

Project PEACE

Though the old song involves a peace train, it was the PEACE van that traveled across Pennsylvania recently bringing word of ways young people and schools can resolve disputes without violence. Beginning on Halloween, the PEACE van moved from Doylestown to Scranton to Harrisburg to Erie to Pittsburgh in a single week, taking word about Project PEACE (Peaceful Endings through Attorneys, Children and Educators) to every corner of the commonwealth. Trainers David Trevaskis, Artemus Carter and Mary Ellen Schaffer brought the latest in conflict resolution education directly to hundreds of educators from more than 80 schools during the week-long training trek. At each site, lessons about handling conflict were interspersed with real life examples of young people demonstrating their mediation skills. Students from Sharswood School in Philadelphia, Schaul Elementary in Enola, Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary in Erie and North Allegheny School District outside Pittsburgh made peer mediation come alive for all who watched them in action at the various sites.

Project PEACE¹ is a peer mediation training program implemented in Pennsylvania by the Pennsylvania Bar Association (PBA) and the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office that provides a research-tested framework for bringing both conflict resolution education and peer mediation systems into the schools at every grade level. This public-private partnership introduces dispute resolution techniques to students throughout the commonwealth. Originally brought to Pennsylvania by then Attorney General Mike Fisher in 1999 after the tragedy at Columbine High School, the program has continued to flourish under Attorney Generals Jerry Pappert and Thomas Corbett. Seven presidents of the PBA have also endorsed the program.

Over the past six years, Project PEACE has brought peer mediation programming and conflict resolution education to 80 Pennsylvania schools directly and another 120 indirectly. All schools, regardless of socioeconomic status, diversity and location, have been forced by outbreaks of school violence to confront the issue of conflict among school students and to help students address and resolve it before it escalates into violence. That initial look at tackling the problem of violence has led to a broader look at building involved communities, first at the school level, and then beyond. Social studies lessons often focus on the local community, using approaches that build and reinforce the sense of community in the class and in the school. Unfortunately, in this era of high stakes testing, double periods of math and reading are taking the place traditionally reserved for social studies, especially in the early grades². In such schools, Project PEACE provides a valuable means of providing civic learning in the schools that would otherwise be lost.

Project PEACE works to reduce conflict and violence in Pennsylvania's elementary schools and beyond in upper grades by teaching students how to discuss and mediate disagreements peacefully. It empowers children, who are still in their formative years, with the important life-skills that promote constructive communication, problem-solving, critical-thinking and self-esteem. Children become active participants in governing behavior in their classrooms by taking on the role of mediator and using the mediation process; they also impact their class and school

¹ See www.leap-kids.com for information on Project PEACE.

² See the report of Ira Hiberman and Kay Atman for the Pennsylvania Council of Social Studies at www.pcssonline.org.

climate by using the skills of conflict resolution that they learn to work out disputes on their own. With the help of neutral peer mediators, or through the exercise of learned skills by individual students, conflicts can be settled in a positive manner, benefiting the school climate as a whole.

Past Project PEACE trainings have featured school teams - composed of one administrator, one educator, one guidance counselor or second educator, one parent and one attorney - being introduced to the peer mediation and conflict resolution education process through hands-on learning activities in a multiple day conference setting. They received instruction in such areas as adjudication vs. mediation, diffusing conflict situations and the skills of conflict resolution. At the end of the training, the schools wrote their own conflict resolution education and mediation plans, which were introduced to their local schools. At home, the schools then selected and trained their student mediators and teach the skills of conflict resolution to all of the school community. The student mediators then helped fellow students resolve disputes peacefully when the students can not do so on their own. The schools with the most effective Project PEACE programs recognized that they must do more than train a corps of mediators and send the mediators out into the community to help promote a peaceful school. Effective Project PEACE programs reached out to teach all members of the community the skills of conflict resolution that are so necessary to have a democratic community.

