

# Peer Mediation in a Context of Systemic Change

by John Conbere

I work in more than 150 schools, training staff and students about conflict resolution, starting peer mediation programs, resolving conflicts among staff, and helping schools implement shared decision making. My goals are two-fold: to have less violent and more joyous schools, and to teach conflict skills important for maintaining healthy relationships.

Teaching students to resolve conflict peacefully can bring about major behavioral change. Starting with this premise is essential because until people see the task as a major change effort, they cannot understand the systemic changes required if conflict resolution skills are to be imparted and violence is to be reduced. Not understanding the immensity of the task, teachers and administrators often give lip service to the effort, but continue to function in old ways which undercut the effort to teach students new ways to resolve conflict. No one is against the effort. We all agree that we need to have less violence, but many do not see that reducing violence is no simple task, and cannot succeed if isolated as an occasional thing students do when convenient.

Even when students are taught these skills and are given the opportunity to test out and internalize them in mediation, they may not take root. The factors that undercut the teaching of conflict resolution are factors connected to systemic change. Adding a peer mediation program and teaching conflict resolution may have little effect if the school itself does not undergo some significant changes.

First a note about systems. A system is a group of interconnected parts creating a greater whole. The parts do not exist in isolation. A change in one part of the system has an impact on the other parts. A good example is the family system. If one family member, treated for chemical dependency, returns to a family that has not changed, the odds of that member staying sober are low. If we want to increase the chances of the person staying sober, we need to work also with the rest of the family — we need to work on the whole system.

A school is a complex system. Simply adding a mediation program without educating the staff about the program has the risk of the staff resisting the changes mediation will bring — changes involving time, curricula, discipline, staff interactions with parents, staff interactions with each other, space, finances, staff development, unions.

Take discipline, for example. Most school discipline systems reflect our criminal justice system in that they are retributive in nature. When someone does something wrong, the norm is to punish the person. Blaming and determining who is wrong are essential. One attains obedience by threatening punishment, which is to say by fear. What we know about retributive systems today is that they do not work. I have heard of first grade students telling teachers, "Screw you. If you do anything to me, my father will sue you."

That is a perfect image of the child announcing that he or she cannot be punished enough to result in obedience. The child is rejecting the retributive justice system. A restorative system focuses not on punishment but on restoring relationship between the parties and with the rest of the community. Retribution is based on fear. Restoration is based on respect.

Where does systemic change come in? In mediation, we promote a restorative justice system. We teach respect for others, that conflict can be solved and behavior changed through a respectful process. But the lesson is undercut when students are disciplined. If students perceive the discipline process to be demeaning or disrespectful or unfair, the gains from mediation have been negated. Schools that have shifted to discipline systems based on respect feel different, and those schools, in my experience, have less conflict and violence than those still using fear.

A second example concerns staff. If staff do not understand conflict resolution, they cannot support it fully. There are many opportunities to teach about conflict in literature, history and social studies, but the teacher needs to know conflict resolution theory in order to make use of the teachable moments.

I have seen growing interest in training staff to resolve conflict themselves. Sometimes this is a result of wanting adults to "walk their talk" before they try to teach students. Sometimes it is the result of a changing system: Once students learn conflict resolution skills, then staff may ask, "Why can't we solve our problems?" Changing one part of the system has an effect on the rest of the system.

Once we look at the causes of staff conflict, the need for systemic change becomes increasingly evident. The single greatest source of staff conflict I see results when a school implements site-based management or shared deci-

— continued on page 11

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sion-making without changing the system. Staff are expected to work collaboratively, but no one trains them to be able to work in this manner. Staff are supposed to make decisions, but they are not given sufficient information and certainly not enough time to make informed decisions. The result is conflict in which the structure of the organization is the cause. Therefore, if staff conflict is ongoing, and if the source is stress from an attempt to implement shared decision-making in the school, then this part of the "school as system" may have to be resolved before staff can have the energy to undertake the changes which are part of starting a mediation program.

One important question for staff is to what degree will conflict resolution theory and skill be taught to students? If the goal is major behavioral change, then the need is for more, rather than less, teaching. One can begin with a brief series of lessons on conflict resolution, which will have some impact on the system. Or, one can integrate the teaching throughout the school's curriculum so that the skills and concepts are continually reinforced.

One simple way to integrate is to discuss every example of conflict wherever it appears in the curriculum — in literature, history, and social studies at a minimum. Teach students to look for the disputants, for the disputants' conflict styles, for the positions and interests of each disputant, and for the long- and short-term outcomes of the conflict. Doing this repeatedly can lead students to understand these elements of conflict, and eventually to look for these elements in their own conflicts. At the same time, the concepts can enrich the analysis of a plot or an event in history. That is a fairly simple change, except the staff need to learn the concepts first — something which takes time (a rare commodity) and someone to train the staff.

A more difficult issue for staff is that if they cannot resolve their own conflicts, they cannot adequately teach students to do otherwise. We all learn more from actions than from words. Staff who do not really believe they can safely resolve conflict because they do not experience this with their peers, will have a difficult time encouraging students to try. I have yet to find a school in which there is not some level of unresolved staff conflict. When I talk with staff, I point out that what is unacceptable is unresolved staff conflict which hurts their ability to serve students. Not resolving conflict when students get hurt is unprofessional behavior. Everyone agrees. Changing, however, is hard. My suggestion is that the school needs a simple dispute resolu-

tion system for adults.

The first step is clear expectations for adults' behavior, something staff need to talk through and agree upon. The second step is the ability to tell each other that there is a conflict. This involves training people to confront appropriately and to receive confrontation. Next is training staff in a process to talk out a problem — that is, principled negotiation. If negotiation fails, help needs to be available: mediation for adults. And if a conflict cannot be resolved by the parties, someone else must decide what will happen. Without these safeguards, the system will not work. Without a process that clearly expects resolution, which supports resolution by training, making time available, making mediation available, and ultimately, making decisions when disputants cannot, accountability for adult behavior is hard to achieve. And after all, we have a similar process for students. Dispute resolution systems are needed for the adults — licensed and unlicensed staff, administrators, and parents.

Again, the systemic implications become clear. Without adults having the process and training to help them resolve conflict, it is very possible that they will not, and this inability will hurt their efforts to develop peer mediation.

Mediation has much to offer schools, students, staff, and families. Sometimes mediation programs can start, and with minimum fuss become effective. When mediation programs struggle or fail, the problem may be the result of not attending to the need for systemic changes which are necessary for mediation to flourish. ■

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