

Creating a Peaceable School Community: Evaluating Conflict Resolution in Schools

By Annette Townley, M.Ed.



**For the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center
of the Western Justice Center**

Third in a Series of Four Leadership Forum Reports

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From Conflict to Collaboration

Based in Pasadena, California, the Western Justice Center is a national nonprofit that collaborates with other organizations to develop innovative models of conflict resolution. The Center relies on a small, core staff who convene cooperative efforts to create, evaluate and replicate new ways to resolve conflicts and to improve the quality of justice in the regional, national and international spheres.

The Center is a nonpartisan, non-ideological organization built upon respect for a wide range of viewpoints. This is a place where creative minds can invent new approaches, share ideas and serve as a catalyst for experimentation and change. The Center creates cost-effective partnerships with other organizations in order to accomplish what each organization could not achieve alone.



The Western Justice Center campus in Pasadena, California

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Foreword

School communities in search of models for teaching violence prevention and conflict resolution face a choice between a wide range of models -- some more effective, some less so. Evaluating Conflict Resolution in Schools, the third report in our Leadership Forum Series, shows parents and educators how to look beyond good intentions and anecdotal evidence to find and adapt the most effective models for their local needs.

Our previous report examined the role of a school's culture in creating inclusive, collaborative communities. This report shows educational stakeholders--including parents, students, teachers and administrators--how to understand, implement and measure the success of school-based programs that aim to create supportive learning environments free of violence and intimidation.

I would like to thank The James Irvine Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlitt Foundation, and the Weingart Foundation, whose generous support makes possible the work of the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center.

A special thanks is due to our Schools Program Consultant Annette Townley, who facilitated the Leadership Forum series and who authored the reports; Western Justice Center Program Manager Jonathan J. Hutson, who served as editor; and the Center's Webmaster, Steven Brehm, who designed and produced the reports, which are available online at www.westernjustice.org/resources.htm.



Bill Drake
Executive Director

Introduction

The field of conflict resolution in education comprises a history of anecdotal success stories passed from one school to another, one practitioner to another, one conference to another. However, as school-based programs have come of age, the need for quantitative and qualitative information is increasing. Both programmatic concerns and funders' requests drive the demand for research and evaluation into the effectiveness of school conflict resolution programs.

This third in a series of four Leadership Forum Reports from the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center of the Western Justice Center takes both a micro and macro view of this subject. This report examines program successes from both the school district point of view and from the point of view of academic research into what makes conflict resolution programs effective. Based on such findings, the report attempts to draw implications for public policy, related to the development and implementation of conflict resolution programs in our schools.

Given the recent, tragic events in school communities across the country, the national attention is focused on violence prevention strategies. Conflict resolution programs are not a panacea for what ails us as a country, nor were they ever intended to be. However, they represent one very important strategy in addressing both the symptoms and causes of disruptive behavior on school campuses. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to deepen and expand those conflict resolution approaches that have proven most effective.



Annette Townley, M.Ed.
School Programs Consultant
Forestville, California, Spring, 1999

I. Background and Overview

A. The School Conflict Resolution Center

Based in Pasadena, California, the Western Justice Center is a national nonprofit that collaborates with other organizations to develop innovative models of conflict resolution. With support from The James Irvine Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Weingart Foundation, the Western Justice Center created the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center (the Resource Center).

The Resource Center is an alliance of conflict resolution and educational organizations, dedicated to expanding the use of conflict resolution principles and practices in lower, middle, and secondary schools. The Resource Center focuses on the Los Angeles area and Southern California, with the realization that the guiding principles and practical resources being developed here have applications nationwide.

“The Resource Center’s strategy recognizes that the problems of violence and intergroup conflict in the schools will not respond to a single solution or isolated pilot projects,” wrote Executive Director Bill Drake, in a Foreword to the Leadership Forum Series. “These problems require a broadly-based, focused and coordinated effort. All stakeholders within a school community should address these issues jointly and should be given the skills to solve problems constructively and collaboratively.”

