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Help schools to promote a safer world
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Education for peace

NEW YORK Education is peace-building by another name. Both the pursuit of peace and the promotion of a well-educated world population are threatened by the rise of religiously intolerant pseudo-schools that embrace hate-filled curricula and stifle independent thinking. More than ever, there is a pressing need to harness education to combat intolerance and a culture of violence that are bred by ignorance and the absence of critical thinking skills.

The urgency of this task is heightened by the growing threats to international security posed by enormous global stocks of weapons of mass destruction and the means for their delivery, the spread of these weapons systems to other states and the possible acquisition by terrorist organizations of nuclear weapons.

In many parts of the world, this apocalyptic vision is overshadowed by the very real and immediate devastation wrought by civil wars fueled by less sophisticated but cheap, deadly and abundant small arms.

For the past two years a diverse group of United Nations experts has explored how education and training might be used to counter these disarmament and proliferation challenges. The group's findings will soon be discussed in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly.

Among the premises of the experts' group report is that contemporary disarmament and nonproliferation education must strive to teach how to think rather than what to think about peace and security issues. One promising means of doing so is to engage students in simulations and other role-playing forms of participatory learning in which they can begin to see the world through the eyes of others.

Another tenet of the report is that education as a disarmament and nonproliferation strategy must make use of a combination of traditional and innovative teaching techniques to convey information, enhance analytical thinking and otherwise facilitate a change in mind-sets.

A tremendous opportunity, for example, is available to use new information and communication technologies, especially the Internet and CD-ROM, to enrich educational programs at all age levels and to reach new audiences and nontraditional students.

The experts hope that the study will stimulate practical efforts by national governments and international organizations to harness education so as to strengthen international peace and security.

Such efforts could take the form of national government and/or foundation support in different states to expand scholarships for graduate training in the nonproliferation field, internships at international organizations with responsibilities in the disarmament and nonproliferation sphere, and the development and dissemination of multilingual, on-line educational materials for high school and undergraduate students.

Young people live in a world ravaged by conflict and awash in arms. In an age of weapons of mass destruction, they also must contend with the fear of total annihilation. As diplomats and educators we have a responsibility to provide them with hope founded on reality. Disarmament and nonproliferation education is an important but underused tool to accomplish that end.

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