I had felt the devastation in my own schooling experience, where no adults had ever intervened; I had seen the impact on my students who checked out of school after repeated incidents of bullying; and I could see the bigger picture in the news stories about students who had committed suicide or turned to extreme violence after being bullied.

I had a strong sense of pride in the school I was teaching at and a great love for my students, but I felt compelled to take a stand for students who were being ostracized, bullied, and ignored in the traditional school setting. I had been the adviser for the school's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), and the stories I heard from students, gay and straight, about their experiences in school were devastating. One boy had been beaten in the stairway because people perceived him to be gay. He wasn't, but it didn't matter to his attackers. Another student was called a witch daily because she dressed Goth and had several piercings. A couple of girls were suspended and outed to their parents for holding hands in the hallway. My students were telling me about these things, and it seemed like every time I turned on the news, there was another story of a school shooting or of a student who had been bullied committing suicide. This was a public health issue, and something had to be done. While there had been some efforts to teach "tolerance" in schools, and some successful lawsuits against districts that had not addressed bullying, in many places, school was still very much about survival for some of the most vulnerable students, and it felt like a moral imperative that students should have the chance to feel safe in school.

I knew all of this, and I felt, at my core, that school should and could look different for all students. I had heard about the Harvey Milk High School in New York, a school that had been started to meet the needs of LGBTQ students there, and I had read about so many great schools, education philosophies, and practices in my teacher education program. I wanted those things for my students. I wanted them to have the chance to grow and learn in a place that was safe, accepting, and reflective of their experience. The chance to start a school that could be a model of acceptance for all felt like more of a calling than an opportunity, and it didn't take me long to find others who felt the same way. With this mission in mind, I gathered teachers and students together, and we started to write. I went to the students first. I gave all my students blank brochures and asked them to make a brochure for the perfect school. Then I went to the teachers who had joined the planning team, and I asked them to do the same. I took the ideas from both students and teachers, combined them with the things I

had learned and believed, and started to craft a proposal. Once the initial draft was complete, I shared it with the teachers and students and made sure it represented the best of what we knew and believed. We added some things, invited community members and parents to share their thoughts, and put the final touches on our proposal. Finally, we had a proposal for a school: The Alliance School.

This is what we imagined:

- All students would be welcome. The students came up with a motto: “Be yourself. Get a great education.” And the tagline they created described us as “The Alliance School—a place where it’s okay to be black, white, gay, straight, Christian, gothic, Buddhist, disabled, or just plain unique.”
- It would be a school based on freedom, where students were treated with dignity and were engaged in learning rather than coerced into education.
- It would be a bully-free school, designed with preventive and restorative practices to prevent and address harm.
- It would have the things students (and adults) need for survival—food, safety, shelter, love, belonging, respect, family, art, creativity, and play.
- It would be a fully inclusive space, where students would learn alongside their disabled, nondisabled, and gifted peers.
- There would be as much learning outside of school as inside of school.
- There would be art, music, dancing, fun, and adventure.
- The teaching wouldn’t be relegated only to the adults. If a student had expertise to share, he or she could teach, as well.
- Teachers would be called by their first names, because after all, we’re all equal.
- Along those same lines, the school would be a democratic, teacher- and student-led school, where we would all vote on policies or practices that affected the school as a whole.
- It would be a year-round school, with four intersessions, so students would never have to spend too much time away from adults who care.

- We would have a college-like, flexible schedule where students would be able to choose classes that fit their schedules, educational objectives, and personal interests.
- Our philosophy would start from the Buddhist quote that says, “If you can see yourself in others, whom can you harm.” With this quote in mind, our teaching and learning would serve the double purpose of spreading knowledge and bringing people together through cooperative learning, service learning, project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and play.
- And, in a small gesture of who we were and what we believed, we would buy every student a gift before school let out in December, because no young person should ever have to go through the holidays without knowing that he or she is known and loved.

We submitted our proposal in January of 2004, and in April, our proposal was approved. For the next year, our planning team researched and visited some great schools, such as Urban Academy in New York, Eagle Rock School in Colorado, and yes, Summerhill School in the United Kingdom. We learned best practices, developed curriculum, searched for a building, raised money for materials and supplies, enrolled students, hired teachers, signed charter contracts, learned protocols, created schedules, attended conferences, designed a logo, held open-house events, and ordered lockers, library books and so much more.

