

# **Don't Fight, Mediate**

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Peer mediation offers a way for students to settle disagreements without violence and without involving the traditional system of school discipline (Davis & Porter, 1985). Simply put, peer mediation offers another way for students to handle the inevitable conflicts of daily school life. Students trained as mediators help other students resolve disputes in a collaborative, win-win form of conflict resolution. In this way, students play a vital role in reducing violent behaviors and creating "safe schools." In this article, I present one high school mediation program that has been implemented and evaluated. First, a brief background about peer mediation is necessary.

## **Peer Mediation Programs**

A peer mediation program is a way for students to resolve conflicts by learning to communicate successfully with other people. The program focuses on healthy self-esteem, a factor in the equation that determines a student's learning and overall success (Purkey & Novak, 1984). A healthy self-esteem depends on positive experiences that build confidence in students so they can solve their problems instead of worrying about them (Younge, 1993).

According to Koch (1988), the overall goals of school mediation programs are the reduction of behavior problems and the teaching of problem-solving skills. These programs teach collaboration as a productive way to resolve conflict and an effective method to prevent fu-

ture problems. They also help to develop student self-responsibility (Cohen, 1987b). Mediation encourages students (and teachers) not only to "just say no!" to negative behaviors, but to "just say yes" to positive alternatives (Gaustad, 1991).

Strong administrative support is critical to the success of any school mediation program (Cohen, 1987b). The school principal's support is particularly important to the implementation and development of the program and translates into: (1) granting released time for teachers and students to be trained in mediation skills; (2) developing procedures for referring discipline situations to mediation; (3) allocating funds for the program; and (4) scheduling time for a staff member to coordinate the program on a daily basis. Principals who model an inviting, collaborative style of conflict resolution also build a strong foundation for the program to be successful.

The objectives of the particular high school program presented in this article were aimed at creating a better school climate by helping teachers and students learn to find peaceful solutions to problems, to encourage student growth by teaching students personal communication skills, to reduce the amount of time administrators and teachers spend on conflict resolution, and to reduce the number of incidents of violence and suspensions for fighting.

### **Piedmont High School**

Piedmont High School, located in Union County, North Carolina, has 940 students in grades 9-12. The student body represents wide social strata from farm families to residents of suburban housing developments. Approximately five percent of students are from minority families.

The Piedmont High School Peer Mediation program (PHSPM), began in the fall of 1991 and grew out of the interest, commitment, and support of the school administrators. PHSPM was developed using guidelines from *Mediation Program Development: Implementation Checklist* (Cohen, 1987a), which asked the following questions.

1. *Who Will Coordinate the Program on Site?* The PHSPM program was coordinated by an assistant principal and a faculty committee that included a school counselor, a Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA) coordinator, a business education teacher, an English teacher, a foreign language teacher, and a special education teacher. The assistant principal supervised the training of teachers and students, coordinated the mediation sessions, and publicized the program within the school and the community. The committee developed the program as a part of the school's discipline system.

2. *Which Students and Staff will be Trained?* Following the suggestions of Davis and Porter (1985), students were selected for training based on grade level, ethnic diversity, level of maturity, and sub-culture representation. Selection was also based on eligibility criteria: (a) a passing academic average; (b) no unsatisfactory conduct; and (c) no out-of-school suspension. The selection of mediators was primarily the responsibility of the faculty committee with input from the general faculty on the applicants' maturity and ability to interact successfully with their peers. Teachers on the faculty committee completed the mediation training along with the students.

3. *When Will the Training be Scheduled?* The training for the first group of mediators at the high school was scheduled for two school days in the first semester of the 1991-1992 school year and for the second group of mediators in the second semester of the 1992-1993 school year. Regardless of specific dates, mediation training should be completed in time for the trainees to assume the role of mediator before an extended break in the school calendar.

4. *Who Will do the Training?* Two staff members from the Dispute Settlement Program (DSP) of Charlotte, North Carolina conducted the first training session and were assisted by the assistant principal and faculty committee members. In the second year (1992-1993) the assistant principal, assisted by veteran mediators, conducted the training sessions for the new mediators.

The DSP is a community-based mediation service providing an alternative form of dispute resolution for the citizens of Mecklenburg County in North Carolina. As part of their outreach program, the DSP staff conduct training in mediation skills for faculty and students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system. A list of other consultants who conduct mediation training is available from: MediationNetwork of North Carolina, P. O. Box 241, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-0241, ( 919-929-6333 ).

