

# **Creating a Peaceable School Community: Evaluating Your School's Culture**

**By Annette Townley, M.Ed.**



**For the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center  
of the Western Justice Center**

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**Second in a Series of Four Leadership Forum Reports**

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## **From Conflict to Collaboration**

Based in Pasadena, California, the Western Justice Center is a national nonprofit that collaborates with other organizations to develop innovative models of conflict resolution. The Center relies on a small, core staff who convene cooperative efforts to create, evaluate and replicate new ways to resolve conflicts and to improve the quality of justice in the regional, national and international spheres.

The Center is a nonpartisan, non-ideological organization built upon respect for a wide range of viewpoints. This is a place where creative minds can invent new approaches, share ideas and serve as a catalyst for experimentation and change. The Center creates cost-effective partnerships with other organizations in order to accomplish what each organization could not achieve alone.



*The Western Justice Center campus in Pasadena, California*

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## Foreword

For communities concerned about school violence, the Western Justice Center is pleased to announce the release of *Evaluating Your School's Culture*. This is the second in a series of four reports on practical ideas for Creating a Peaceable School Community.

The first report from the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center centered on the role of educational stakeholders as leaders in transforming school communities. This report examines the role that a school's culture can play in contributing to an inclusive, collaborative community — one where administrators, teachers, students and parents work together as allies rather than adversaries.

I'd like to thank our Schools Program Consultant Annette Townley, who facilitated the Leadership Forum series and who authored the reports; Western Justice Center Program Manager Jonathan J. Hutson, who served as editor; and the Center's Webmaster, Steven Brehm, who designed the reports, and who collaborated with Jonathan in archiving the full series on our Website, [www.westernjustice.org/resources.htm](http://www.westernjustice.org/resources.htm).

We gratefully acknowledge The James Irvine Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlitt Foundation, and the Weingart Foundation, whose generous support makes possible the work of the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center.

We hope this report will stimulate concrete actions by educational stakeholders that reduce violence and fear while contributing to supportive learning environments.



Bill Drake  
Executive Director

## Introduction

This is the second in a series of four Leadership Forum Reports from the Children in the Schools Program of the Western Justice Center Foundation.

This Leadership Forum explores two questions:

- (1) What are the impacts of recognizing and addressing public policy issues on the successful development and implementation of conflict resolution programs in schools?
- (2) If we were to take into account the challenges that schools and stakeholders face in seeking new approaches to disruptive behavior, violence and intergroup conflict, how would we alter the design and expression of conflict resolution programs?

We share responsibility for creating a peaceable school community and for making the attainment of this goal an exciting emotional, physical, and spiritual challenge for all members of a school community, particularly young people.

A school's culture plays a pivotal role in either preventing or perpetuating conflict. In the first forum, we examined the function of leadership in the transformation of school culture. In this forum, we explore the importance of understanding, assessing, and building a school culture as we develop and implement conflict resolution programs.



Annette Townley, M.Ed.  
School Programs Consultant  
Forestville, California, Spring, 1999

## I. Background and Overview

### A. The School Conflict Resolution Center

Based in Pasadena, California, the Western Justice Center is a national nonprofit that collaborates with other organizations to develop innovative models of conflict resolution. With support from The James Irvine Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Weingart Foundation, the Western Justice Center created the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center (the Resource Center).

The Resource Center is an alliance of conflict resolution and educational organizations, dedicated to expanding the use of conflict resolution principles and practices in lower, middle, and secondary schools. The Resource Center focuses on the Los Angeles area and Southern California, with the realization that the guiding principles and practical resources being developed here have applications nationwide.

### B. Focus Groups

On October 5-6, we conducted a series of focus groups for members of the school communities participating in the Leadership Forum Series. Through these dialogues we sought to learn more about the range of views and experiences held by the stakeholders with respect to conflict resolution in education. In the education community, much reference is made to the principle of involving stakeholders in the process of reinventing schools. However, in practice, parents and most importantly students are often left out of the conversation. Young people are the ones most directly affected by the decisions that influence the purpose, meaning, and direction of a school. They have a tremendous stake in creating a safe learning environment. And they have a critical role to play in evaluating the effectiveness of school initiatives. Therefore, we requested from each district administrative, teacher, parental, and student representation at the focus groups. All participants were asked to reflect on the following questions prior to participation:

- What is your understanding of conflict resolution in the schools?
- How can conflict resolution programs play a role in creating your vision of a peaceable school?
- Where does conflict resolution fit into your educational priorities?
- What do other people in your stakeholder group think of conflict resolution programs?
- What do you think other stakeholder groups think about conflict resolution programs?

