

## **Managing School Conflict: the Peer Mediation Approach**

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### **Introduction**

Conflict exists as a part of nature for all living things. We have come to observe conflict as being an inevitable component of existence, one that appears to be impossible to overcome on any kind of permanent basis. Though conflict is commonly viewed as being destructive, we must acknowledge that it is often the catalyst for positive, constructive change. Well-managed conflict is a productive feature of human interaction.

Though each conflict has its own particular source, these sources can be divided between three general headings: resources, psychological needs, and values. Conflict inevitably occurs over possessions. Two individuals want the same item, or one person wants what another person possesses, or too many people want to possess that which is in scarce supply; from each of these instances, resource-based conflicts do arise. Beyond the need for resources, human beings have certain basic psychological needs; the need for power and control, self-esteem, a sense of belonging, love, accomplishment, self-actualization, and happiness. When the fulfillment of these needs is threatened, we come into conflict with whoever or whatever presents the threat. The most difficult conflicts to resolve are those based on values. Value-based conflict involves a direct attack on one's belief system, a basic threat to the need to survive. It is very difficult to change our personal value system and often even more difficult to recognize and acknowledge the validity of another's values. [\(1\)](#)

Whereas conflict is found in every aspect of human existence, it can be observed on an increased level where any one or a combination of interdependence, pressure and variety are found to exist. [\(2\)](#) The more individuals depend on each other, the more they interact and the more their needs and values clash. The more pressure that is placed on a person from outside sources, the more that person is forced to compromise their own expectations and preferences. The more variety one experiences, the more one is forced to deal with the differences of others. Nowhere can this heightened level of conflict be observed more clearly than in our nation's school system. Our public education system is a focal point of conflict in Canadian society. The replacement of the one-room community schools with integrated district education structures, the increased pressure from anti-racism, gender equity, teachers' rights, students' rights and other social movements, and the rapid increase in the variety and numbers of cultures represented at our schools has led to much conflict, both between students and between students and staff.

Conflict resolution does not exist as a means to eliminate conflict, rather, it is a process for approaching conflict and managing it in order to effect a benefit for each side in the dispute and for the relationship between them. Used in our nation's education system, conflict resolution in the form of peer mediation offers an effective means through which conflicts can be resolved without violent confrontation, permanent damage to relationships or punitive measures. Peer mediation offers students the opportunity for personal growth by requiring that they expand their intellectual horizons during the formulation of a positive outcome to the conflict. It can enhance the quality of life not only for the students involved in conflict but also for the school society in general. Peer mediation, through a process of active participation and direct communication, offers a collaborative approach to conflict resolution whereby

both students (or student and teacher, as the case may be) win individually, as does their relationship. (3)

This essay identifies and discusses the three generally recognized models of peer mediation found in our school system. The process of implementing a peer mediation model into our schools is then broadly considered and specific results identified. Following this introductory discussion, an examination of the elements and recommended implementation process for one specific peer mediation model, the Common Ground program, is offered. The final section of this essay conveys the practical experiences associated with the operation of the Common Ground program at Central Catholic High School, located in Windsor, Ontario. An authors' notes is provided wherein a discussion of the process issues relating to the joint writing of this term paper are considered, as are the means used to overcome the disputes that arose.

### **Three General Models of Peer Mediation**

Peer mediation programs, while differing marginally one from to the next in practice, tend to fall within one of three general organizational models: the total school model, the elective course model, and the student club model. (4) The success of any school mediation program depends heavily upon its ability to attract competent student mediators who can facilitate meaningful discussions between the disputants and guide them to a mutually supported resolution. In choosing between the above-noted models of peer mediation, a school's conflict resolution administrator must weigh the various approaches to determine which model offers the most effective means through which to recruit competent student mediators.

The total school model involves teaching the principles and practices of conflict resolution to all students. Once this initial training is completed, the entire student population is given the opportunity to act as mediators. With the total school model there is believed to be a greater likelihood that the severity and frequency of conflicts in the school will decrease as every student learns how to manage conflict in a constructive manner. Despite this advantage, the total school model of peer mediation is not widely followed. This is largely due to the fact that implementing the model requires significant time and financial commitments on the part of faculty, administration and the school board. The total school model is best suited for elementary level education centres where teacher-student ratios are low and where teachers have the same students for the majority of the day; this allows mediation to be available in every classroom. In middle and high schools, particularly larger ones, where staff has less frequent contact with any particular group of students and students have a significant variety of contacts with other students, it is very difficult to introduce, operate and monitor a total school mediation program. (5)

The elective course model of peer mediation has been developed on the belief that conflict resolution can be successfully adopted into our education system through the teaching of mediation as a component of the school's elective social studies curriculum. (6) Under this model, peer mediation skills are taught to students in the classroom. That venue provides a forum within which students can conduct mediations and be assessed on their performance. The classroom setting also allows teachers, who are generally the program coordinators under this model, to provide continuing support to student mediators. (7)

As was the case with the total school model, the elective course model offers both operational advantages and disadvantages. This model is noted to provide a consistent classroom setting for the on-going training and supervision of mediators. This allows for the development of very knowledgeable mediators that are easily accessed through the program coordinator (who is also the course teacher). If, however, mediations are restricted to the times during which the social studies class is in session, this will certainly constitute a weakness of the model. As students are initially made aware of the mediation component in a social studies elective course and subsequently choose to enroll in that course, the mediation program benefits from having access to a highly motivated pool of mediators. However, the available pool of mediators is limited to those who are eligible to enroll in the social studies elective. Due to this limit, the available mediators may not adequately represent the diversity of the student population. Stephen Smith, professor

of special education at the University of Florida, Gainesville, notes that, "if schools select only the good students or...the "leadership elites" to be peer mediators, they won't reach troubled students who are apt to have the difficulty settling problems without violence." (8) This concern, which has been raised in the past with regard to both the elective course and the student club models, is open to debate. The opposing argument in this debate, as conveyed by Catholic Central High School's peer mediation coordinator, Ms. Stephanie Houlahan, will be considered in a later section. (9)

The student club model of peer mediation is the approach most commonly introduced to Canadian and American schools. Under this model, the peer mediation coordinator (again, a staff member) selects mediators from the entire student population and trains them outside regular class hours, preferably after school or on weekends but also during lunch and study periods when necessary. If feasible, this training takes place at a location other than the school. Coordinators often schedule mediations before school, during lunch, or after school in order to keep peer mediator and disputant out-of-class time to a minimum; though this is not always practical for the parties involved due to busing schedules and other complicating factors.

The most significant advantage attributable to the school club model lies in the flexibility of the mediator selection process. With this flexibility, the peer mediation coordinator may choose to fashion the available pool of mediators in such a way as to be representative of the diversity of the total student body or may fashion that pool based on an alternative criterion. The coordinator may choose to recruit students on the basis that they would not otherwise become involved in school activities. In the alternative, selection of peer mediators may focus on members of the at-risk student population within the school, or on students who may be able to offer diverse perspectives based on their cultural heritage or other past experiences. Though more student mediators can be recruited under the student club model than is possible under the elective course model, mediator training is not as in-depth with the former when compared with that of the latter. A further disadvantage of the student club model lies in the complications associated with the coordination of mediation times and the reserving of meeting rooms. (10)

### **The Implementation of Peer Mediation - Broadly Discussed**

As stated above, the student club model of peer mediation represents the approach most commonly implemented at Canadian and American schools. Accordingly, this section's broad introductory discussion will focus primarily on the implementation of that particular model. When introducing any model of peer mediation into a school, the first consideration should be to encourage support from the administration and staff, students, parents and the general community. To gain the support of both administration and staff, orientation meetings can be held to educate these persons with regard to the purpose of student-led mediation, the manner in which the program will be implemented and how it will operate. Students can be educated and encouraged to support the introduction of a peer mediation program through the holding of school assemblies, the completion of mediation mini-lessons within the general curriculum, or the playing of related videos, to name but a few of the available options. Parent and greater community support can be obtained through PTA meetings or presentations to community groups, the use of local or school newsletters, and the community media.

