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## Students reaching out is an example for all

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Six months ago, long-simmering tension between students from two north-end Montreal high schools erupted. A student from Lester B. Pearson school called out a racist taunt to a student from Henri-Bourassa secondary school. What followed that day, Oct. 17, was violence, vandalism and a school lockdown with the worst of the violence filmed and shown on YouTube.

There didn't seem much possibility of students from either school reaching out a hand of friendship in the immediate or even distant aftermath.

What had happened was ugly and embarrassing. Not only that, the incident was on film for anyone who wanted to watch, as often as they wanted: Four girls from Henri-Bourassa apparently kicking a girl from Lester B. Pearson as she lay on the ground.

And yet, six months later, the hand of friendship has been extended and accepted. The ugly incident from last fall turned out to be a galvanizing force for good. Students from both schools were ashamed by what they saw of themselves on YouTube and became determined to change other people's impressions of them.

"We were shocked at the negative portrayal of both our schools in the community," Joey Gendron, 17, student council president at Lester B. Pearson, told The Gazette's Brenda Branswell.

He and his counterpart at French-language Henri-Bourassa said they realized the two schools had little in common, even though they are only a few blocks apart. Half of Henri-Bourassa's 2,000 students have parents born outside Canada, with Haiti the country of origin for many. Lester B. Pearson's 1,500 students are English-speaking and mainly of Italian background.

At Lester B. Pearson, teachers told students to come up with projects that would let people know that a "sense of community" could exist between the two schools, said principal Terrence Quinn. To their great credit, students from both schools took up the challenge.

The students jointly created a mural dedicated to mutual friendship, wrote a declaration calling on students to break down the walls of intolerance and founded a newsletter to serve both schools.

At a time when the partially leaked report from the Taylor-Bouchard commission on reasonable accommodation has adult Quebecers back at each others' throats, the example of school kids trying to get to know each other better should stand as a model to everyone.

The students have had to overcome embarrassment, ill will, anger and condemnation from the wider community to get their projects off the ground. And they've succeeded. Henri-Bourassa principal Jean-François Bouchard said, "It was easier than we thought. It was just a question of seizing the opportunity."

While we applaud the students of Henri-Bourassa and Lester B. Pearson high schools, we should take the time to reflect that what they've done is something we could all do: Reach

out.

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