B. Focus Groups

On October 5-6, 1998, a series of focus groups for members of the school communities participating in the Leadership Forum Series were conducted. Through these dialogues we hoped to learn more about the range of views and experiences shared by the stakeholders with respect to conflict resolution in education. In the education community, much reference is made to the principle of involving stakeholders in the process of reinventing schools. However, in practice, parents and most importantly students are often left out of the conversation. Young people are the ones most directly affected by the decisions that influence the purpose, meaning, and direction of a school. They have a tremendous stake in creating a safe learning environment. And they have a critical role to play in evaluating the effectiveness of school initiatives. Therefore, we requested from each district administrative, teacher, parental, and student representation at the focus groups. All participants were asked to reflect on the following questions prior to participation:

- What is your understanding of conflict resolution in the schools?
- How can conflict resolution programs play a role in creating your vision of a peaceable school?
- Where does conflict resolution fit into your educational priorities?
- What do other people in your stakeholder group think of conflict resolution programs?
- What do you think other stakeholder groups think about conflict resolution programs?

During the course of the first focus group, two other issues surfaced—the role of adults and need for evaluation. These issues were then explored with the subsequent groups in the form of two questions:

- (1) How do the conflict resolution practices of the adult culture in your school reflect what you want to teach the students in your school?
- (2) How would you measure the success of a conflict resolution program in your school community?

The previous report in this series examines the former question; this report addresses the latter.

Administrators indicated that program success should be demonstrated through hard evidence. Factors cited by administrators included: students coming to the office and asking for mediation; significant numbers of elementary school students expressing a desire to participate in the program; statistics pointing to what works and what does not; fewer referrals to the office—evidence of teachers' ability to manage conflicts in the classroom; reduction of violence on campus; training in intercultural conflict resolution; and involvement of parents in the process.

Teachers generally expressed program success in attitudinal terms. They identified the climate of the school as being the most important indicator. For example, said teachers, there would be a sense of openness between teachers and students and teachers and administrators and there would be a willingness to solve problems together. They felt that tallying the number of fights before and after program implementation is just a small part of the measure of program success.

Parents measured program effectiveness through a reduction in problems, an increasing number of people coming together to work out lasting solutions, an increased sense of trust and comfort in talking about issues, children feeling safer in school, and more teachers coming to PTA meetings.

Students said program success would be measured through a change in the atmosphere of the school. For example, said students, more people would know that there was a way out of conflict, a way to deal constructively with their problems, and that there was someone with resources and training who could help students resolve conflicts.

C. Third Leadership Forum

The author led the third in the series of leadership forums at the Western Justice Center, entitled Evaluation and Research, on February 24, 1999. Three school districts participated, including Glendale Unified School District, Rowland Unified School District, and South Pasadena Unified School District. Leadership teams from these respective districts came together with conflict resolution experts to discuss the role of evaluation and research in the development and implementation of conflict resolution programs.

The Resource Center selected these school districts based on the following criteria:

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- An initial focus upon urban/suburban districts that are often ignored in education discussions in the Los Angeles area and California, but that have many of the same challenges facing inner city schools in major cities – including economic challenges; great racial, cultural, and language diversity; limited resources; and gang, drug and crime activity.
- A focus on school districts rather than individual schools so as to help more districts help themselves and each other at strategic levels.
- Districts that appear well led and willing to innovate.
- Districts with leadership, administrators, faculty, students, and parents, who are committed to introducing or enhancing negotiation and conflict resolution curricula and programs in a systemic rather than superficial manner.
- Sufficient geographic proximity to allow a concentration of effort and opportunities to work together across district lines, so that each district would not have to develop all its own resources for training, curriculum development, evaluation, and public education.

II. Understanding Conflict Resolution Programs

In order to open a discussion of the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs, a review of the various implementation approaches is helpful. Leadership forum participants examined three categories of implementation approaches: (1) skills training, (2) curriculum integration, and (3) implementation of conflict resolution skills in a school's culture.

A. Skills Training

These tend to be stand alone workshops and can include peer mediation training, such as the training offered by Program for Young Negotiators (PYN), which provides negotiation skills for students, teachers, and other mentors; and mediation and/or conflict resolution training for teachers, administrators, and parents. When asked what types of skills the participants were currently teaching, they offered the following responses:

- Reflection articulation
- Problem solving
- Negotiating
- Trust building
- Anger management
- Active listening
- Peer mediation
- Collaborative problem solving
- Cultural awareness
- Character development
- Preparing educators to teach conflict resolution
- Connection between anger management and cultural awareness

B. Curriculum Integration

This is a process in which conflict resolution skills and theories are taught as part of the academic program. Conflict resolution can exist as a separate course or be integrated into existing disciplines such as English, history, and math. Participants identified the following as courses within their schools that promoted the development of conflict resolution skills and principles:

- Program for Young Negotiators
- Peer Helpers (Basic Helping Ideas)
- Community of Caring (Core Values)