Once an adequate level of support for the peer mediation program is achieved, the program structure must be established and students must be selected for training as mediators. With regard to program structure, questions such as "Who will be the program coordinator?", "How will the mediator training be dealt with?", and "Where will the mediation sessions be held?" must be addressed. The selection of a program coordinator should be made no later than this stage.

The process for selecting students to be trained as peer mediators can take multiple forms, each reflecting

a certain philosophical position held with regard to that procedure. Psychologist M. Deutsch indicates that students who are 10 years of age and older are sufficiently mature to be trained as stand-alone mediators. Prior to this age, Deutsch suggests that teachers actively control student-lead mediations through a total school model. (11)

Three basic means exist through which potential student mediators can be attracted to a peer mediation program: self-nomination, peer-nomination, and teacher nomination. These approaches can, of course, be implemented in any combination. From the collected nominations, the program coordinator must prepare a manageable list of students for mediation training (lists are normally 15 to 30 students in size) based on varied criteria; gender, race, achievement level, language(s) proficiency and other characteristics. (12) Psychologist and school counselor N.L. Day-Vines has suggested that diversity should be the overriding consideration in the process of selecting peer mediators; this, to ensure that the students see themselves reflected in the body of mediators. (13) This approach, according to Day-Vines, necessarily includes the selection of troubled students to be trained as mediators. As will be discussed later in this essay, Central Catholic High School peer mediation program coordinator Stephanie Houlahan places the importance of diversity beneath other assessment criteria. In addition to the assessment of objective criteria, program coordinators often used personal interviews to make final selections for student mediators.

As is the case with the introduction of any extra-curricular school program, the issues of resource availability and acquisition costs are of paramount concern. Where support for the establishment of a peer mediation program is high within the school administration, the school system and the general community, the program coordinator may draw on these sources for funding and support. The particular school or school system may employ individuals with mediation experience who can volunteer time to the establishment of the program. These knowledgeable persons can work with less experienced members of the implementation team to complete the initial training of peer mediators. The program coordinator might also have the opportunity to benefit from the volunteer input of either community dispute resolution centre employees or those involved with mediation through the court system, or both.

The time invested in training mediators, though influenced by considerations such as student age, training group size, the number of available trainers, and the complexity of the issues to be ultimately mediated, tends to be in the range of 10 to 20 hours spread across an average of 1 to 30 days. (14) Most training programs include a discussion of the purposes and principles of conflict resolution, a description of the mediation program model that has been adopted for use in the school, and role plays of the different stages of that program. The emphasis of such training appears to be placed upon the development of both communication skills and a heightened level of comfort with the application of the mediation process. As will be alluded to by discussions in the following sections, peer mediation models have developed and thus possible implementation options have expanded over the years, as even the most contemporary models are adapted with each use. This continuing evolution of approaches is due to the inevitable and necessary moves of program coordinators to adapt a theoretical program to fit the parameters of their own style and abilities and those of their students.

Once a school's mediation program is established and the initial training of peer mediators is complete, the mediation of disputes can begin. However, there are certain on-going concerns that require the attention of both the coordinator and student mediators. In order to attract disputants to the program, the coordinator must advertise its existence through any or a combination of school-wide announcements, teacher-directed classroom announcements, the student newspaper, posters and bulletins, or any other available medium. Peer mediators can assist the coordinator with these activities and can promote the program to other students through word of mouth. In most programs fashioned after the school club model, the program coordinator will also be responsible for the scheduling of mediations and for the on-going supervision and training of students and any involved staff from year to year. The coordinator may feel the need for and will thus organize refresher training for student mediators during a given year; this

need will be established by the coordinator's continuous general or detailed evaluation of the program's effectiveness. As this program continues, teachers, school administrators or parents may raise certain concerns regarding its functioning and the outcomes achieved. It is left to the peer mediation coordinator to address and resolve these concerns on behalf of the program. (15) In most cases, the program coordinator will not be forced to defend peer mediation as the results of that program will speak for themselves.

### **Specific Peer Mediation Results**

As much of the existing research on the results of peer mediation is anecdotal, the mediation outcomes identified herein are similarly conveyed. (16) Despite the general nature of this evidence, it definitively supports the conclusion that peer mediation is an effective means through which to resolve existing conflicts and to prevent future disputes. Teachers, school counselors and administrators, and concerned professionals both in Canada and the United States support this conclusion.

In 1992, the Attorney General of California, "praised peer mediation as one of the most effective means to deter violence in public schools". (17) In excess of 10,000 U.S. schools and community groups are presently using peer mediation as a means to resolve conflicts among youths. One such program, the Winning Against Violent Environments (WAVE) conflict resolution program at Cleveland's Martin Luther King Jr. High School is the oldest school-based peer mediation program in Ohio and one of the oldest in the United States. (18) The program, introduced in conjunction with the opening of the school in 1982, played a significant role in the easing of tensions when, in 1996, the high school nearly doubled its enrollment by adding 400 middle-school students to its population. A 1998 year long evaluation of a similar program, the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), adopted by several Atlanta high schools revealed a one-third reduction of in-school suspensions and a 17.2 percent reduction of out-of-school suspensions; whereas comparable non-participating Atlanta high schools were observing an average 16.8 percent rise in in-school suspensions and a 5.8 percent increase in out-of-school suspensions during the same period. Of the Atlanta middle schools that adopted RCCP, one such school was found to have experienced a two-thirds decrease in in-school suspensions and an approximate 10 percent decline in out-of-school suspensions during the same period that non-participating middle school were experiencing an average 25 percent rise in in-school suspensions and an 85.5 percent increase in out-of-school suspensions. (19)

Successes associated with the introduction of school mediation programs have been in no way limited to the United States. During a 1992 study of program effectiveness completed for the Metropolitan Toronto Separate School Board, empirical evidence was uncovered to support the hypothesis that student mediators are positively effected by their participation in the program. The data revealed an increase in the self-esteem scores of student mediators during the evaluation interval, with no parallel increase in scores of the control group. A survey of peer mediator parents and teachers was also completed in conjunction with this study. Of the parents who completed that survey, 80 percent agreed that participation in the student mediation program had a positive effect on their child's self-esteem, while 88 percent of responding teachers reported that peer mediators become more confident and more responsible with the progression of their involvement. (20) Additional empirical evidence solicited during a 1998 Manitoba survey of 319 high school students revealed that the involved school peer mediation programs were successful in resolving over 90 percent of the 155 disputes brought forth by the surveyed disputants. (21) Studies continue regarding the impact of peer mediation on Canada's public school with results pending. (22)

As the beneficial impact of peer mediation programs on American schools would appear to reflect that which has been experienced in the less documented Canadian context, it is appropriate that a further U.S. case be considered to gauge the success of such programs. In the late 1980s, student safety and security at

Walt Whitman Intermediate School, a grade 6 to 8 school located in Brooklyn, was under considerable threat due to several race-related incidents in the school and surrounding community. As a result, Walt Whitman was selected to participate in a Youth Leadership Initiative program administered by the Fund for New York City Public Education Board. During the winter of 1989, two Walt Whitman guidance counselors, one teacher and the school's principal received training by the Board regarding the implementation of the STOP (Schools Teaching Options for Peace) peer mediation program. It was hoped that the program would assist students to cope with conflict while providing non-violent alternatives for the settlement of disputes. Most important was the expectation that the program would lead to improved student self-esteem and empowerment. The STOP program began operation at Walt Whitman Intermediate School in the fall of 1990. (23)

By the end of its first year of operation, Walt Whitman's STOP program had allowed for a reduction in the number of major incidents occurring during dismissal and after school. Also, a 10 percent reduction in the number of school suspensions was documented; the above due primarily to a reduction of repeat incidents made possible through the mediation of initial disputes. At the end of year two, the number of major incidents occurring at Walt Whitman had decreased significantly from the level it had been two years previous, while the role of student mediator became a desired position for students. By the time the STOP program had completed its third year of operation, Walt Whitman Intermediate School had received the Brooklyn Borough President's First Annual Excellence in Education Initiatives Award. Students involved in the program were invited to testify before the New York State Commission of Youth Violence and graduated peer mediators were assisting in the creation of peer mediation programs in their respective high schools. At the conclusion of year four of STOP's operation, school suspensions had declined from a pre-program average of 27 per month to an average of 15 per month. (24) In 1992, violence prevention programs in 100 New York City schools are credited with having reduced classroom fights by 71 percent. (25)

A well-designed, implemented and operated peer mediation program offers a means through which schools and students can intervene to resolve conflict without leaving the disputants to resort to violence. This alternative approach to handling conflict provides a lasting resolution to disputes, while advancing the self-confidence, empowerment and personal responsibility levels held by those actively involved in the process. One such well-designed program is found in the Common Ground program. That particular model will be examined in the following section.