Attorney General Corbett, after a year in which Project PEACE focused on the Philadelphia School District where CEO Paul Vallas has declared that every K-8 school in the district will have a Project PEACE team, decided to broaden the reach of Project PEACE by having trainers conduct five single day trainings for the program across the state. Corbett hoped to both energize older Project PEACE programs by giving them a hands-on refresher in their local area and to reach out to new schools that would then begin the process of setting up Project PEACE programs. With nearly 200 educators from over 80 schools participating in the training, the PEACE journey across Pennsylvania proved to be a rousing success!

In their refreshing look at democracy, *The Quickening of America*³, Francis Moore Lappe and Paul Martin DuBois attack the myths that they say keep people from becoming more involved in creatively solving the problems of our day. Myth Three is that “public life means ugly conflict” but the “empowering insight” of the authors is:

In public life we encounter differences, even more than in private life. But conflict doesn't have to be nasty or destructive. It can be healthy and informative, bringing insights about ourselves and new perspectives for solving problems.⁴

That “insight” comes straight from a Project PEACE elementary mediation lesson about conflict being neither good nor bad, that what matters is what you do with the conflict to make it positive or negative. When children are asked to find conflicts in the newspaper, they almost always pick out the articles and pictures that show conflict in a negative manner. Stories about war, crime and other violence provide the definition most children

³ Published in 1994 by Jossey-Bass, this work by the author of *Diet for a Small Planet* is a wonderful call for civic engagement.

⁴ Lappe and DuBois, *The Quickening of America*, p. 29.

seem to have for conflict. Indeed, war is often a suggested synonym for the word.

Children, and adults, need to be taught how to creatively solve their problems so that they will have the skills and the attitudes necessary to participate in our representative democracy. Project PEACE helps teach those skills both through specific lessons and in the actual practice of peer mediation in real-life disputes. When asked by a lawyer working with their school what they had learned from their participation in Project PEACE, fifth graders in an urban elementary school listed the following: “Patience”, “Commitment”, “Trust”, “Setting a good example”, “Reflecting”, “Communicating”, “Helping others”, and “Understanding”.

This is not a theoretical list of the virtues we spend a lifetime hoping to achieve. This is what fifth graders mediators told the lawyer they had actually learned from their participation in Project PEACE. So why are children who are not in trouble with the law talking to lawyers? Lawyers work with schools through Project PEACE to bring conflict resolution training and peer mediation education to the young people of the Commonwealth. Many Project PEACE attorneys spend considerable time in schools working with and listening to young people as they help schools implement the program. The lawyer partner is a unique aspect of Project PEACE. Most solid educational initiatives involve teams of administrators, educators and parents, but Project PEACE adds an attorney to the mix. This provides a partner who is connected to the community beyond the school and who, by nature of professional training, should be grounded in the rule of law and world of civic engagement.

When teachers, administrators, and parents first observe the results of Project PEACE, they often are amazed at the ease with which students, who are just reaching double-digit ages, diffuse and resolve conflicts. But conflict management skills are not all the students learn. Students in Project PEACE also gain a profound understanding of life—they discover truths that many adults have forgotten.

One of the primary benefits of Project PEACE is that it teaches students that conflict is an inevitable part of life that they should not fear. Through their experience, students see how conflict can create opportunities for growth and development. As a fifth grader told his school’s attorney partner, “It’s good to be in conflict because it helps you learn to solve problems.” This attitude is borne out by an independent evaluation of the Project PEACE model issued in March, 2001.⁵ The report found that Project PEACE students feel confident in their ability to handle conflict. How many adults do you know who wish they felt that way?

Teachers will tell you that in the field of education, trends come and go every two or three years. Someone is always promoting the latest and greatest. Measured by that yardstick, Project PEACE, at six years of age in Pennsylvania, has survived a couple of lifetimes. Why? Perhaps it is the program’s emphasis on self-determination in resolving

⁵ See the Indiana Project PEACE research at www.leap-kids.com. Research on the CRF VOICE curriculum, mentioned earlier in this article, further suggests that standardized test scores may be raised by combining conflict resolution education into a history curriculum with a service component.

conflict. That connects with youth who clamor for greater independence. Students learn that with greater independence comes greater commitment and responsibility.