5. *How Will the Mediation Program be Funded?* The major costs of any school mediation program include the trainers' fees, substitutes for teacher released-time, and miscellaneous costs including office supplies and incentives for student mediators (e.g., T-shirts). Possible sources of funding include local funds available for school improvement projects; state and federal dropout prevention funds; federal funds for drug-free schools; and funds donated by parent organizations or business groups. Sometimes, community-based mediation agencies may donate staff time to train students and teachers in mediation.

6. *Which Issues Will be Mediated?* Cases mediated during the first year of the PHSPM program involved physical conflict, argument, harassment, rumor, relationship, and property. Mediation was not recommended in cases where students' fights resulted in physical injury. However, in some cases involving physical conflict, mediation was offered as an option to reduce the number of days a student was suspended. For example, a student involved in a fight would have a

choice of three days of "Out-Of-School Suspension" (OSS) or one day of OSS with mediation.

7. *Where Will Mediation Sessions be Held?* The mediation sessions at Piedmont High School were held in a private conference room in the high school library. When that room was not available, empty classrooms or available administrative offices were used.

8. *When Will Mediation Sessions Be Held?* Mediation is more effective when the initial session is scheduled soon after a conflict occurs. Sessions in this high school program were held during class time and during lunch periods. Mediators were excused from class to mediate unless the mediator or teacher requested that the student not miss that particular class. Disputants were excused from class in order to resolve a conflict that was interfering with their concentration on school work.

9. *What, If Any, Are the Limits on Confidentiality?* Mediators discuss confidentiality with disputants before mediation begins. Confidentiality is guaranteed with limitations as required by law and school policy. Mediators are required to report to the school administration any mention during mediation sessions of child abuse, suicide, illegal drugs or weapons on school property, and situations that might result in personal harm. These exceptions to confidentiality rule are explained to the disputants by the mediators, who are instructed to keep all other information shared by disputants confidential.

10. *How Will the School-at-Large Be Informed About Mediation?* Students and teachers were introduced to the PHSPM program through mediation demonstrations at school assemblies and faculty meetings, through presentations in English classes, and in articles published in community newspapers. The mediation team produced a video tape of a simulated mediation session, which has been used to demonstrate the process to students, teachers, and parents. Announcements over the

intercom, posters placed around campus, and student testimonials have been used to encourage participation in the program.

11. *What Kind of Ongoing Training and Support Will Be Provided?* The PHSPM team meets twice during each semester to discuss concerns of mediators, disputants and faculty. Veteran mediators are used in the training of new students. Periodically, mediators are involved in simulated mediation sessions to sharpen their skills and to learn additional skills such as discontinuing sessions when disputants are not seriously involved.

12. *How Will the Program Be evaluated?* The assistant principal conducted an evaluation of the PHSPM program at the end of both the 1991-1992 and 1992-1993 school years. The evaluation reports were used to make recommended changes in the program and to communicate information about the PHSPM program to both school and community groups.

## **Program Evaluation**

Evaluation of the PHSPM program was designed to determine program outcomes and to compare these outcomes with program objectives. The evaluation consisted of three questions:

1. Was the PHSPM program used by students and teachers to resolve conflict?
2. What were the outcomes of the program with regard to school climate variables?
3. Was the mediation process followed by mediators and disputants?

To answer these questions, information was gathered from three sources: mediation case reports; the Student Information Management System (SIMS) database; and surveys of the faculty, mediators, and

disputants. The quantitative data from these three sources were analyzed using frequency tallies and percentages of frequency. Questionnaire data were analyzed using a statistical software package from National Computer Systems Microtest™ Survey. Qualitative data from responses to open-ended questions were summarized and then categorized as positive or negative.

*Question #1:* Was the PHSPM program used by students and teachers to resolve conflict? Yes, the program was used to resolve conflicts involving students at Piedmont High School during the first year (November, 1991 to May, 1992) and the second year (August 1992, to May, 1993). In the first year there were 48 cases involving 21 mediators and 108 disputants (some students were involved in more than one case). In the second year there were 52 cases involving 114 disputants and 2 teachers (some students were involved in more than one case). Two cases in this year involved teacher-student disputes that were referred to mediation. The program involved twice as many 9th and 10th graders as 11th and 12th graders in both years (Year 1=66%; Year 2=81%).

Physical conflict, argument, rumor, and harassment were the leading causes of disputes referred to mediation. Cases were referred to mediation by teachers, administrators, counselors, and students themselves. Assistant principals were the main source of referrals in both years. During the second year there was an increase in the number of students who referred themselves to mediation. Information from the questionnaires for that year indicated a majority of mediation sessions produced written agreements and that these agreements were honored by the students involved.