### **The Common Ground Program**

The Common Ground peer mediation program was developed at Urbana Middle School, located in Urbana, Illinois and serves as an example of how to establish and implement a student directed conflict resolution program. The school has operated its program for a number of years and has successfully helped other schools adopt similar peer mediation programs. The Common Ground manual and guide assist students and teachers from the beginning stages of finding sponsorship, leaders, and students through to promotion, implementation and follow-up.

The Common Ground program is based on the belief that conflict is a natural occurrence and in dealing with conflict, a peer mediator "facilitates a process of communication and problem solving that leads to resolution". (26) Student mediators are trained to redefine conflicts in such a way that there are two winners as opposed to a winner and a loser. Further, peer mediation teaches students how to handle conflict in more effective and positive ways, as well as promoting understanding among different groups and individuals.

The Common Ground program, developed at Urbana Middle School, has proven to be successful in reducing the number of conflicts and to improving the School's atmosphere. Conflicts such as name

calling, threats, insults and rumours can disrupt students and classes, and may lead to verbal attacks, fights and other discipline problems. The authors of the program observe that "...students need to become aware of the advantages of working together rather than against one another to resolve conflicts". (27) The goals of peer mediation are linked to this concept, and include:

Teaching students that conflicts are opportunities to grow and learn;

Reduce aggressive behaviours between students;

Reduce the number of students suspended; and

Improve the overall school climate through improved communication and mutual understanding between students. (28)

Thus, the overall aim of establishing a peer mediation program is "to help students learn to deal with their conflicts creatively and constructively". (29)

#### (A) Program Sponsorship and Promotion

Before introducing a peer mediation program to a school, it is essential that the program coordinators endeavour to create support and enthusiasm for the concept. An effective promotional campaign will increase the likelihood of success of the program, as well as informing students and staff. The Common Ground program sets out four goals of program promotion:

Increase awareness of the importance of peer mediation as a "peaceful alternative for resolving conflicts" and to encourage participation;

Promote the program philosophy through a name and logo;

Provide information on the program to the school and community; and

Communicate the types of conflicts, which can be mediated.

It is important that the coordinators be aware of the image they are presenting to the school, and the goals and expectations for the program. These must be identified and understood by the promoters so that a coherent representation is made to the school. The Common Ground program advises that the inclusion of students at the promotion stage is also important in encouraging program participation and recognition. Faculty assistance will also lend credence to the program and will increase teacher support and referral. The school community may be unfamiliar with the concept of peer mediation; it is thus imperative to present a positive and succinct image of the program and its purpose.

As part of the promotional campaign, program coordinators should distribute material on the program outlining its goals and objectives. The Common Ground program recommends posters, brochures, and advertising in the school newsletter as well as presentations at an assembly or individual classes. Appendices 1 and 2 are examples of a staff and student brochure. The intended audience is given background information on mediation including the process and advantages. When students and staff are informed of peer mediation's benefits and potential, it is more likely that the program will be utilized.

#### (B) Peer Mediator Recruitment, Selection and Training

The Common Ground guide recommends that, after a new peer mediation program is announced, student applications (see Appendix 3) for mediator positions should be reviewed. The number of students required will depend on the size of the school and the scope of the program. The program guide recommends approximately 25-30 peer mediators for a school population of 800-1000 students. (30)

Peer mediators should be selected based on the following qualities: maturity and ability to keep information confidential; assertiveness and ability to assert the ground rules; possession of good communication and problem solving skills; respected by peers; sensitivity and understanding. (31) The guide further notes that the program coordinators should attempt to select peer mediators who are representative of the school community, keeping in mind sex, age, ethnicity, and culture. The selection of peer mediators is a critical step in establishing a peer mediation program and it is imperative that responsible and reliable students are recruited who are able to commit to the program and its goals.

The training of the peer mediators will introduce them to the basic concept of mediation in general, and to the process of peer mediation in particular. The Common Ground program has developed a training module composed of 14 training activities that will give them the skills to conduct most peer mediation sessions. The training requires approximately two days, and is composed of a variety of exercises, including presentations on understanding conflict, effective listening, steps of the peer mediation process and role playing. These activities and mini-workshops will encourage teamwork, creativity and confidence. (32) The Common Ground program recommends that the presenters strive to create a positive training atmosphere, inviting participation and communication among the student trainees.

### (C) The Peer Mediation Process

In the Common Ground program, one's participation in peer mediation is voluntary; students request mediation or are referred by a teacher or administrator. Both parties must agree to participate in the mediation. While peer mediation is a formal method of handling disputes, it must remain flexible and responsive to each case. Mediators work towards five key goals which encourage cooperation among participants: the peer mediator is unbiased; the peer mediator is an empathetic listener; the peer mediator is respectful; the peer mediator helps people work together; and the peer mediator keeps information confidential. (33) Mediation promotes a balanced dialogue between the disputants, with the mediator monitoring the exchange, and using effective communication skills to enhance cooperation.

The program guide sets out the steps of the peer mediation process (see Appendix 4):

Open the session;

Gather the information;

Focus on common interests;

Create options;

Evaluate options and choose a solution; and

Write the agreement and close. (34)

#### Step One - Open the Session

The peer mediator will make introductions and set the ground rules. They will confirm that the mediator will remain neutral, interruption is not allowed, disputants will cooperate, and the mediation will remain

confidential. This step sets the tone for the mediation, introduces the parties to the concept of mediation and confirms that it will be up to them to work together to construct a resolution. The program notes that an effective opening is essential to achieving a positive outcome. [\(35\)](#)

#### Step Two - Gather Information

The mediator will identify each party's perspective on the dispute by asking each student to recount their position. The mediator then clarifies both sides. This ensures that the mediator understands each side accurately, and allows the participants to hear the other's version of events. The program guide notes that "while gathering information, the mediator must validate the concerns and feelings of each disputant as well as clarify the sequence of events...This builds trust and encourages a constructive dialogue about the problem". [\(36\)](#) Each party must believe that they have been heard and clearly understood.

#### Step 3 - Focus on Common Interests

The guide points out that the identification of similar interests is a crucial part of the mediation process. It may be difficult for each side to see beyond their own position, but the peer mediator can encourage this by asking questions such as: "If you were the other party how would you feel?" and "What will be the consequences if you do not reach an agreement?". [\(37\)](#) The mediation of a final agreement or resolution is dependent on finding common interests, and the program advises that the peer mediator not continue to the next step until this is accomplished.

#### Step 4 - Create Options

This step involves the brainstorming of ideas that are not to be evaluated or criticized. The peer mediator instructs the participants to say anything that comes to mind, not to judge or discuss the ideas, and to mention a variety of options. The possibilities are recorded by the mediator. The mediator must apply effective communication and problem solving skills during this stage.

#### Step 5 - Evaluate Options and Choose a Solution

Each participant is asked to choose the ideas with the most potential from the recorded list. The mediator helps the participants to evaluate and improve on those selected ideas by asking questions about the fairness and consequences of the choices. Once there is an agreement, the mediator helps the participants in assessing the agreement and ensuring that it is "effective, mutually satisfying, specific, realistic, and balanced." [\(38\)](#) The mediator will then summarize and reiterate the agreement.

#### Step 6 - Write the agreement and Close

This step involves the preparation of a written agreement on a standard form (see Appendix 5), which is subsequently read aloud to the parties and signed by both. It must be a short and concise statement of the conduct agreed to. The guide points out that the purpose of the agreement is to "influence future conduct in a way that decreases the need for further mediation." [\(39\)](#) A well-written agreement will clarify issues and support the parties' intentions should future problems arise. Finally, the mediator will shake hands with the participants, encourage each to do so and thank them for their participation.