- Peer Mediation
- Second Step
- Educators for Social Responsibility Curriculum
- Character Counts
- Magic Circle

C. Infusing the principles of conflict resolution into the school culture

This can be accomplished through the vision of the school, through governance, and through leadership modeling. Participants brainstormed what this might manifest in a school and offered the following ideas:

- Evaluating the disciplinary policy and practices within the policy;
- Developing a common language about conflict and the resolution of conflict;
- Repeating messages through icons;
- Examining school norms;
- Reflecting on how disputes are handled among students, faculty and parents;
- Instituting “talk it out corners”;
- Teaching pedagogy;
- Reflecting on ways in which the school interacts with students, parents, and staff and the underlying philosophy of these interactions;
- Checking internal understanding and making a commitment, with time for the conversation and implementation; time for the stakeholders to gain understanding of how to infuse core values and how these align to standards and mandated restraints; and
- Involving teachers, administrators, classified personnel, noon supervisors, volunteers, students, parents, community members, and the school board and making all stakeholders, not just students, responsible for committing to core values, establishing norms, and working toward the core purpose of each student reaching her or his full potential.

D. Curriculum Modules

Three school district teams were asked to reflect on the range of identified conflict resolution skills, choose two or three skills, then develop a short curriculum module for teaching these skills. The module contained the following components: Audience, Goals, Objectives, and Pedagogy. The groups presented the following three curricular outlines:

Curriculum One

Audience: Parents

Goal: To empower parents to problem solve at the school site.

Objectives: To train parents in implementing problem solving skills.
To teach teachers how to work effectively with parents.

Pedagogy: Teach active listening and negotiation skills.

Curriculum Two

Audience: Adults

Goal: To build intercultural understanding.

Objectives: To build trust among all stakeholders.
To develop articulation and active listening skills.
To facilitate the removal of language barriers.

Pedagogy: Role-plays
Dialogue
Visioning activities
Trust building activities
Bring in community gatekeepers

Curriculum Three

Audience: Parents

Goal: To improve communication with your children.

Objectives: To decrease, not suppress, parent child conflict and increase family harmony.
To empower parents to take an active role in their children's social and emotional development.
To apply skills beyond parent-child relationship.

Pedagogy: Share experiences.
Teach active listening skills.
Teach problem-solving skills.
Utilize role-plays and feedback
Multi-session format.
Practice.

Strategies for Drawing People:

Provide babysitting/childcare and offer refreshments.

Make personal phone calls.

At the close of the curriculum work, the participants were asked to identify any learnings they gleaned from either preparing the brief module or listening to the presentations of their colleagues. The following are the lessons learned:

- Meeting the needs of a targeted audience takes effective outreach and adequate planning time.
- Don't need to re-dig the well; there is a deep pool of skills and experiences from which to draw.
- Sometimes an outside facilitator will need to be brought in because of a lack of trust.
- Appreciate the power of teachers and parents working and learning together.
- Recognize the importance of developing different outreach methods to attract diverse stakeholder groups.

III. Measuring Success

A. Uses of Evaluation

A **California Resource Guide**, published by the Sacramento County Office of Education, offers useful evaluation strategies for school districts. The guide teaches that the ideal time to begin evaluation is before the conflict resolution program is fully developed, and certainly prior to program implementation. Yet what exactly is program evaluation? Briefly stated, evaluation is the measurement of outcomes and the comparison of those outcomes with your program's stated goals. Program evaluation serves several important purposes:

- Accountability.
- Determining program effectiveness.
- Determining what works and what does not.
- Providing information that enables staff to make changes to improve program effectiveness.
- Providing “proof” for skeptics, thereby increasing the sustainability of financial and community support for effective programs and practices.

To be effective, evaluation techniques should be incorporated as an integral part of your school community's conflict resolution program design. To do that, it is important for stakeholders to reflect on what the success of a program would look like in your school. The evaluation tools created and utilized should capture data that will inform you as to how and to what extent you have achieved your desired, collective vision.

B. Measuring Personal Success

The participants were first asked to identify what “tools” they use to measure success in their personal lives. This was done individually, then discussed with other team members, and ultimately shared with the whole group. Here are the array of responses:

- Positive feedback/response from others.
- How it feels when activities are taking place for self and others.
- How individual work impacts the collective global situation.
- Continued achievement.
- Appropriate length of time to complete a task.
- Level of joy and happiness experienced when doing a task.
- Level of chaos in the activity.
- Emotionally present while doing the work.
- Freedom and free time.