During the course of the first focus group, two other issues surfaced, concerning the role of adults and methods of evaluation. These issues were then explored with the subsequent groups in the form of two questions:

- (1) Does the adult culture in your school reflect what you want to teach the students in your school?

(2) How would you measure the success of a conflict resolution program?

This report addresses the former question; the third report in this series, “Creating a Peaceable School Community: Evaluating Conflict Resolution in Schools,” will address the latter.

There appears to be consensus that adults must model the skills that we want children to develop. Modeling is seen as educators’ most powerful tool in setting the tone for the school and in teaching young people mature ways to manage conflicts. (It was noted that when students select a teacher of the year, they invariably identify someone who serves as a significant role model.) There is recognition that for some adults in the school this will mean a real shift in behavior. The leadership of a school district from the district level to the site level should show competency in modeling constructive conflict resolution skills for which everyone should be held accountable. There is a need to integrate this accountability into the screening and hiring process of new personnel.

A peaceable school community is one in which people work together, help each other out, listen, and demonstrate a sense of trust, caring, and mutual respect. Authority and discipline are not the top priority. Rather, the focus is on a mutual commitment to creating a comfortable and safe place for students, parents, and school personnel to come together to resolve issues and build community in a peaceable manner.

### **C. Second Leadership Forum**

The author led the second in the series of Leadership Forums at the Western Justice Center, entitled *Creating a Peaceable School Community*, on November 12, 1998. The number of school districts participating in the series was increased from three to six to expand the conversation and to broaden the networking possibilities. Leadership teams from Glendale Unified School District, Pasadena Unified School District, Rowland Unified School District, South Pasadena Unified School District, Temple City Unified School District, and Walnut Valley Unified School District came together with conflict resolution experts to discuss the role of school culture in the creation and perpetuation of conflict and to explore strategies, knowledge, and skills to respond to this dilemma.

The Resource Center selected these school districts based on several criteria and program directions:

- An initial focus upon urban/suburban districts which are often ignored in education discussions in the Los Angeles area and California, but which share many of the same challenges facing inner city schools in major cities, such as economic challenges; great racial, cultural, and language diversity; limited resources; and criminal activity, including gangs and drugs.
- A focus on school districts rather than on individual schools, so as to help more districts help themselves and each other at strategic levels.
- Districts that appear well led and willing to innovate.

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- Districts with leadership, administrators, faculty, students, and parents, who are committed to introducing or enhancing negotiation and conflict resolution curricula and programs in a systemic rather than superficial manner.
- Sufficient geographic proximity to allow a concentration of effort and opportunities to work together across district lines, so that each district would not have to develop all its own resources for training, curriculum development, evaluation, and public education.

## II. Vision of a Peaceable School Community

The vision articulated in the focus groups is in keeping with the definition of a peaceable school community embraced by the field of conflict resolution in education. William Kreidler first defined the concept of a peaceable classroom which was expanded upon by Donna Crawford, Fred Schrumph, and Dick Bodine in their book, **Creating the Peaceable School: Conflict Resolution in Schools** (Research Press, 1994). They describe this vision of a peaceable school:

This is a place where learners, both adults and students, manage and resolve their own conflicts. A place where diversity and individuality are celebrated... a place where people listen in order to understand others' viewpoints and perceive conflict as an opportunity to learn and grow... a place where learners cooperate instead of acting aggressively or coercively... a place that supports everyone's rights and encourages everyone to exercise her or his responsibilities... a place where peace is viewed as an active process, made day by day, moment by moment. (p.1)

In order to achieve this vision, the concept of a school community must move beyond the school walls and include all those members of the community who care about young people, who work with youth, and who have an investment in the future of our children. All such people are stakeholders in the school community, together with administrators, teachers and students.