In a world where violence and disruptive behaviors have become increasingly common, Project PEACE promotes civility and tranquility. Research on Project PEACE has found that teachers perceived less verbal harassment, physical harassment, and uncooperative behavior among their students after those students had participated in Project PEACE. The report also found that students who participated in Project PEACE were able to resolve more problems themselves or through other student intervention. That, in turn, enabled teachers to devote more of their time and energy to teaching rather than disciplining.

This does not mean that Project PEACE is a substitute for discipline. Nothing could be further from the truth. Peer mediation does not replace discipline—it enhances it. Students involved in the program learn firsthand that there are consequences for their behavior and that they must accept responsibility for those consequences. When discipline is doled out, they understand why and accept it. Project PEACE proves that in the shadows of the rebellious, irresponsible youth of *The Lord of the Flies*, there is a resourceful, compassionate individual who is willing to take ownership for his or her actions.

Lynette Lazarus, a nurse and the Project PEACE coordinator at Sharswood Elementary School in Philadelphia since the program began in 1999, has seen “incredible personal growth” in students after they complete peer mediation training. Her students exhibit more self-confidence and pride, as well as a greater awareness of how conflicts are created and how they are resolved. According to Lynette, we should never underestimate the ability of children to deal effectively with the fundamental challenges of life. The key, she says, is to establish high expectations for the children. They can accomplish far more than we think.

Before students are ever exposed to the techniques used in Project PEACE, an adult team representing the school is formed. The purpose of this team is to establish the groundwork for setting up a conflict resolution education and peer mediation program in the school. Training of team members provided by Project PEACE instructors, as well as review of materials from the nationally respected Community Boards Program, introduce team participants to the peer mediation process and to show them how to teach their students about conflict resolution.

The school’s team for Project PEACE consists of representatives from the administration, faculty, and parents, as well as the attorney volunteer. Although the school personnel assume the greatest responsibility for successfully implementing and maintaining the program, the attorney partner is what distinguishes Project PEACE from other educational innovations. Research in why kids and schools succeed, as well as research on school mediation programs, suggests that the partner from the outside community can have a significant impact in improving school climate. Project Peace provides members of the Bar with a unique opportunity to nurture and guide the development of our most important resource: our children. The attorney’s example teaches students more than just how to resolve problems—it shows them how to

conduct their daily activities in a constructive and productive way.

Lawyers wear many hats—advisor, advocate, scrivener, spokesperson—both at work and with Project PEACE. This versatility allows attorneys to serve the varying needs of participating schools. As a member of the Project PEACE team, the lawyer’s job is to fill the gaps the team sees in building its program. A Project PEACE lawyer can, for example, use her or his organizational skills to help set up the program and coordinate activities. He or she can help promote the program within the local community. If a lawyer can educate a jury about some esoteric, technical aspect of the law, lawyers also have the skills to help train faculty and students to use the Project PEACE dispute resolution process. Many lawyer volunteers have helped their schools find speakers for kickoff programs and other meetings or obtain proclamations from local and state elected officials recognizing Project PEACE. Above all else, lawyers can acknowledge the effort of the students and show enthusiastic support for the school effort. In an era when negative reinforcement flows freely, a little bit of spunk and praise goes a long way in lifting the spirits of students, faculty, and administrators.

Many lawyers involved in Project PEACE have noted that they learned more from the students than the students learned from them. One lawyer explained: “Sometimes the students remind us of simple truths we’ve taken for granted and forgotten. When I asked a fifth grader what he learned during his two years as a Conflict Mediator at one of the PEACE schools, he said, ‘To solve other people’s problems, you need to solve your own.’ True enough, but how many of us regularly put that knowledge into practice?”