

MEDIATION AT ALJ HIGH SCHOOL **by Ellen Spingler**

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It's a typical school day in any American high school. Two students are overheard arguing in the hallway by a teacher who promptly escorts both to the vice-principal's office. Unlike the typical high school, however, these students are not waiting for a school administrator to solve their problem: Their next stop is the mediation room where two trained peers will listen to their differences and help them find a mutually agreed upon solution.

The Arthur L. Johnson Peer Mediation Program began six years ago. Since its inception, it has exceeded all expectations. With a school population of 700 students and 10-12 student mediators, the program handles about 75 conflicts per year. Conflicts range from physical and/or verbal aggression and name-calling to issues of harassment and also "boyfriend/girlfriend" problems. Referrals to mediation come from a variety of sources—administrators or staff, the local police, parents or students. Initially, most came from the school disciplinarian, but as the years have passed, more and more of the referrals are coming directly from the students. It is not that unusual to overhear a student discussing whether he/she needs to go to mediation.

The idea for starting a peer mediation program came directly from school administrators. With limited funds and few programs in other schools, I simply read the available literature and wrote my own program. Certain factors helped to make my task easier: strong administrative support, at every level; the belief that students can help other students resolve their problems; and, a basic understanding of the tools needed to develop specialized interventions, given my preparation as both a teacher and a school psychologist.

I began with three major concerns—the actual process of mediation, the selection and training of peer mediators, and the day-to-day operation of the program. The first was the easiest. Mediation is a clear cut process with structured steps whether it is done at the high school level or the international level. Mediators listen to the disputants, paraphrase their responses, probe for additional information, look for common interests, brainstorm and evaluate possible solutions to obtain a signed agreement. Thus, I utilized the steps common to all mediations as the basis for my program.

The second concern, selecting and training students to effectively conduct mediations was more challenging. This part of the program has had numerous additions and alterations over the years. I began with ten pre-selected mediators the first year. During the second year, the selection of the new mediators became the task of the current mediators. Only seniors are eligible to serve. Candidates are interviewed by the mediators and lists are narrowed down during closed-door debates. The final selection becomes an arduous job as they discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each nominee. Can they keep mediation confidential? Are they able to be unbiased? Do they

have the respect of their peers? The students selected sometimes come as a surprise to the faculty. Those chosen are not necessarily honor roll students. Mediators tend to be a cross section of the student body. Referent power and street savvy are more important to being a successful mediator than report card grades. The ability to communicate effectively with students from all groups and of many abilities is crucial. As advisor, I may suggest, but I do not participate in the voting or final selection. By giving the students the responsibility of choosing their successors, I have discovered that they make sound choices based upon a genuine concern for the program. Certainly, they know which students have the respect of their peers far better than I.

To prepare and train mediators, I conduct three full day sessions. The first is conducted with the senior mediators and the newly elected juniors toward the end of the school year. The focus is to develop the listening and communication skills necessary for mediation, to create a feeling of connectivity among the mediators and to explore the nature of conflict. The second workshop is devoted to teaching the juniors specific mediation steps through a series of role plays. Practicing each step—from the moment the disputant comes into the room through the signing of the contract—increases confidence. The final workshop is held in the early fall. We review the previous sessions and learn some specific trouble-shooting techniques such as the caucus. Further training occurs at the conclusion of each mediation. Together we evaluate the session and the actual performance of the mediators. Each mediator has an opportunity to be the chief mediator as well as the co-mediator. Co-mediators keep the records as well as participate in the mediation.

We conduct a yearly review of the records by categorizing the data in terms of type, number and characteristics. Follow-up sessions, known as call-backs, are used to ensure that contract terms are fulfilled.

The day-to-day operation of the program requires numerous forms for referral, brainstorming sheets, contracts and call-backs. We keep the forms related to a particular case in a folder with the disputants' names. We are fortunate to have our own private office in the school library. Over the years the mediators have decorated it with posters, pictures and materials related to mediation. During the first year, a mediator drew a logo which shows a mediator overseeing two disputants shaking hands. We use this logo on all correspondence. The mediation room has a secure file for records, a mediation table, as well as additional chairs and supplies. Having a specific room makes a strong statement about the importance of peer mediation in the school—and the confidentiality at the core of it. The names of the mediators and referral forms are posted on the door.

Gaining the acceptance of school staff and becoming an integral part of the school are also important to a successful program. We have used a variety of techniques to accomplish this. For example, we held a mock mediation for the faculty the year the program was introduced. Each ninth grade class is acquainted with mediation during orientation.