Constructing a peaceable school community requires the efforts of peacemakers. Participants were asked what qualities they possessed that made them feel like a peacemaker. The characteristics and skills they presented included:

- Striving to teach non-violence at an early age
- Listening to kids and their problems
- Good listener who uses creative problem solving
- Interest in finding a path to non-violence
- Strong belief in good communication and that a willingness to learn will solve problems
- Belief in collaboration, respect, and integrity
- Support for conflict resolution programs that work
- Trust and care for children
- Understanding of language as a vehicle to solve problems
- Willingness to provide a forum for people to come together

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- Belief that conflict resolution will create a healthy and peaceful atmosphere in schools
- Inquiry and reflection before making decisions
- Strong need to defuse conflict
- Getting people to appreciate others' points of view
- Empathy
- Trust in the creativity of people to solve their own problems
- Appreciation of diversity
- Willingness to acknowledge one's own role in conflict resolution
- Understanding how a conflict starts
- Bicultural background

Some other qualities that can be added to this list are:

- Willingness to focus on the problem not the person
- Being clear about what one needs
- Ability to cooperate
- Taking responsibility for one's actions
- Willingness to share power
- Ability to think "out of the box"
- Understanding that there is no one right answer

A peacemaker is a person who models resiliency, empathy, creativity, collaboration, and good communication skills. These are the stones on the path to a peaceable school community.

### III. The Role of School Culture in the Development of Conflict

Several years ago, the **Utne Reader** featured an article on adolescence. The article was based on the author's recounting of an experience of following a doctor, Dr. Barbara Staggers, on rounds at the Fremont High School and the Teen Clinic of Children's Hospital in North Oakland, California. The article was disturbing, but enlightening. One particular interchange from the article is worth noting as we think about developing and implementing conflict resolution programs in schools.

Dr. Stagger explains, "[W]e don't get very far by telling teens not to take risks because they scare us. When we ask our children why they screwed up they say, 'I had to. Everybody else was doing it.' The adult replies, 'If everybody else jumped off the cliff would you, too?'" The honest answer, according to Staggers, is yes. She goes on to say that it is really important to understand that for the young person, at that moment, being down at the bottom together with their friends feels better than being on the edge of the cliff alone. So how can we turn conflict resolution programs and their quest for peaceable school communities into an exciting, emotional, physical, and spiritual risk for young people?

A large part of the answer to that question lies in our approach to developing and implementing programs. If we view programs as a quick fix, focused on "fixing the kids," we are bound to fail. To assume that students are the reason for increasing disruptions on school campuses leaves out our collective responsibility for creating a peaceable school community. Such an assumption also demonstrates resistance to examining school culture itself and looking at the ways adult behavior unintentionally or intentionally contributes to the development and perpetuation of conflict among school children.

#### A. Definition of School Culture (The Way We Do Things Here)

Each school district has its own habits, expectations, perceptions, rules, and style. It is tacitly understood that these norms inform the way business within a school community is conducted. Usually these norms arise from the dominant culture of the school community. The use of the term "culture" here refers not only to ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, language, and ability, but also to learning styles, roles, access to resources, and inclusion in decision making. "The way we do things here" typically equals the way a district has always done things. The behavior pattern is seldom conscious or explicit. However, those outside the cultural norms receive a palpable, implicit message: You do not belong here.

#### B. Case Study

The above definition of school culture was handed out to the participants as a backdrop against which to read and respond to the following case study taken from **Waiting for Mr. Stone: Interpersonal and Institutional Responses to an Intercultural Dispute** (Moore & Townley, 1993, p.53).

Your school has undergone a recent, dramatic shift in student demographics. The number of European-American students had decreased by 25 percent and the number of

African-American students and Latino students has increased by 30 percent and 10 percent respectively. The faculty, predominantly European-American, has not changed.

The school is trying to diversify the faculty and to increase the number of bilingual teachers and counselors. However, tensions are high. Several faculty members and students are complaining about the level of resources being devoted to the new students. Several comments have focused on the need to get “our school back” and the importance of not letting “them” take over. Yesterday, in the faculty cafeteria, a colleague said, “This used to be such a nice school with a good reputation.”

The school has always had its share of student disputes, but the number of disputes has increased in the last few months. Fights have occurred between students of different ethnic backgrounds and among students of the same ethnicity. Most of the fights involve two to three students, but the most recent dispute, between European-American and African-American students, involved nine people. All the students involved in the fight were suspended, but the European-American students received one-to-two-day suspensions, while most of the African-American students received three-to-five-day suspensions.