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- Physical health in order after doing the work.
- Positive relationships created as a result of doing the work.
- Desktop condition at the end of the day.
- Balance of responsibility.
- If goals were met, they were the right goals.

This list can be summarized into the following indicators for measuring personal success:

- Gut instinct
- Level of joy and happiness
- Free time
- Problems are in the process of being solved
- Level of conflict
- Opportunity for growth
- People were really present for what was happening
- Feeling of satisfaction/energy/freedom
- Positive input from others
- Lower stress level
- Clarity
- Sense of completion

Although these are all affective measurements of accomplishment, they are important ingredients in promoting ongoing effort towards a vision. And even though these are not the types of goals that are typically measured in an evaluation process, they demand equal attention because they do play a critical role in the success of any program.

C. Measuring Success of a Conflict Resolution Program

Earlier in this report, we were given information as to how the different stakeholder groups would look for signs of program success. These ranged from changing the climate of a school, to improving relationships, to a reduction in behavioral problems, to student involvement in the programs, to people working together to solve problems.

At this point in the forum, district teams were asked for their visions of a successful program and measurements of the program's success. Below are their responses:

- An articulated K-12 conflict resolution program which insures that all students reach their full potential. This program would be based on the district's core values, would be consistent with the norms established, and would be articulated at all schools and to all stakeholders so that the process becomes intrinsic and alive. Ultimately, there would be no need to measure success, because the program goals would be so ingrained into people's behavior.
- Collegial caring environments in which adults and students can thrive on a violence-free campus. It would be important to recruit motivated people who share this vision and who can garner trust and respect. A resource referral system consisting of a cadre of adults and students would be available at any time. The number of referrals for verbal or physical confrontations; number of suspensions and expulsions, and the number of interventions that prevented formal actions would measure success.
- The program would be consistently implemented with sufficient support and resources. There would be student and staff buy-in for the program which would establish a friendly peaceful culture with more adult presence from parents and community members on campus. Fewer disciplinary incidents, campus pride (physical and emotional), fewer truancies, student parent and teacher satisfaction, and higher student and parent involvement in campus life would measure success.

Clearly, creating safer school campuses is not just about reducing incidents of students' disruptive behavior. Creating peaceable school communities is also about the quality of life on a school campus. People seek to work and learn in a caring, communicative, and problem-solving culture. This finding is supported in the 1993 **Preliminary Report on Violence in California Schools**, published by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, which also recommends conflict resolution programs as an important violence prevention strategy.

IV. Research in the Field

A. Relationship Between Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention

It is important to remind the public and ourselves that conflict resolution is **just one** violence prevention strategy. An article by Larry Cohen, Rachael Davis and Manual Aboelata, entitled “Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention: From Misunderstanding to Understanding,” which appeared in the August/September issue of **The Fourth R**, is very helpful in articulating the relationship between the two fields.

The conflict resolution field and the violence prevention field share two important goals:

(1) Helping people to envision violence and unresolved conflict as learned behaviors; and (2) Viewing non-violent alternatives as preferable and possible.

However the two fields do differ from one another in some significant ways. For example:

- **Scope.** Violence prevention concerns itself only with violence-related situations; there are numerous conflict issues unrelated to violence. At the same time, there is a great deal of violence that is not conflict-based, such as child abuse and sexual assault.
- **Approach.** Violence prevention emphasizes policy change as much as individual education; whereas conflict resolution tends to rely primarily on individual skill building and community education. Conflict resolution tends to focus on improving interpersonal skills by enhancing communication, and by utilizing negotiation and mediation techniques. However, some conflict resolution practitioners consider policy change as vital, too.
- **Risk Factors.** Violence prevention seeks to alleviate risk factors as a way of reducing and eliminating violence before a violent situation erupts. For example, a violence prevention effort that associates violence with poverty and a lack of economic opportunities might work to create more economic opportunity for youth. Conflict resolution strategies address risk factors such as history and context to the extent that these appear to be important components in mediating a specific conflict. Violence prevention practitioners also deal directly with risk factors surrounding a conflict, while conflict resolution practitioners make appropriate referrals if the parties request assistance.
- **Power.** Conflict resolution practitioners often seek to create a “level playing field” among disputing parties, whereas violence prevention practitioners tend to consider inequities endemic to the environment, therefore requiring broad-based change.
- **Resiliency.** Conflict resolution activities foster resiliency within individuals while violence prevention focuses more on the risk factors within the environment.

