

Community Service Learning and Business Partnership: Reforming Education and Enhancing Peer Mediation

by Denise Messina

Community Service Learning (CSL) is a compelling method for transforming the present educational structure and instructional delivery. It can foster the development of active learners and community contributors, engaged and empowered to identify and respond effectively to community needs. CSL combines the powerful experience of providing services for one's community with deliberate and structured preparation and reflection. It asks students to identify a community need, plan an action to address that need, and implement that action. Preparation, implementation, and reflection are individual and collaborative, and involve developmentally appropriate skills and learning tasks. The learner involved in CSL has a practical opportunity to use newly acquired skills while strengthening and reinforcing others in a real life setting.

Peer mediation programs are probably the most popular and widespread examples of Community Service Learning Programs in schools today, although they commonly are not recognized as such. Frequently, within a school system, both the technical consultants to the peer mediation program, and the immediate school department supervisor, do not understand the relationship of Community Service Learning and peer mediation. Those of us with even limited knowledge of CSL agree that it can be applied to any discipline. Better yet, the true visionaries among us believe it can be the main vehicle of instruction and learning in any discipline. There are numerous schools which have successfully implemented peer mediation programs for years and yet would not identify themselves as having any existing CSL programs. This mystery can be explained in much the same way that many progressive, effective, and innovative models of instruction typically exist in schools in isolation, when with cooperation and coordination, they could enhance and support each other.

If we consider the methods and standards of service learning defined by the Alliance of Service Learning in Education Reform, the national organization for school-based service-learning, we can recognize key CSL components in the implementation of a peer mediation model in a school. (See Sidebar on page 10) Students who volunteer to be trained as peer mediators have identified school and community violence as a serious concern and have expressed a commitment to addressing the issue. Primarily, students

learn through active participation. Students know that in resolving student conflict in their school community, a real and meaningful contribution is actually made to that school community. The peer mediators participate in an intensive and highly organized training period which is ideally co-curricular and/or integrated into the academic schedule, rather than "extra curricular." It is cross-graded. The training is experiential and engages students in role plays which are modeled after "real life situations," requiring them to use their newly acquired communication skills. After training is completed, authentic assessment takes place when student mediators are monitored by the mediation coordinator. The debriefing which follows a mediation includes processing and self-evaluation, and is clearly the reflection component required for true community service learning. Incidental and related outcomes for students include applying these skills outside the school community, in their neighborhoods and families, as well as developing a concern for the larger community. Clearly, the peer mediation model meets the standards and criteria for a Community Service Learning program.

Like the majority of mediation coordinators, I was completely unaware of the educational philosophy of the Community Service Learning model and of the complimentary and compatible nature of the peer mediation program to CSL. However, I had begun thinking and informally discussing some "advanced training" and outreach ideas with some of the peer mediators who had expressed their interest in further development.

It was at this point that our school began a business partnership with Fleet Bank. The bank had a national and regional Youth Leadership program, which was based on CSL. The bank provided CSL training to interested school and bank staff, who expressed their willingness to become advisors to groups of students interested in the program. Through this initial training, I was able to recognize that the peer mediation program I was coordinating was a model of Community Service Learning. The CSL and unique Youth Leadership model that Fleet Bank presented provided the students and me with a framework to further our exploration, and enhanced our motivation. Fleet Bank made available to us additional training through the Regional Community Service Learning Center in collaboration with the University of Massachu-

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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-

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Community Service Learning

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Students decided to volunteer their services as mediators to the community. They researched family and youth serving agencies and centers in the community who might be interested in mediation and came up with a list of 55. They developed a brochure . . . and had it printed. They sought and received funding for mailing costs to distribute the brochures to those agencies.

setts. This training provided me with the insight and support required to envision my next step.

Through the training, other interested school and bank staff, as well as parents became knowledgeable and enthusiastic about CSL. Thirteen Fleet Youth Leadership groups of eight to nine students with their advisors, began to meet on a weekly basis, and started to identify, define and problem-solve community issues of concern to the students. Fleet Bank supported those trained employees in becoming Co-advisors for the groups, so that each group had either a parent or teacher paired with a bank employee. This Co-advisor model created unique and interesting dynamics and relationships, unfamiliar to each of us in our traditional roles and settings. Advisors, teachers, and bank employees acted as coaches or facilitators, allowing student ideas to take the lead. They provided resources, support, and direction when required. Bank employees were released during working hours, students and staff during scheduled classes. Fleet Bank also offered incentives and created many opportunities to support the efforts of these thirteen CSL Fleet Youth Leadership groups. Our school partnership with Fleet Bank helped staff to consider some of the barriers to true collaboration. But, more importantly, it presented to the students a working model of collaboration.

The nine student mediators involved in the CSL group, were motivated to take their experience of violence prevention and mediation beyond their school community, and they identified many means to accomplish this. They developed ideas and tasks, worked individually, in pairs, and small groups. They sometimes required assistance, sometimes not. Much like subcommittees, they researched and implemented each idea, always returning to the whole group to collaborate and share. They took turns taking and recording meeting notes, taking pictures, making phone calls, writing letters, researching and preparing for tasks. Our role, of course, as advisors, was to facilitate, helping them to process and identify the next steps, to evaluate their efforts and progress, and to provide resources when necessary.