The school has a peer mediation program. All student disputes that do not involve weapons or serious physical injury are referred to the mediation program for resolution. If the students cannot resolve their differences, all parties are suspended.

You have a reputation among the students and the faculty for being honest and fair. Because they trust you, several students have come to you and complained about unfair treatment in the selection of who gets sent to mediation. They claim that every dispute that involves European-American students gets sent to mediation, but when the dispute is between African-American and Latino students, they are automatically suspended, and are not sent to mediation. The students believe that the only reason European-American students were suspended in the nine-person dispute is because one of the African-American students was seriously injured.

The students would like you to speak to the principal and the mediation coordinator about the injustice.

Forum participants were asked to describe the culture presented in the case study. In general, the group felt that there was an on-going failure to recognize change and that questions needed to be asked to fully assess the culture. However, the following terms were applied to the cultural context:

- Confrontational
- Poor communication
- Bilingual issue not being addressed
- Not addressing the growth of African-American students
- Students mirroring adults

- School culture failed to address change as it was occurring
- Entrenched in the past; unwilling to meet needs of the present
- Segregated
- Racial bias in student discipline
- Majority students feel threatened
- Lack of clarity about who had access to mediation
- Polarized
- Territorial
- Fear-driven tension
- Power struggle creating isolation
- Consequences for behavior inequitable
- Attitude of staff perpetuated problems
- Transitional
- Divisive
- Lacks cultural resources

A participant also noted that this was a familiar sequence of events that may not necessarily represent ethnic tensions, so much as tensions between the old and the new.

It's important to note that most conflicts are multifaceted and that research has shown that cultural differences play a role in all conflicts.

Participants were asked to discuss in small groups whether they felt any action needed to be taken in this situation and if so, of what kind. There was consensus that some type of action was required regardless of whether the sense of injustice was actual or perceived; and that the school culture had contributed to the brewing conflict. The recommendations for action fell into the following categories:

- **Assessment:** Survey data to determine the extent to which perceptions might be based in fact; evaluate how policies are stated and enforced; identify support and resources needed; and because this is a systemic issue with no quick fix, strategize long and short-term responses.
- **Leadership:** Administration needs to take lead in recognizing change; principal needs to get staff buy-in and student input in the change process.
- **Education:** Cultural awareness training, dialogues and forums to discuss intercultural issues and to seek common ground; conflict resolution training for parents; integrating conflict resolution as part of the basic school curriculum.

- **Mediation Program:** Needs to be expanded and be more inclusive; can't be used to appease only one faction and create a two-tiered system of discipline.

There were also some general comments and reflections that emerged from this discussion:

- Recognize that everyone owns the problem.
- Parents, staff, and administration must cooperate.
- Reject the impulse that “We need to fix the kids.”
- Examine what is the measure of a good school.
- Realize that children reflect adult issues around them.
- Children's inability to resolve conflicts affects their ability to learn, which in turn results in suspensions, discipline problems, etc.

The case presented in the forum contains elements familiar to many of the participants. This has implications for both implementing programs that are perceived and experienced as fair and equitable and for having appropriately trained school community members to respond to the conflicts that inevitably accompany the change process.

### C. Strategies to Address the Dilemma

In further discussion, participants identified some current educational practices that contribute to school culture creating or perpetuating conflict:

- Taking a “micro” view of a situation.
- Not challenging perceptions.
- Failing to respond to changing needs.
- Change not coming from the leadership.
- Failing to adapt to local culture.
- Reacting emotionally rather than logically.
- Inability to identify underlying issues in conflicts.
- Lack of community dialogue around school planning.

To these we can add:

- Denial when there are conflicts and problems for fear of the school being seen in a bad light.
- Minimizing behaviors such as name-calling and pushing or shoving.
- Blaming the parents for a student's behavior.

- Avoidance of conflict because school community members don't feel they have the skills to resolve a conflict constructively.

Given these realities, what are some strategies that can be employed to support schools in addressing and resolving conflicts effectively and in a timely manner? The members of the forum came up with the following suggestions, which are tied into their earlier thinking about the case study.