A peer mediation program should include follow-up, record keeping, statistics on success rates, ongoing training and support for mediators. The program coordinator will be able to assess the benefits and contributions of the peer mediation program to the school environment through feedback from mediators, students who engaged mediation services and administrators.

#### (D) The Common Ground Program - Urbana Middle School

The Common Ground peer mediation program began in 1989 at Urbana Middle School. From September 1989 to May 1990, mediators helped resolve 245 student conflicts. The following chart identifies the percentage of each type of conflict reported and the resolution rate:

<i>Type of Conflict</i>	<i>Percentage of Total Conflicts Reported</i>	<i>Resolution Rate</i>
Name calling	26 percent	98% success rate
Rumours	23 percent	100% success rate
Hitting/Fighting	16 percent	100% success rate
Other (lost or damaged property, relationship	35 percent	93% success rate

problems, etc.)

Urbana Middle School also reports an increase in the number of requests and referrals for mediation, which they attribute to "increased support for and perception of the effectiveness of the program" (40)

Some of the benefits of a peer mediation program are that, "mediation empowers students to act responsibly and take control over their own lives. [In addition] it enhances self esteem." (41) It provides students with an appropriate means of resolving their disputes with the involvement of a neutral person, a peer, who can understand their experiences. The Common Ground program is based upon principles of general mediation, and has adopted these to the school setting. Students are trained how to listen, ask guiding questions, and use problem-solving skills to help disputants arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement. This process affords all involved parties a beneficial learning opportunity, while allowing for a possible reduction in the use of traditional discipline (such as suspension or detention). The school environment is improved as a result of this alternative approach to handling conflicts.

#### **The Conflict Mediation Program at Catholic Central High School**

Guidance Counselor Stephanie Houlahan is the Conflict Mediation Program coordinator for Catholic Central High School. The program has been in place for the past five years, having been instituted by a previous counselor. The "Peer Mediation - Conflict Resolution in Schools - Program Guide" (the Common Ground Program) was followed initially in the establishment of Catholic Central's program. Questions regarding the program's history and benefits, as well as the mediator's experiences, were presented during interviews with Mrs. Houlahan and a 12th grade peer mediator, Nicole, and their responses were recorded (see Appendix 6).

As Mrs. Houlahan was not at Catholic Central during the program's conception and implementation, very little information was available pertaining to the first stages of the Common Ground program. However, she was able to provide details concerning peer mediator recruitment and training, and the impact of the program on the school as a whole.

Catholic Central has a population of approximately 900 students, with 10 peer mediators currently in the Conflict Mediation program. The program coordinator plans to recruit 25-30 students to train as peer mediators for the upcoming school year. Mrs. Houlahan stated that, when recruiting students, she primarily seeks responsible, mature students who are well respected by their peers; they must be conscientious and diligent. Peer mediators must be good students who can miss class to mediate a dispute, and cannot be overly involved in school activities. However, while focusing on the previous criteria, Mrs. Houlahan will attempt to train a variety of students representative of age, sex, "clique" and ethnicity divisions within Catholic Central. As has been previously mentioned, this approach differs from

other perspectives that declare the overriding selection criteria should be diversity. Mrs. Houlahan finds diversity of the mediation pool to be of little value to the process where peer mediators are not, first and foremost, respected by their fellow students.

Mrs. Houlahan will approach teachers and ask for recommendations of reliable students who may be interested in the program. She will then approach the students individually and explain the program, its benefits and the time commitment involved. All students interested in joining the program as peer mediators must submit an application with references from four teachers and four students. Once the completed applications are received, interviews are conducted and a final selection of peer mediators is made based on the above criteria. The program seeks peer mediators from various grades, ages, and groups so that the program coordinator has a selection of mediators from which to construct an appropriate mediation pair; that is, two mediators who are available, impartial and able to handle a particular dispute.

The training of peer mediators at Catholic Central follows the Common Ground program guide workshops, activities and role play exercises. Mrs. Houlahan finds it helpful to have the training at a site off school grounds, giving trainees the time and a fresh context upon which to become acquainted and to build teamwork skills. Nicole, the student mediator, also finds retreat training to be beneficial. However, this can be an expensive option, especially where a large group of mediators is being trained.

The transcript of the interview (see Appendix 6) includes the program coordinator's description of how a dispute is mediated. Their program's approach is based on the material provided in the Common Ground guide. The co-mediators are briefed on the dispute, introduced to the students, and ground rules of mediation are explained. The students must agree to keep the session confidential and abide by whatever resolution is reached. The students share their version of events, and the mediators initiate the brainstorming session and the evaluation of options.

The final agreement, based on the evaluated options, must be supported by both parties. It must be a realistic and precise statement of what was agreed to, how the terms will be implemented and when. For example, if there is a dispute between two students in a classroom, one solution might be to sit in different seats. The agreement must set out who will be responsible for telling the teacher, and when the change needs to take place. Mrs. Houlahan explains that if the conditions of the agreement are not clearly written, the negotiated settlement will likely break down and students will be forced to return to mediation again to sort out the continuing problems. It is best for all involved that the particulars of an agreement be clearly defined at the mediation to the effectiveness of the process.

The Conflict Mediation Program at Catholic Central uses a co-mediator approach, where two peer mediators work together to mediate a dispute. Although this may be common to some programs, it is not explicitly mentioned in the Common Ground guide from which the Catholic Central program was fashioned. In co-mediation, one mediator focuses on one party, while the other focuses on the other party and responds to them. This helps to balance the attention paid to each disputant and ensures that no important comments are left unacknowledged or ignored. Authors Leviton and Greenstone note that: "having an effective co-mediator can reduce the pressure on the lead mediator and allow him or her to serve the process and the parties." (42) The co-mediator helps by supporting and validating the lead mediator and by providing feedback on the progress of the mediation.

The program accepts many different types of conflicts, most being the typical teenage disputes such as name-calling, rumours, friendship and boyfriend/girlfriend problems. Mrs. Houlahan noted that not all disputes are appropriate for peer mediation; such disputes may be handled by the program coordinator personally or referred to the vice-principal. Catholic Central's peer mediation program has had relatively few cases involving extreme violence (i.e. weapons, gangs) though some cases have been diffused

through mediation that would otherwise have reached that stage. Mediation helps to work out disputes before students resort to serious fights or injury. The majority of cases handled involve two student disputants. While peer mediators handle teacher-student disputes, these occasions are quite rare and often difficult to mediate given the obvious power imbalance.

With regard to the impact of the peer mediation program, Mrs. Houlahan observed that it has been beneficial for the mediators, students and staff of Catholic Central. Peer mediators receive valuable training that improves their communication, problem solving and analytical skills. Mediating disputes empowers students and allows them to resolve their conflicts without involving teachers or principals. Students learn that there are alternatives to fighting and disrupting classes. Teachers know they can refer problems to the program for resolution instead of getting involved themselves. The administration may use mediation as an incentive for students to resolve a conflict in exchange for a reduced suspension.

Mrs. Houlahan observes that peer mediation is effective in responding to student conflict as students may feel more comfortable sharing information with their peers than with a teacher or guidance counselor. Students can better understand what their peers are going through and are more aware of the context in which the disputes are taking place. She commented that "students work well with students" and adds this program supports the school's mission of training and educating students. The school's conflict resolution program enables students to face their disputes in a controlled and responsible fashion. Mrs. Houlahan notes that, "Kids often prefer not to deal with their disputes; it is harder for them to sit down and talk the problem out than it is to avoid the problem or fight about it." Many students would be unwilling to address their differences on their own without a peer mediation program supporting the dialogue.

The interview with the peer mediator, Nicole, was particularly helpful in providing insight regarding the experiences of the participants in the program. Students at the school know that they can come to the program for help with sorting out their differences, a less stressful alternative to fighting. She described how the program has helped her personally as well: "for myself, I have learned speaking skills. It gives me the ability to deal...with my own everyday problems. I know how to approach them..." Nicole observed that these skills are useful at school, work and home. Mrs. Houlahan added that improved interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving skills are increasingly valued by universities and employers.

