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A Conflict Resolution/Student Mediation Program: Effects on Student Attitudes and Behaviors

Marjorie K. Hanson

Teaching students ways to resolve conflict and reach agreement can both contribute to an orderly school climate and give students valuable skills to use throughout life. The Conflict Resolution/Student Mediation Program that currently operates in Region II of the Dade County Public Schools was initiated during the 1991-92 school year. Under the program, training has been provided for school staff in conflict resolution and student mediation; conflict resolution instruction has been infused into school curricula; and school-wide student mediation has been established.

Conflict resolution instruction involves training students in techniques for peacefully resolving their disagreements with others. The instruction involves written materials as well as activities like role-playing. This instruction is usually provided by the classroom teacher, but it may also be provided by a counselor.

Student mediation involves training a team of students for the specific purpose of mediating disagreements among other students in their classroom or throughout the school.

The two aspects of the program are not entirely independent of each other. In classes where all the students have been trained in conflict resolution, teachers may ask certain students to mediate disagreements among other students, or students involved in a disagreement may ask one or two other students to mediate. A trained team of student mediators, however, is a more formal indication that students are available to conduct mediation.

The ultimate objectives of the program are: 1) to enable students to employ constructive alternatives to the resolution of conflict; 2) to support school staff in modeling and teaching the attitudes and behaviors that engender such

an approach to conflict; and 3) to provide alternative tools for the school community to resolve conflicts. A total of six staff members — two Intergroup Relations Specialists from the Office of Multicultural Programs, one facilitator from the Teacher Education Center, and three Educational Specialists from the Division of Student Services provided direction and support toward the implementation of this program in Region II schools. Each of the 37 schools in Region II has adopted some variation of the program, establishing mediation programs and/or incorporating conflict resolution material in selected curricular areas.

This article discusses the results of an evaluation of the conflict resolution/student mediation program in Region II in the 1992-93 school year. The article describes training received by school staff, conflict resolution instruction for students, the nature and extent of student mediation, and measurable results of the program in terms of resolution of student conflicts, student referrals for disciplinary problems, and changes in student attitudes.

What training was provided to school personnel by the school district regional office?

Conflict Resolution/Student Mediation program training was implemented in two phases. The first phase (in 1991-92) involved the training of an administrator and a counselor or teacher at each school in student mediation and the subsequent training of a cadre of students to carry out student mediation. The second phase (in 1992-93) involved the training of two teachers at each school in conflict resolution for

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the purpose of diffusing conflict resolution training throughout the student body. A few schools requested training for all of their teachers in conflict resolution; at least one school's staff decided not to implement student mediation and, instead, focused all of their efforts on implementing the conflict resolution curriculum.

Initial training —

During the 1992-93 school year, 104 teachers, counselors, and administrators who had received no previous training attended one-day workshops. Training materials were based upon those developed by the Grace Contrino Abrams Peace Education Foundation in Miami, Florida. Depending on the workshop participants' positions, teaching grade levels, and responsibilities for program implementation, the curriculum included one or more of the following:

- ◆ *Peacemaking Skills for Little Kids* (Preschool - Grade 2)
- ◆ *Creative Conflict Solving for Kids* (Grades 3 - 4)
- ◆ *Creative Conflict Solving for Kids* (Grades 5 - 9)
- ◆ *Mediation for Kids* (Grades 4 - 12)

Each workshop participant received his or her own training manual and poster, and each school received one set of student handbooks appropriate to the grade level of the student body. Information regarding purchasing additional materials from the Peace Education Foundation was provided, and all participants were told that student activity pages could be copied without violating copyright laws.

Ongoing Support —

During 1992-93, a resource support network composed of Region II personnel knowledgeable and experienced in mediation and conflict resolution was formed. The names of these volunteers were distributed to schools in April 1993.

A day-long conference for representatives from all schools took place in May 1993. The program included assessment of progress, sharing of strategies for successful program implementation and expansion, and opportunities to develop feeder pattern cooperation and collaboration with regard to student mediators and conflict resolution training. Presentations by conflict resolution trainers, as well as opportunities for discussion with representatives from other schools, were provided.