This understanding assists us in establishing parameters for realistic measures of success.

B. What the Research Indicates

To date, some substantial research has been done on the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs on school campuses. Questions being raised include: Do our programs work? What

do they accomplish? Are the young people and adults we work with getting better at resolving conflicts nonviolently? How do they make peace?

The National Institute for Dispute Resolution (NIDR) and the Conflict Resolution Education Network (CRENet) published in 1998 a **Special Report on Conflict Resolution Education Research and Evaluation**. Participants discussed the following key findings summarized from this report:

- Involve parents and community groups more, to encourage the use of conflict resolution skills outside the classroom, in homes and neighborhoods.
- The primary challenges to program implementation were limitations on staff time and program resources and a lack of teacher and administrative support.
- Incorporate the concepts of conflict resolution into the curriculum and as a cornerstone of the discipline policy.
- The sources of conflict coming from the local community and the wider society should be examined.
- One session per week of a conflict management program held over a semester frequently increases grades, attendance, and percentage of homework turned in.
- More experienced trainers had fewer discipline referrals originating from the classrooms in which they facilitated workshops than did inexperienced trainers.

These are important guidelines to consider in program design and implementation. Keeping them in mind can maximize efforts and help avoid some common pitfalls.

C. Public Policy Implications

One of our biggest challenges in the field is getting conflict resolution on the education agenda within individual states. Probably the biggest roadblock is the current emphasis and focus of resources on academic standards. In a world that uses an either/or lens, there is a tension between academic intelligence and emotional intelligence. Good program evaluation is needed because school boards are reluctant to assign resources to things that don't focus on academic performance standards. However, students, teachers, and parents shared the following lessons in the focus groups:

- Academics become more meaningful when students are learning in an environment in which they can survive.
- If students don't discuss social and personality issues, their studies suffer.
- Students are distracted by what is going on in their personal lives; they need outlets for their frustrations.
- Unresolved problems get in the way of paying attention to what is going on in class.

So what is emotional intelligence? Here are some salient features adapted from an interview with Daniel Goleman in the September 1966 issue of **Educational Leadership**:

- Ability to manage distressing moods well and control impulses;
- Remaining hopeful when you have setbacks;
- Empathy;
- Social Skills;
- IQ contributes at best about 20% to the factors that determine life success;
- Skills such as being able to resist impulsivity or delay gratification are helpful in the academic arena;
- Physiology of the brain supports the premise that a child who is worried or anxious or upset in some way can't keep her/his mind off of what she/he is worrying about;
- Emotional intelligence is virtually all learned and needs to be modeled through caring, respectful interactions with children.

Those of us in the conflict resolution field try not to divide the world into either/or polarities, rather we strive to find synthesis and synergy. We know that both types of intelligence are crucial to a young person's success and that emotional intelligence supports the development of an optimum learning environment. The educational costs of unresolved conflicts can run high.

Participants ended the session by brainstorming the seeds of arguments that could be made to education policy makers as to why conflict resolution skills are as valid as academic skills. They are listed below:

- Provide managerial skills for the workplace.
- Interpersonal skills make people successful.
- Life skills make one feel more tied into their community and therefore less likely to act out.
- Inability to control impulses could have fiscal implications.
- Dealing with the aftermath of violent outbreaks and conflicts takes away from learning.
- Relieves suffering for children carrying around conflict.
- Children who are distracted cannot learn.
- Teaches the importance of balancing feelings and logic.

To these we might add:

- Develops the ability to think critically.
- Creates citizens who can participate successfully in a diverse community.
- Cultivates leadership qualities.
- Encourages creativity.

V. Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to summarize the participants' discussion and exploration of the role evaluation and research play in the design and implementation of conflict resolution programs. The report also highlights the costs of unresolved conflicts for a school campus.

We recognize that adequate resources are required to build the kinds of programs we envision for our school communities. Right now the nation is seeking responses to young people's feelings of disenfranchisement. Conflict resolution programs are part of the solution. We need to be able to make strong cases for the potential effectiveness of the work we do, and we need both anecdotal and hard evidence to support our claims.

As we design our programs we need to identify the evaluation users and decision makers, we need to set specific and clear program goals and objectives, and we need to ensure that appropriate resources are available to carry out an evaluation plan.

**Appendix:
Participants in the Forum of February 24, 1999**

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