As previously noted, a significant weakness often observed with peer mediation programs is found in the evaluation stage. Unfortunately, the program coordinator at Catholic Central was unable to provide any substantive numbers or statistics regarding the number of disputes mediated or the success rate. Mrs. Houlahan believes that in the previous year, the number of mediated disputes was reduced to approximately 30 per year. This may be attributed to the fact that the program has been in place for five years, and students are avoiding being drawn into conflict, or are learning to handle problems in more effective ways. Though it is important for coordinators to assess progress success rates through the use of recorded empirical data, Mrs. Houlahan has neglected to do so.

In summary, Mrs. Houlahan believes that the program works well and is worth the time and investment. It has improved the school environment and provides a valuable place where students can go to resolve their conflicts instead of avoiding them or fighting them out. Peer mediation allows students to respond to student problems in a responsible, mature and constructive process. While it may not be appropriate for all disputes, she believes peer mediation programs are able to respond to the majority of conflicts that are distracting and upsetting to students. Peer mediation helps students find a fair and lasting resolution to the dispute, and this can reduce future disruptions. Mrs. Houlahan believes Catholic Central High School has achieved a more positive atmosphere for students, teachers and administrators through its program.

## **Analysis**

Speaking from a public policy standpoint, it is anything but politically correct to criticize the student mediation approach to conflict resolution. Those who support the introduction and use of peer mediation in school tend to be particularly enthusiastic and vocal regarding their support. Parents and school staff, most of whom are alarmed by the increased level of violence in North American schools, are inclined to support any program that promises a safer school environment for their children. It is difficult to challenge those who promise reductions in the incidents of school violence, the improvement of student communication skills, increases in levels of self-esteem, and the development of student dependability with the introduction of school-based peer mediation programs.

In theory, peer mediation offers many potential benefits to schools and students, and, in practice, it does appear that many of these benefits are realized with the commencement of such programs. Unfortunately, those benefits are often assumed to exist despite the general absence of supporting empirical evidence. In most cases, proponents of student mediation rely on anecdotal evidence to support the continuation of these programs. (43)

While anecdotal evidence is of some value in the assessment of a program's success, the conclusions drawn from that evidence speak in little more than general terms. In order to make an effective determination of a program's status, it is necessary for the program coordinator to reserve a portion of their time for the collection and analysis of empirical evidence. This evidence can be obtained through a process of reviewing mediation contracts, interviewing or forwarding questionnaires to students, teachers, administrators and parents, tracking the level of conflict reoccurrence, or through other approaches. Unfortunately, despite the fact that empirical evidence is within their grasp and thus easily accumulated, few program coordinators invest the time necessary to complete proper status evaluations. Though it may be true that peer mediation programs are generally successful when implemented, it is to the potential long-term detriment of a particular program that its coordinator would rely upon such an assumption without the support of empirical evidence. By relying on such an assumption, operational problem may be left unattended, funding is advanced without any tangible proof of return on investment, and drops in program effectiveness may continue without intervention. This failure to evaluate represents a significant weakness in the coordination of most peer mediation programs, including that observed at Catholic Central High School.

During her 20 March 2000 interview, Mrs. Houlahan was specifically questioned regarding the success of the peer mediation program at Catholic Central High School. In response, the interviewers were provided a few anecdotal accounts of student conflicts that had been resolved. But when pressed regarding the level of her program's success, Mrs. Houlahan disclosed that available empirical evidence was limited to the completed student contracts in her possession. She was not able to offer the results of any empirical analysis of the student contracts as no such analysis had ever been completed by her. Even where empirical evidence is accumulated, as was done by the program coordinator at Walt Whitman Intermediate School in Brooklyn, New York, that evidence can be potentially misleading due to the inclusion of complicating variables. For example, in the case of Walt Whitman, program success was measured by the reduction of suspensions. However, in the empirical evidence, the program coordinator failed to separate the percentage reduction of suspensions resulting from the peer mediation program from the percentage reduction of suspensions resulting from the newly introduced alternate forms of punishment. Thus, the empirical evidence provided by Walt Whitman may simply be showing the results of a broadening of the discipline options at the school rather than the success of their peer mediation program. (44)

In accordance with the above, it is advisable that peer mediation program coordinators institute a detailed evaluation procedure at the time of program development. Once the program is under operation, investigation days should be scheduled to occur at specific intervals. These investigations should include the canvassing of students, teachers, administration, and parents. A permanent framework for the

evaluation of investigation results should be established; this, to ensure that the required information is obtained and to allow for the accurate comparison of evidence across several evaluation intervals. Through the introduction of this evaluation process, school program coordinators would gain specific, accurate evidence with which to assess the success of peer mediation at their schools. Without such evidence, coordinators are left only to suppose the success of, or potential problems with, their mediation programs.

A further concern regarding the operation of peer mediation programs arises from the use of suspensions as a means to promote student use of such programs. In many cases, when serious conflicts are brought to the attention of the administration at Walt Whitman, Catholic Central and other schools, students are first suspended but then offered a reduction in the length or elimination of that suspension in exchange for their involvement in the school's peer mediation program. (45) Though the motivation behind this promotional technique is sincere, it is feared that students introduced to peer mediation in this manner will immediately and forever equate mediation with punishment. As previously discussed, there are many ways to promote student mediation programs in schools, ways that do not create the risk of students viewing the process as demeaning or a form of chastisement. Program promotion should therefore be limited to these risk-free methods.

Another important consideration of peer mediation programs is that of mediator selection. While most programs advise choosing students who are well respected, there are proponents who support mediators who may be unconventional. One program counselor observes that, "...the goal is to achieve a combination of at-risk students (1/3 of the total) and role models. The mediation program should involve all students. The brightest and most popular students are not always able to relate to the students who are on the edge of trouble and vice versa." (46) This approach differs from the Common Ground program, which recommends recruiting only responsible, reliable student mediators.

Students who may have a "tarnished" reputation among teachers should not be discounted at the outset, as there may be other reasons to carefully consider involving a variety of students in a peer mediation program. The students who have had trouble in the past would gain valuable experience and skills through participating in mediation training. One critic argues that "students who are not considered positive role models by faculty may, in fact, have strong leadership skills and may benefit from the experience of peer mediation." (47)

The Conflict Mediation program at Catholic Central should review its peer mediator recruitment procedure. Their current selection process is based on teacher and student references (peer mediator applications must have four of each) and an assessment of the respect each student is given by their peers. This approach effectively eliminates students who may not have less outstanding grades or reputations, but who may nonetheless benefit from participating as a peer mediator. Instead, program coordinators should make a detailed evaluation of the school's population and "cliques", and attempt to include a cross-section of students as peer mediators. With the proper training and support, all peer mediators can make positive contributions to the program.

## **Conclusion**

Peer mediation programs cannot be expected to solve all student conflicts. Such programs should be treated as an alternative to or in conjunction with traditional discipline. Peer mediation provides an option that allows for the development of listening skills and the opportunity for students to resolve their own problems. Further, it imports a sense of responsibility and maturity to the students who participate in the mediation process. The skills gained by students during their participation in peer mediation sessions allow them to better manage their personal lives. Peer mediation helps students respond to problems in a positive way. Thus, there are both short and long term benefits associated with peer mediation. The

approach attempts to improve the school environment and the interpersonal relationships among students; it enhances students' ability to effectively resolve future conflicts at work, home and university.

Peer mediation must be carefully considered and reviewed before a school decides to implement their own program. The program, if introduced, will require commitment and funding on the part of the school administration and faculty, as well as the dedication of a capable coordinator. A full-time coordinator with mediation experience will increase the chances of program success. Issues surrounding the training, selection and supervision of peer mediators must be addressed and contemplated in light of the individual school's circumstances. Ultimately, with the necessary preparation, attention and support, a peer mediation program can be successful in improving student self-esteem and confidence, and the school's atmosphere. It is essential that schools today respond to student conflict and one solution may be a peer mediation program, which can provide students, teachers and administrators with many benefits and positive results.