On August 1, 2005, our school opened its doors, with me serving as the lead teacher for a community of students, teachers, and families, all of whom believed in the Alliance mission—to be a safe, student-centered, and academically challenging environment to meet the needs of *all* students.

Since that date, the Alliance School has been educating students in our truly unique way, and the results speak for themselves. Students who were the most likely to drop out of school have been graduating each year and going on to work or college. Students who once may have considered suicide are alive and starting families of their own. I have been invited to so many birthday parties, baby showers, and weddings over the years, and every one brings me great joy because it is a sign that life has gone on. If the student

stories are not compelling enough, the data tells its own story. When we started the school, our schoolwide attendance rate was 66 percent, and in ten years, it grew to 90 percent. In 2016, we beat the Milwaukee School District on high school attendance rates, measures of GPA, percentage of students taking AP tests, and ACT composite scores, and we did this all while serving the same population of students we started with. More than 30 percent of our students are students with identified disabilities, approximately 25 percent of our students have been homeless or in foster care while attending Alliance, and about 50 percent of our students identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ).

Over the years, we have shown that creating a safe and accepting place, where all students are treated with dignity and the opportunity to be children, is one important reform that makes a difference. The academic outcomes have been outstanding, and the human outcomes of this work have been extraordinary. If there was ever a high school in the United States that produced happy, confident, caring citizens, Alliance is it. At one point, my daughter, who graduated from Alliance, said to me, “Alliance students are going to be the doctors and teachers and social workers and counselors of the world, because at Alliance you don’t just learn how to learn; you learn how to care.”

Alliance has accomplished a great deal. We didn’t know it when we were planning our school, but we were the first school in the nation started with the mission of addressing bullying and teaching others to do the same, and we were one of very few schools with an explicit mission of being an LGBTQ-friendly school. These two things captured the hearts and minds of many people, young and adult, who wished they could have attended a school like Alliance, and over the years I have heard from many who wanted to visit or learn more about Alliance. Hopefully, this book will become an inspiration for them and for anyone who is committed to carrying on this tradition of making the experience of school better for all students.

I am proud of the place that Alliance has become. We didn’t do anything at Alliance to force young people into learning or kindness. We just gave them a chance to learn together, share their stories, and get to know each other well. What a simple experiment, and what a powerful result.

I truly believe that when young people are given a chance to show their goodness in this world, they step into that expectation, and when students are treated as if they need to be controlled, they step into that expectation, as well. As schools and communities, we need to open our doors to young people with the expectation and the promise of hope and love. It is not enough to expect reading, writing, and arithmetic in our schools. We must expect so much more.

In the past couple of years, I have been blessed with the opportunity to step away and to continue my learning by enrolling in the Ed.L.D. program at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. The program has inspired me in many ways, but most importantly, it has inspired me to capture the practices and beliefs that made the Alliance School work. Alongside my studies, and with the encouragement and support of many amazing educators, I have written this book, which I hope can be a resource for others.

*The Alliance Way* is written as a philosophical guidebook for all of the educators, school leaders, and others who care about ensuring a safe and inclusive learning environment for young people. It is not a program for individuals to implement. It is an example of how schools can be and what it takes to get there—a road map of sorts, with plenty of places where school communities can add their own twists and turns to make the journey and destination the best they can possibly be. The book suggests a collaborative, improvement science approach to change, where school communities use the principles and practices of the Alliance School and consider how these can be implemented in their own communities. These principles and practices are captured in the stories of our community, many of which I have collected over the years knowing they would someday be powerful stories to share, and some that I have recollected through memories as I identified the core principles that have driven our success. Our everyday practice has always been about putting students at the center, so the stories of our students and our community are at the center. In most cases, I have used real names, but some names have been changed to protect the privacy of former students and staff. In this book, you will learn about many of the students who helped to make Alliance the place that it has

been, including: Tocarra, the transgender Alliance heroine who helped to create our vision, yet passed away in our first year; Chris, the first student I met when the doors opened at Alliance; and Shauna, the student who inspired us to have a mission and vision that included *all* students. You will read stories of tears and triumphs, stories about voting, and protesters, and holiday parties, and reporters, and service trips. Through these stories, you will begin to see a picture of what school can be like when it makes a goal of being a safe, welcoming, and academically challenging place to meet the needs of all students. If you are searching for ways to address problems of school violence, bullying, LGBTQ acceptance, or twenty-first century democratic learning, you will find some hope in our stories, because sometimes the best practices can be found in stories.