*Question #2:* What were the outcomes of PHSPM program with regard to school climate variables? The number of reported incidents of aggressive behavior (student fights) actually increased in the first year, but decreased in the second year of the program. According to

second year data, the number on incidents of aggressive behavior dropped to approximately half the number reported during the first year.

During the second year of the program, two student-teacher disputes were mediated. These cases involved misunderstandings between teachers and students. Follow-up contacts indicated that the teacher-student relationship was more positive after mediation.

With regard to other school climate variables, there was no conclusive agreement among respondents during either year that the academic performance of students involved in the program had improved. There was some agreement among faculty surveyed that the behavior of mediators and disputants had improved during both years. Respondents indicated that there had been some improvement in the attendance of both mediators and disputants with greater improvement in the attendance of mediators. In both years, more mediators than disputants agreed that their satisfaction with school had increased as a result of participation in the peer mediation program.

Responses from all three groups in both years indicated strong agreement that the PHSPM program should continue during the next school year. The overall effects of the program as described by faculty and students were consistent with the benefits of similar programs found in the literature. The positive effects included fewer fights with fewer corresponding negative consequences and a reduction in tension among students creating a peaceful school climate. The program was linked to better student behavior in general with less time spent by administrators and teachers on student conflict.

Some concerns outlined by respondents in the first year that students used peer mediation to avoid going to class and to avoid punishment from the administration were again confirmed by all three groups surveyed in year two. In addition, other negative outcomes per-



ceived by these groups were the amount of instructional time lost to mediation sessions and the belief that mediation only helped some students.

Respondents made several suggestions for program modification. Two of these became recommendations. First, cases should be sent to mediation more quickly. Second, the program and its positive effects should be publicized more widely to students and to the school community. This publicity along with additional training for mediators would help to reduce the abuse of the program by those who participated in it.

*Question #3:* Was the mediation process followed by mediators and disputants? More than 50% of the mediators and disputants in both years indicated that mediators: (a) helped disputants find solutions to disputes, (b) explained the rules of mediation, (c) let disputants tell their side of the problem, (d) asked the disputants how they felt about the situation, (e) kept the session confidential, and (f) did a good job of listening. According to data from the second year, over 60% of both student groups reported that mediators established control of mediation sessions. A large majority of mediators and almost half of the disputants reported that they used skills they learned in mediation to resolve other conflicts.

### **Recommendations of the Evaluations**

On the basis of the information gathered in the evaluations, the PHSPM program was recommended for continuation during the 1993-1994 school year. A majority of all respondents agreed that the program should be continued. More than 100 cases involving 230 students (disputants and mediators) were mediated in the first two years. The data indicated that the number of fights on campus decreased in the second year. There has been an increase in student self-referrals, one

indication of program success (Pilati, 1993). Mediation has been used to successfully resolve teacher-student disputes. Teachers continue to report that they spend less time on student conflicts.

It was recommended that mediators be given further training in establishing and maintaining control of the mediation process. Mediators should be able to discontinue a session when disputants are not taking the process seriously or when not following the rules of mediation. Additional mediators should be selected and trained from the 9th grade since a large number of these students use the program.

The program evaluation should include summary case data collected during the 1993-1994 school year for comparison with the earlier data. In addition, data should be collected to measure the effects of the PHSPM program on school climate variables and to determine if the program meets its objectives. These variables would include the number of students' fights, the number of days lost to OSS because of fights, school attendance, academic performance, students' satisfaction with school, teachers' satisfaction with school, teachers' time spent on student conflict, and students' use of mediation skills in everyday conflicts.

### **Suggestions for Implementation**

Schools that are exploring peer mediation programs as "safe school" initiatives will want to consider three suggestions for implementation. First, a structure for planning, implementing, coordinating, and evaluating the program is essential. Implementation of a peer mediation program can become the responsibility of any school-based committee. The committee or team, a school-level group representing all school constituencies, would design the program to meet the specific needs and objectives of that school community.

Peer mediation programs are an integral part of any comprehensive conflict resolution program that teaches peaceful resolution skills. A successful program will include other components such as teaching conflict resolution skills in the classroom, developing cooperative discipline plans, and training teachers, parents, and students in mediation skills.

Ultimately, both the implementation and continuing success of any school mediation program requires the support of the administrative team. Administrators increase the activity and visibility of the program by referring cases to mediation and encouraging others to do so.

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