### **Authors' notes**

One might imagine that the account provided in this section could be taken out of the mundane and made a truly enjoyable read by including tales of hard line positions, battles waged at every page and prolonged negotiations in order to reach an agreed paper draft. Fortunately, none of the above describe the experiences of Karin Vermander and Jeff Silver in the writing of this paper. As is revealed in the following paragraphs, issues did arise between the two writers, issues that could have led to the breakdown of an otherwise cordial working relationship. However, the writers chose to ensure the effectiveness of their combined effort by using techniques learned in their Alternative Dispute Resolution class both to direct their efforts from the onset and to resolve all subsequent disagreements. The result was an enjoyable shared writing experience.

The first issue addressed in the writing of this paper was that of topic choice. Initially, Karin and Jeff held differing opinions as to what would constitute an appropriate paper topic, though neither writer was to the point of belligerence. As the foundational theme of both the paper and the course is that of "alternate dispute settlement", Karin and Jeff felt it wise to negotiate this initial issue. The writers listed, on a separate piece of paper, the underlying interests that had attracted them to their particular topic choice. Karin had suggested a topic related to the different negotiation, mediation and arbitration approaches used in the formulation of professional sports contracts. Her list of underlying interests included "sports", "an action/excitement topic", and "a topic that we can do field research on". Jeff is not a sports fan and therefore was not particularly interested in that topic. He proposed a topic related to the use of mediation in private sector human resource departments. Jeff's list of underlying interests included "human resources - training and development", "the opportunity to perform some of the research", "a topic with ample research materials", and "a controversial issue that is being talked about lately". Once these interests were recorded, Karin and Jeff discussed the same in an attempt to find a topic that encompassed as many of their interests as possible.

The idea of peer mediation came to Jeff's mind; he presented this idea to Karin. During their discussion regarding peer mediation as a topic, Karin noted her interest in children, which developed through her past involvement with gymnastic and sport camps and through the fact that her husband has an education degree. She further noted that the choice of peer mediation as a topic would allow the writers to perform some of their own investigative activities. Jeff was very interested in this hands-on research possibility. He also noted the recent media attention given to youth violence at schools and his interest in student training; the latter having previously led him to obtain an education degree. As a result of his Bachelor of Education training, Jeff was aware that many articles have been written on the topic of peer mediation. After further discussion, the two writers agreed to pursue that topic.

With willingness to compromise expressed by both parties from the onset, and through the continuation of the above-noted casual negotiating process, few subsequent issues arose between the writers. As Jeff had completed a significant amount of past research on various education topics, he led the research portion of this paper. After locating several relevant articles, books and videos at Leddy Library, University of Windsor, Jeff reviewed those materials, made cursory notes of the important research findings, then arranged a meeting with Karin for a review his finds. In advance of that meeting, Jeff advised Karin of the remaining information gaps in their research. The writers agreed that they would meet to discuss Jeff's research findings the following weekend. During the intervening weekend, Karin returned to her home in Lansing and, while there, visited Michigan State University's library where materials were found to fill the existing research gaps. Karin read this additional research and made cursory notes in preparation for our meeting. The day prior to their first official essay strategy meeting, Jeff contacted an education program colleague, who is teaching in Windsor and, through that person, was able to meet with Mrs. Stephanie Houlahan, guidance counselor at Catholic Central High School. During that meeting, Mrs. Houlahan provided Jeff with additional materials and agreed to be interviewed for the purposes of this term paper. She also agreed to make one of her peer mediators available for a brief interview.

During their first essay strategy meeting, Karin and Jeff discussed the content of the research materials they had collected, exchanged these materials and related cursory notes, and worked together to develop a general outline for their paper. This outline was made without any disagreement with regard to the sections each writer proposed; there was complete unanimity with regard to both the initial outline draft and the subsequent adjustments made thereto. Their meeting concluded with the drafting of questions to be posed during the upcoming interviews of Mrs. Houlahan and her choice of student mediator. Karin, the typist of this writing duo, typed the draft questions out on Jeff's computer as both she and Jeff presented questions; again, there was total unanimity between the writers during this process. By this point, it was clear to Karin and Jeff that they shared both a similar writing style and, at least to the extent of this topic, a similar thought process.

As Karin is a very fast typist and the owner of a laptop, it was agreed without debate that Jeff would conduct the interviews with Mrs. Houlahan and her peer mediator and Karin would type their responses, raising additional questions when she felt it appropriate to do so. The interview process established by Karin and Jeff proved to be very effective. Immediately following these interviews, the two writers met to compare Karin's typed transcripts with Jeff's rough response notes (Karin later finalized the transcripts as attached). The two writers then analyzed the interviews. For the purpose of focusing that analysis, Karin and Jeff agreed that their discussion would be limited to the answering of three crucial questions: (1) In which aspects of the topic did the interviewee's comments reflect the findings of existing case study research, (2) In which aspects of the topic did the interviewee's comments not reflect the findings of existing case study research, and (3) How closely does the Catholic Central peer mediation program reflect the Common Ground Program? Both writers contributed their comments to the building of this list without any concerns being raised regarding the other's observations.

Karin and Jeff initially believed that they could sit together in front of a single computer and write their paper together one word at a time. After three hours of effort and little more than one-half page of completed essay, both writers acknowledged the futility of this method. Though the two could likely have persisted in their original approach, which would ultimately have produced a similar result to that achieved, the extreme time inefficiencies were unacceptable. These inefficiencies, so obvious to both Karin and Jeff, were quickly leading to the frustrations that were being directed one writer to the other. This time pressure was heightened by the arrival of midterms, a Nova Scotian in-law's visit, previous commitments to spouses, and necessary out-of-country travel. The fact that Karin lives her weekends in Lansing, Michigan presented a further time-related obstacle to the writing of this term paper.

In order to maintain what had been to that point a highly effective working relationship, the two writers needed to formulate an alternate writing approach. They again turned to the informal application of the mediation process they had learned in their Alternative Dispute Resolution class. Karin and Jeff first identified their individual time interests then considered the possible writing options available to them that would allow for the effective writing of their paper while accommodating the requirements of time efficiency. It was ultimately agreed that Jeff would write first drafts for the introduction and the first two essay sections of the paper while Karin would write first drafts for the subsequent sections (with the exception of the analysis and authors' notes sections, which would be written together). It was also agreed that each writer would complete a detailed point form commentary for the sections that were assigned to the other writer; these to be later used in the joint analysis of the first drafts.

Once the first draft of the paper was completed, Karin and Jeff met to review all first drafts and to use their point form commentaries as the basis for raising concerns or suggesting add-ons to each other's sections. All concerns and add-ons were valid and thus accommodated without hesitation. Once this step was completed, the writers each received a hard copy of the essay and agreed that they would meet over the following weekend to complete the analysis and authors' notes sections and to edit the final draft together. Before leaving this meeting, Karin and Jeff agreed to both draft point form versions of the remaining sections in anticipation of their weekend meeting.

The weekend meeting was very productive. Karin arrived at Jeff's home on Saturday morning with her laptop in hand. The two writers reviewed their point form notes for the analysis and authors' notes sections, confirming that no areas of contention existed, then amalgamated their notes. It was then agreed that Karin would construct a draft analysis section on her laptop while Jeff typed an authors' notes section on his computer. At this point a potential dispute arose.

In the writing his authors' notes draft, Jeff thought he would attempt to create a witty, entertaining introductory paragraph and continue through the entire section in that vein. However, when he read his first paragraph to Karin she quickly and forcefully rejected Jeff's approach. In response, Jeff more aggressively insisted on the witty approach. Karin, having realized that this situation was quickly deteriorating into a battle of positions, thought it best to disclose that she enjoyed reading Jeff's opening paragraph but was simply scared that the witty approach would "backfire" on them. After Karin explained that she was simply a conservative person who does not like taking chances in her writing, Jeff re-read his opening paragraph and, in so doing, came to the conclusion that his approach was indeed inappropriate for the style of paper they had written together. Once Karin's dismissive stance was set aside, so was Jeff's defensive response; it was only then that he could see the many weaknesses of his approach.