We run commercials on the student news program and provide referral forms in and around the school. Mediators have conducted in-class mediations—demonstrations—as well. We mediated the case of two literary characters for an English class. The most effective message to staff and students however, remains the successful results obtained by these programs.

Peer mediation teaches and encourages student responsibility on several levels. Disputants actively participate in problem-solving techniques which transfer to learning beyond the classroom. Mediation provides on the job training in conflict resolution. It offers peer mediators the opportunity to help fellow students by providing an essential school service and improving the overall school climate. In human terms it provides a legitimate outlet for the ninth grader who is being harassed by an upperclassman and the means to put an end to it. It offers two adolescent males a face-saving way to avoid a physical confrontation. It gives staff an alternative to removing a student from class. After six years of peer mediation, the Clark police report, "...a reduction in violence and confrontational situations occurring both inside and outside of school."

It's Friday afternoon and most students and staff are heading home. In the mediation room, four males sit around the table. One disputant is requesting an immediate mediation because the other keeps bothering him. He worries about a confrontation during the weekend to come. Forty-five minutes later, a contract is signed and a conflict is avoided. The mediator shakes hands with each and compliments them for their efforts. He reminds them that they have given their word to keep the agreement and to keep what was said in the mediation room confidential. Without fanfare, the mediator puts the file away and locks the mediation room door.

CNCR Visits ALJ Highschool

Sanford M. Jaffe and Linda Stamato engaged in a dialogue about mediation with mediators from the 3 high schools that work with Ms. Spingler. They visited with the mediators, Ms. Spingler, and administrators at ALJ in April, 2000. Brief remarks placed the school mediation programs in the general context of developments at community, state, national and international levels, and provided information on research relating to constructive impacts of mediation on mediators and those who are participants in the process. Stamato and Jaffe engaged the student mediators in discussions of problems they encountered, whether they noted differences with respect to gender, for example, how they explain the program's success, and the impact the experience has had on them and their peers and associates.

LITERACY, PARENTING, AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

A companion program, in Passaic, combining peace-keeping and literacy, takes place in a hospital (St. Mary's) instead of a school, and features the family. It combines instruction of English as a second language with work on family-related issues, notably how to get along better as a family and how to resolve conflicts without violence. Parents and children attend together, thus building relationships and providing coping and conflict resolution skills they can recognize and value and put to family (and community) use. This pilot program, an unusual combination of parenting lessons, conflict resolution and language classes, garnered St. Mary's an award from the American Hospital Association.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROGRAMS AT NEW JERSEY SCHOOLS

Struggling to find a balance between the carrot and the stick—between detentions and suspensions on the one hand and counseling and peer mediation on the other—school districts are developing a variety of policies and codes that incorporate conflict resolution. In New Jersey, of 111 high schools surveyed on methods of preventing disruption and violence, 104 had some mediation or conflict resolution program (*Star Ledger*, October 31, 1999.)

At Passaic High School, where suspensions dropped by more than 1,000 in the last two years, much of the credit goes to the school's peer mediation and peer leadership programs, according to school officials. The student president of the peer mediation program, Iricenia Vasquez, thinks kids in trouble tend to listen to their classmates more than to adults because their peers understand what they're going through. "Neutrality that's the No. 1 thing," Vasquez told the *Ledger*. "Mediators can't give opinions. You need a lot of good listening skills, and you have to be able to ask open questions. The idea is that we want always for the two people to talk to each other. The more they talk, the better." The results are impressive.

READINGS

"Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research" by David W. and Roger T. Johnson (*Review of Educational Research*, Winter 1996, Vol. 66, No. 4, pp. 459-506) provides a useful assessment of peer mediation programs. Whereas untrained students by and large use conflict strategies that create destructive outcomes by ignoring the importance of their on-going relationships, students who receive training in negotiation and mediation procedures tend to use these strategies which generally, then, leads to constructive outcomes. Students' success in resolving their conflicts constructively tends to result in reducing the numbers of student-student conflicts referred to teachers and administrators, which, in turn, tends to reduce suspensions. (For copies of the article, contact CNCR).

"Education in Conflict Resolution: A Whole School Approach" by Joan Burstyn and Rebecca Stevens (*Nexus: Journal of Peace, Conflict and Social Change*, Spring/Fall 1999, pp. 56-69) argues for teaching conflict resolution not as an add-on within a smattering of class sessions or as out-of-class peer mediation training, but rather as an effort to infuse the ideals and practices of conflict resolution throughout the school—within the academic curriculum, skills mining workshops, classroom communities, and among all school personnel. Aiming to alter the whole school environment, this approach emphasizes, particularly, pluralism, multicultural education and democratic practices. (For copies of the article, contact CNCR).