- Provide team building opportunities for school community members; provide “how to” resources and teach process skills.
- Data collection and research to assess community needs on an on-going basis; compile community resource list.
- Provide open forums and dialogues for all members of the school community to discuss issues.
- Empower people to take leadership roles and nurture strong leadership with vision.
- Deal with tough issues directly and bring in outside skilled intervention when necessary.
- Support students by identifying non-academic stresses in their lives and modeling the behavior expected of them.

Paying attention to the cultural context in which a conflict resolution program is introduced can mean the difference between conflict resolution programs that make a qualitative difference in the learning environment and ones that are seen as “just one more add-on program.”

## IV. Skills Building

At the June Leadership Forum, the school district teams indicated that incorporating a clinic component in subsequent forums would be beneficial. A clinic approach could offer some of the mentoring and coaching that is critical to transforming school culture. In the November Leadership Forum, we presented activities to develop skills in reframing and in separating positions from interests. These are two skills that help to build peaceable school communities.

The group took part in an exercise centered on reframing problems for joint ownership and positive response. Reframing is a process of making statements in more neutral terms by removing judgment-laden language from the communication. It helps to alleviate defensiveness, increase understanding, and reduce tension. It is a tool to use when one wants to open the door to communication with others. An example follows:

**Teacher to Parent:** Your son is a real troublemaker!

**Reframed:** I'd like to discuss your son's behavior in class.

The learning the participants gleaned from this exercise encompassed the following conclusions:

- Avoid placing one party on the defensive by not starting conversations in a blaming tone and by not beginning statements with the word “you”.
- Be in touch with the school culture.
- Conflict resolution does not mean being nice all the time; this does not allow for the identification of tough issues.
- Reframing takes thought; we don't always understand the impact of what we are saying.
- Nouns are more specific in language.
- Reframe to validate others' input.
- Consider your power dynamic in reframing; school structure (hierarchy) may impact reframing.

Some other thoughts on this exercise include framing issues:

- In terms of the presenting issues or relationship between the parties rather than focusing on a person's attitude or behavior. Separate the people from the problem.
- In an open-ended manner, including questions and problem statements.
- So that multiple solutions are possible.
- As joint problems with shared solutions.

- Focused on the future rather than past actions.
- With neutral language.
- In a way to encourage “thinking out of the box.”

The participants performed a negotiation role-play in pairs, emphasizing separating positions from interests. Getting underneath people’s demands to their real needs is the key to effective problem solving. Forum members also made the following discoveries about successful negotiation:

- Ask “Why?” in order to get to people’s real interests. Often these can be met.
- Identify common interests. Ask how we can accommodate the needs of all parties.
- Demonstrate a willingness to listen.
- Both parties in a negotiation are not required to have conflict resolution skills; one person can make a difference.
- Consider long-term relationship possibilities.
- Ask the right questions and listen to the answers.
- Negotiate in good faith.
- Create and maintain a non-threatening environment.
- Establish norms.
- Bringing in an impartial third party/mediator can “level the playing field.”

Learning, applying, practicing, and modeling productive conflict resolution skills are the foundation to building a peaceable school community.

## V. Action Plans

The forum ended with school district teams formulating action plans. They were asked to review the above vision of a peaceable school community put forth by Crawford, Bodine, and Schrumph and to identify the following:

- Two things they could do between this meeting and the February 24 Leadership Forum to move their school community closer to this vision.
- The people who will implement the described actions.
- How the plan's effectiveness will be measured.
- Who will report back at the February meeting.
- Any support the conflict resolution specialists at the meeting could provide in the implementation of the plan.

## VI. Conclusion

The purposes of this report are to summarize the discourse on creating a peaceable school community and to put a framework around that summary. Building this kind of community takes vision, leadership, a willingness to tackle difficult issues, and a commitment to learning and modeling constructive conflict resolution.

We recognize the challenges that the principles of true cooperation and sincere mutual respect pose to existing educational norms that are based on promoting the status quo. We also recognize that the quest to pursue these principles involves a level of personal, professional, and institutional risk taking that is often lacking and not typically supported in our nation's schools.

However, the promise is the transformation of a school into a community in which the emotional, spiritual, and physical safety of all students and staff are ensured. This means a school community in which the underlying philosophy is one of collaboration and inclusion. A school founded on these values improves the mind and uplifts the spirit by offering people opportunities to see themselves as part of a community of problem-solvers and peacemakers.

## Appendix: Participants in the Forum of November 12, 1998

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## Creating a Peaceable School Community

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