Once the two drafts were completed, the writers edited both sections together. As was the case with the balance of this essay, any issues raised during the editing of these concluding sections were limited to spelling and grammatical corrections, format concern, and the occasional suggestion of a better way to express an idea. Spelling and grammatical corrections were made without the need for discussion, while alternatives to format and expression of ideas were suggested until an approach was found that both writers agreed to. To complete this term paper, it was agreed that Jeff would complete the endnotes and bibliography and Karin would develop a cover page, appendix pages and a table of contents. After the endnotes and bibliography were completed, Karin reviewed them to ensure their accuracy. The final version of this paper was subsequently printed and bound during Karin and Jeff's last meeting.

The writers of this term paper have indeed discovered that they work well together. Karin and Jeff brought an atmosphere of compromise, flexibility, patience, commitment and good humor with them to this group assignment and were able to maintain that atmosphere throughout their combined effort by applying the mediation skills and processes that were taught to them in their Alternative Dispute

Resolution course. Instead of taking positions and fighting against each other with every concern raised and every decision pending, Karin and Jeff chose to emphasize their shared interests and combined efforts from the onset. In doing so, they built a lasting consensus with regard to the general direction of their term paper and every element thereof. They also made certain that they allowed themselves ample time to complete their paper; this, to avoid the pressures associated with last minute paper-writing, pressures that can destroy even the most effective writing team.

As can be concluded from the above, there is little that Karin and Jeff would have changed about the process used to co-write this term paper. The only fault in the process that they could detect was the failure on their part to pre-schedule meeting dates and times for their joint writing efforts upon the occurrence of their first meeting. Because they selected meeting dates and times from week to week, it was on numerous occasions that one writer was available to work only during times when the other had previously booked engagements. The time to complete this assignment was ultimately arranged between Karin and Jeff, but would have been more easily found had joint scheduling been performed well in advance of their assignment start date.

In conclusion, Karin and Jeff wish to convey their sincere gratitude for making possible this opportunity for them to work together. They have developed a lasting friendship as a result of their work on this term paper and look forward to the possibility of working together again before the conclusion of their final year of law school.

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### Questionnaire for Peer Mediator

What kind of training did you go through to become a peer mediator?

What kind of skills have you developed from the training and the program?

Can you identify some benefits from participating in the peer mediation program for yourself, your school and fellow students?

Have you received (positive or negative) feedback from the students who participated in the mediation process?

How has your school environment changed after having a peer mediation program put in place?

Can you give examples of the kinds of conflict you have mediated?

Do you think that the peer mediation program has helped students respond to conflict in a more positive way i.e. resolve on their own through discussion, negotiation, etc.

How do the students react to other students mediating their problems?

Does the program allow the peer mediators to follow-up with students after mediation to confirm if the mediated solution is working?

### Questionnaire for Program Coordinator

What kind of training did you go through to become the director of the peer mediation program?

What kind of training do you offer to the peer mediators?

Can you describe the program implementation process?

What kind of skills do your peer mediators develop as a result of the training and their participation in the program?

Can you identify some benefits from participating in the peer mediation program for the school and students?

Have you received (positive or negative) feedback from the students who participated in the mediation process?

How has your school environment changed after having a peer mediation program put in place?

Can you give examples of the kinds of conflict the peer mediators have mediated?

Do you think that the peer mediation program has helped students respond to conflict in a more positive way i.e. resolve on their own through discussion, negotiation, etc.

How do the students react to other students mediating their problems?

Does the program allow the peer mediators to follow-up with students after mediation to confirm if the mediated solution is working?

**Interview with Nicole (20 March 2000)**

*17 years old peer mediator in the Conflict Mediation Program at Catholic Central*

*High School, Windsor, Ontario.*

*- A peer mediator at the School since Grade 9; now in Grade 12.*

**What kind of training did you go through to become a peer mediator?**

We went to a weekend retreat with specialists, and had different topics such as dealing with angry people; being aware of body language; how to accurately repeat or rephrase (active listening); how to stay neutral and non-partial. We got to know each other well, and how to work as a team.

**What kind of skills have you developed from the training and the program?**

Communication, people and listening skills. Problem solving and interpretation.

**Can you identify some benefits from participating in the peer mediation program for yourself, your school and fellow students?**

It has helped other students by them learning of an orderly fashion for dealing with problems. They learn to take a calm approach.

For myself, I have learned speaking skills. It gives me the ability to deal with other problems, and it helps with my own everyday problems. I know how to approach them.

The students know they can come to us for mediation and that it is a better way to solve problems. It avoids fights and confrontations, and is less stressful.

Those students who have used the program can say whether it is successful or not - but no one can discuss issues with anyone outside of the mediation.

**How has your school environment changed after having a peer mediation program put in place?**

I hope they [students] try to mediate on their own after going through the process.

**Can you give examples of the kinds of conflict you have mediated?**

The grade 9's often have friendship disagreements; the grade 10-11's are more boyfriend problems, clique disagreements

**Interview with Mrs. Houlahan (20 March 2000)**

*the Conflict Mediation Program coordinator at Catholic Central High School,*

*Windsor, Ontario.*

**What kind of training did you go through to become the director of the peer mediation program?**

I had training from the other teacher (who started the program at Catholic Central). I have taken counseling, psychology and sociology classes, and participated in mediation workshops.

**What kind of training do you offer to the peer mediators?**

We teach the students about anger management, and they learn different styles such as passive aggressive, assertive, etc. Students will play different roles (in role-play exercises). They also learn about body language and the rules of mediation.

Anger management - kids need to know how people may react; know others reactions and your own. To be an effective mediator, we need to educate mediators on how they react to anger, to different types of people and to conflict.

We have held the training session at a retreat called Chelsea Woods, which is a remote location. However it is expensive, so we may have training on site at the school but the kids don't get away. We will be training 30-40 students, over a weekend: Friday to Sunday afternoon.

We will bring older students (peer mediators who have gone through the training) to mediation training to share experiences and how to conduct sessions.

The leaders of the training will critique the students and give feedback.

They will learn about conflict and mediation through role playing

Brainstorming sessions - the students write down suggestions, and then go through them. They learn to assess different options and how to evaluate.

Contract agreements need to be specific, so we will teach peer mediators how to write a contract.

**What kind of skills do your peer mediators develop as a result of the training and their participation in the program?**

Students learn to be organized and good listeners. They learn interpersonal skills, questioning skills (for example, how to avoid "yes" and "no" answers), and they learn about body language and eye contact. They learn how to brainstorm, how to write a contract, and how to assess options.

**Can you identify some benefits from participating in the peer mediation program for the school and students?**

The peer mediation program empowers and educates students.

We are here to train and support students. Peer mediation tells students that they can work together to fix their problems. They can use mediation skills in everyday life, and use them in the future. It is an investment to help other kids.

Often, students know of conflicts or problems before the teachers, and the peer mediators can suggest mediation and sell it to the other students.

**Have you received (positive or negative) feedback from the students who participated in the mediation process?**

We have had positive feedback from the administration and teachers. A positive sign is repeated referrals. However, sometimes we must draw line - mediation is not punishment or not discipline, it's an option.

I have not completed any type of empirical assessment regarding the success of the program. I do hold onto the student contracts but I would have to look at them before I could say how many successful negotiations we have had in the program or provide any other information like that; I don't keep records.

**How has your school environment changed after having a peer mediation program put in place?**

I think that the program has helped the school environment by making a positive contribution. Students learn to work things out so the next time the kids say or hear something they don't like, they can avoid reacting to rumours. They will think before they react. Once they go through problem, they become aware that it is not always the truth being said, and they learn to ask, "Who is starting the gossip?"

Mediation may not prevent initial disputes but it lowers repeating problems. It assists in dealing with future conflict.

**Do you think that the peer mediation program has helped students respond to conflict in a more positive way i.e. resolve on their own through discussion, negotiation, etc.**

It can educate kids on what goes on in the school environment and know what to do when they are faced with it.

Kids learn to try to talk about it on their own. They can find out what happened and work it out in a quiet space.

### **Can you give examples of the kinds of conflict the peer mediators have mediated?**

We have had harassment cases but you must make sure that the victims are not further victimized.

Also, personal disagreements and friend problems. Sometimes there are problems between strangers, such as bad looks or violence. A few cases of fights, with gangs.