Our accomplishments went beyond our expectations. Students decided to volunteer their services as mediators to the community. They researched family and youth serving agencies and centers in the community who might be interested in mediation and came up with a list of 55. They developed a brochure to describe mediation and their volunteer services, and had it printed. They sought and received funding for mailing costs to distribute the brochures to those agencies. They wrote letters to our Congressman, Senator and President Clinton, expressing

their views and requesting that mediation as community service be part of the National Service Trust Act. They developed a presentation to promote mediation as an alternative and delivered it to local elementary school classes. They sought and received grant funding from the local Cable Endowment to produce an informational program on peer mediation. They promoted their work as mediators in addressing violence, giving various media interviews, drafting news releases, presenting at conferences, fairs and forums and participating on committees. This work is ongoing and has recently included testifying before the State House Committee on Education in a public hearing for a House Bill on Violence Prevention and before the State Board of Education.

Fleet Bank honored the outstanding CSL groups in the state through a statewide forum and selected our group for a round trip to Washington D.C. for four days. In addition to a well-planned and supervised daily agenda of sight-seeing, we had the opportunity to meet with our Congressman and Senator, and express our ideas.

Fleet Bank has continued to support the work of peer mediation in our school. This past year, three four-day mediation trainings for both students and staff have taken place at Fleet Bank's headquarters in our city. Generously allowing us to use this "corporate style" conference room for twelve business days throughout the school year was a large gesture of support, and helped provide an air of real professionalism to the training. We, in return, offered the bank the option of including any employees in the training. None have taken us up for the full training, but many have stopped in.

In collaboration with Fleet Bank, our school organized a first Annual Community Service Learning Fair. Each CSL group made a display of their projects. Students and advisors took turns staffing each display and answering questions. This year, a Community Service Fair was sponsored prior to the formation of the Fleet Youth Leadership CSL groups. This was to help students explore on-going volunteer and service work in the community, so students were better able to identify and research community needs. Fleet Bank also sponsored a neighborhood cleanup day which paired bank employees with school staff and students to clean the neighborhood and assess neighborhood needs. This project included over 400 students, 15 staff and 15 bank employees.

An active and integrated business partnership experience should provide staff and students the experience of collaboration as well as Community Service Learning opportunities. It

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is clear that the Fleet Bank business partnership made Community Service Learning a possibility in our school. Additionally, the framework of CSL allowed the peer mediators to reach out into our neighborhood and community.

In addition to fostering altruism and volunteerism, this school/business partnership was able to promote business and neighborly goodwill far beyond what an advertising campaign ever could have. Staff and students entered into new relationships and together their awareness was raised about both community needs and business pressures. Bank customer service representatives and tellers became sensitized to the needs of the city's schools, teachers and students, as well as the community's. Each of the 13 groups in our school represented Fleet Bank, the school, and youth in general, to numerous community groups, as they researched and implemented their various community service learning projects. Our Mediation Outreach/Fleet Youth Leadership group alone exposed thousands to our ideas and our message. At the same time, our school and its relationship to our business partner, Fleet Bank, was promoted through this effort.

The term "mutually beneficial relationship" could not be more aptly applied. Business partnerships can go beyond a simple commitment of support and help schools in the process of restructuring. Commitment to CSL can effectively enhance an established peer mediation program. Effectively implemented peer mediation programs which are valued, supported and integrated, are excellent examples of Community Service Learning, and may be a gateway for

other CSL opportunities in the school. This in turn, will begin the redefinition of traditional student and teacher roles, and move toward staff and students sharing roles as learners, contributors, providers, advisors and facilitators. ■

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National Service Learning Cooperative
K-12 Serve America Clearinghouse
1-800-808-SERVE

Community Service Learning Center
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National Association of Service and Conservation Corps
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National Society for Internships and Experiential Education
3509 Haworth Dr., Suite 207
Raleigh, NC 27609

Youth Service America
1319 F. St., NW, Suite 900
Washington, DC 20004.

Community Service Learning

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Standards of Quality for School-Based Service Learning

1. Effective service learning efforts strengthen service and academic learning.
2. Model service learning provides concrete opportunities for youth to learn new skills, think critically, and test new roles in an environment which encourages risk-taking and rewards competence.
3. Preparation and reflection are essential elements in service-learning.
4. Students' efforts will be recognized by their peers and the community they serve.
5. Youth are involved in the planning.
6. The service students perform will make a meaningful contribution to the community.
7. Effective service learning integrates systematic formative and summative evaluation.
8. Service learning connects school and its community in new and positive ways.
9. Service learning is understood and supported as an integral element in the life of a school and its community.
10. Skilled adult guidance and supervision is essential to the success of service learning.
11. Pre-service and staff development which includes the philosophy and methodology of service learning will best ensure that program quality and continuity are maintained.

Excerpted from "Standards of Quality for School-Based Service Learning," published by the Alliance for Service Learning, Council of Chief State School Officers, One Massachusetts Ave., NW Suite 700, Washington, DC 20001-1431.