With verbal yelling and name-calling, we try to find root of the problem and ask what are the underlying issues.

### **How do the students react to other students mediating their problems?**

Students work well with students. Kids will tell peers some things but may not feel comfortable telling a teacher.

Students may be more willing to disclose to other students but it depends on the problem. Kids are fairly honest. However, it also depends on the selection of kids (as peer mediators) and how their peers see them; they must be seen to be credible and respected.

*(Our discussion with Mrs. Houlahan included a detailed explanation of their recruitment process, the impact of the program on the school and how a session is mediated. These are her comments in point form.)*

### **Recruitment of Peer Mediators**

a letter is sent to staff for referrals and announcements are made.

Students need reference letters from 4 teachers and 4 students.

they must agree to come to the training weekend.

We look for students who are not over committed (must be able to participate in peer mediation when required).

Looking for male and female, and ethnic mix when appropriate.

Looking for students who are responsible and conscientious (must be able to keep up with their schoolwork).

recruit from different cliques (helps her pull mediators to help with different student problems - have a cross-section of the school as peer mediators)

Grade 9 and 10 's- less training involved and they can spend more time in the program

Must understand confidentiality

Students must not have been involved in intense verbal conflict. (one year with no problems) Must be

able to work out their own problems otherwise it is not effective to have them in the program.

Must be respected by peers; this is the most critical requirement.

Once we get referrals from teachers, I follow-up with students and explain the commitment and training. I explain opportunities and benefits and that it will help with their future career and resume.

Don't want students who are over-involved - school play, committees, and sports - then they can't afford to miss class. Mediation takes place during class time so they need to be able to miss and make up the occasional class.

We will set a deadline for applications and then have interviews.

Need reliable kids - it is up to them to get references in - they need to be responsible and respected.

Currently we have ten peer mediators and all are seniors.

Must be conscious of ages - putting younger students together for issues.

### **Referrals to Mediation**

If referral is by the Vice Principal - follow up (resolved to satisfaction - or not) Mediator must feel it is resolved before contract is written - may come back to go through it again.

Depends on administration - some mediations come from them - affects how many mediations are referred to the program. If the administration see themselves as counselors then they may prefer to deal with students on their own. But disciplinarians tend to refer more (they feel it is not their job to work out problems between students)

Mediation may refer students to anger management or counseling.

If kids have recurring problems, we will educate kids on how to handle their problems.

Teachers see initial stages of a dispute. But, some are not always referring to program.

### **The Peer Mediation Program and the School**

We will hold a Mediation Week - with role playing in classrooms and explaining why it is effective and why it is a good option.

Student body - 900. Last year not as many conflicts mediated. (maybe about 30 last year).

the Conflict Mediation Program has been in place for five years.

Previous teacher started it at Assumption; pioneered program and brought it with her to Catholic Central.

Teacher/student dispute mediations - rare but has happened. (three in program history). Power struggle; difficult to level playing field - obvious power imbalance.

Kids often prefer not to deal with their disputes; it is harder for them to sit down and talk the problem out

than it is to avoid the problem or fight about it.

Mediation lowers temper levels. Vice Principal sometimes will make deals - if mediation can be arranged and the students are willing to participate, they may get a two-day suspension instead of three days - students do take options.

Not all problems can be mediated.

Teacher cooperation with mediated resolution - it is to the teacher's benefit to do everything to avoid conflict between students and to support mediated agreements.

"The investment (of time, money) is worth it - and the program works"

We often find someone is in the middle who is playing both sides. Once kids are in the mediation session they can discover who said what and find differences/ contradictions in the rumors. Once kids sit down and go through problem, they find some other kids are saying different things and creating problems.

### **The Peer Mediation Process**

Sessions are held with two peer mediators.

The program coordinator, me [Mrs. Houlahan], screens the problems - some problems may not get referred to peer mediators depending on the subject, nature of the conflict, age and availability of peer mediators. Emergency situation - sometimes occurs where a dispute needs to be resolved right away.

Coordinator will give peer mediators as much information as possible, such as the source of referral and nature of problem - and if they are coming off suspensions (may be able to use as leverage to encourage a settlement).

Mediate in guidance counselor office, with Mrs. Houlahan in next room available to help with any stalemates or problems.

Neutral peer mediator - cannot have bias - bias puts mediators in difficult positions.

Must be aware of gender and age dynamics that affect mediations. Experience to tell you how to match peer mediators with students.

Any difficult/rough sessions teacher will take; caucus with individuals if there is a problem.

### ***The Peer Mediation Process - continued***

"Do not disturb" sign on office door while mediation is in session.

Sit at opposite end - mediator close to door. Give every chance to stay to work it out.

Co-mediators introduce themselves - set out ground rules of mediation and parties must agree to follow rules. Students must respond to request to follow rules before mediation proceeds.

Statements - tell what you saw - tell your side before someone else brings it up - be honest.

"Who would like to go first?" - if no one volunteers, flip a coin - mediators do not choose; avoid any hint of bias.

Tell story - mediators effective listening - repeat story and feedback - everyone hears it again.

One Mediator focuses on one party while the other peer mediator focuses on other party and responds to them so they do not feel ignored; evens playing field. Go back and forth as long as you need to (need to add anything to other side's story). At some point the disputing students may start to talk to each other or only through mediators.

Mediators - what steps can we take to fix this - brainstorm - write down all suggestions and then evaluate (i.e. Don't want to sit next to her in class - who will tell teacher). Try to be very specific - what will happen with suggestions. If it is not worked out then they will just come back.

Mediators can make suggestions - ask questions. Generate ideas - "not getting along in school but do you see them outside of school and are there problems - what can you do about that"

Fill out contract from suggestions and details

Read aloud

Signature of both parties and mediator; one contract which stays in the office. (Coordinator of program keeps referral and contract on file).

Disputing students go back to class.

Coordinator follows up with peer mediators - goes through sessions, problems and how mediator handled them. Do they feel that there may be any future problems?

Coordinator reviews contract and gives feedback to the peer mediator.

Coordinator follows-up with students 3-4 weeks after mediation, but follow-up is sooner if there is an ongoing problem. Depends on type of mediation and the students involved; may sometimes have to follow-up with them a week after mediation.

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4. 4 W.L. Carruthers et al., "Conflict Resolution as Peer Mediation: Programs for Elementary, Middle, and High School Students" (1996) 43 *The School Counselor* 374 at 374-375.

5. 5 *Ibid.* at 375.

6. 6 K. Bickmore, "Preparation for Pluralism: Curricular and Extracurricular Practice With Conflict Resolution" (1997) 36 *Theory Into Practice* 3 at 5.

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8. 8 K. Vail, "Give Peace A Chance: Peer mediators in Cleveland choose nonviolence" (1998) 185:8 The American School Board J. 22 at 24 [hereinafter "Give Peace"].
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16. 16 Give Peace, *supra* note 8 at 23.
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21. 21 E. Johnson, D. Krochak & D. Thomas, "Effects of Peer Mediation Training in Junior High School on Mediators' Conflict Resolution Attitudes and Abilities in High School" (1998) 64 Alberta J. of Education Research 339 at 339-340.
22. 22 Give Peace, *supra* note 8 at 24.
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24. 24 *Ibid.* at 15-17.
25. 25 Peace Education, *supra* note 7 at 65.
26. 26 D. Crawford, F. Schrupf & H.C. Usadel, *Peer Mediation: Conflict Resolution in Schools Program Guide* (Illinois: Research Publishing Co., 1991) at 1 [hereinafter "Program Guide"].

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28. 28 Program Guide, *supra* note 26 at 95.
29. 29 Program Guide, *supra* note 26 at 95.
30. 30 Program Guide, *supra* note 26 at 23.
31. 31 Program Guide, *supra* note 26 at 24.
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34. 34 Program Guide, *supra* note 26 at 13.
35. 35 Program Guide, *supra* note 26 at 13.
36. 36 Program Guide, *supra* note 26 at 13-14.
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39. 39 Program Guide, *supra* note 26 at 15.
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44. 44 Taking a Stand, *supra* note 23 at 15-16.
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