Office of Multicultural Programs Intergroup

Relations Specialists were available throughout the year to provide assistance to any school requesting services. Requests during 1992-93 included on-site training for selected staff members, faculty presentations, and working with students on dealing with racial/ethnic conflict. Over 30 school visits were made in response to these requests.

To what extent were student mediation and conflict resolution training implemented in schools?

Student Mediation —

Selected students were trained in mediation in 33 of the 37 schools in Region II; the trained mediators actually carried out mediations in 32 schools. According to Mediator Report Forms submitted from the schools, 1,485 mediations took place during 1992-93.

Each mediation involved at least two disputants, and the typical mediation was conducted by a pair of student mediators. Occasionally only one or as many as four mediators and as many as six disputants were involved in one mediation. Thus, 2,353 students were identified from Mediator Report Forms as having experienced student mediation during the 1992-93 school year — either by being trained to mediate or by being mediated. Among the 33 schools where some student mediation activity took place, about five percent of the students were affected by the program. The number of participants per 100 enrollees at those schools ranged from 2 to 40 at elementary schools, from 1 to 14 at middle schools, and from 1 to 5 at senior highs.

Conflict Resolution Training —

According to the school liaisons' reports, training in conflict resolution reached 90 to 100 percent of the student body at five elementary schools and one middle school. At the other extreme were five elementary and two middle schools where conflict resolution training was limited to those students who were trained to be student mediators. The proportion of classes receiving instruction in conflict resolution at other elementary and middle schools fell somewhere in between. At the senior highs, from 5 to 15 percent of the student body received training in conflict resolution. Conflict resolution training took place in classrooms or in small groups, with teachers or counselors providing the training.

Highest Levels of Implementation —

Only one school, a middle school, had exemplary participation in both student mediation (14 percent) and conflict resolution (100 percent). Other schools seem to concentrate on one or the other. Five elementary schools reported that over 90 percent of their students had been trained in conflict resolution; of these five schools, four had modest participation in student mediation (three to eight percent), and one had no student mediation program at all. The highest levels of student mediation participation were found at four elementary schools where over 10 percent of the student body participated; conflict resolution training was moderate at these schools, ranging from 9 to 40 percent of students.

Factors Associated with Highest Levels of Implementation —

Disciplinary referral rates were associated with the level of implementation of student mediation. The four elementary schools having the highest levels of student mediation implementation tended to be schools that had many opportunities for mediation — in other words, schools that had high disciplinary referral rates for general disruptive behavior and for fighting. Thus, it appears that student mediation was taking place in elementary schools where it was needed. However, there were four other Region II elementary schools with high disciplinary referral rates that did not have high levels of student mediation participation.

Elementary schools with the highest levels of implementation in conflict resolution training and the middle school with high levels of implementation in both aspects of the program had no noticeable characteristics that distinguished them from other schools with lower or moderate levels of implementation.

The socioeconomic status of the student population (the percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch) was not related to the rate of implementation of either conflict resolution training or student mediation.

Behavior Characteristics of Mediated Students —

About 60 percent of the students mediated in 1992-93 had no record of referrals for misbehavior that year, according to the school district's Student Case Management System (SCMS). However, the rate of referrals was

higher for students who were mediated than for students as a whole. The most frequent type of referral category of students receiving mediation was "general disruptive behavior"; this is also true for the student population as a whole. Some students who were mediated had been assigned referral codes in more serious categories, such as battery and theft.

This indicates that a significant proportion of students receiving mediation were those who had behavior problems resulting in official referrals; mediation was not being used only for students who would not normally have problems with behavior.

How successful was student mediation in resolving conflicts between students?

Information about mediation was collected from the Mediator Report Forms completed for each incident throughout the year.

Incidents Mediated —

Mediations carried out by students were actual conflicts, not just small or invented incidents to be used as exercises. Although they may not have been events that would have led to formal referrals, they probably would have resulted in some kind of adult intervention.

For elementary schools, "fighting" was the type of incident for which the greatest proportion of mediations occurred (47.9 percent), with "verbal abuse"—name-calling, threatening, teasing — coming in second (30.2 percent). In middle schools, verbal abuse incidents took precedence (36.7 percent), with fighting coming in second (30.6 percent). At senior highs, as great a proportion of mediations occurred for "argument" (regarding friendship) as occurred for verbal abuse incidents (29.6 percent each); fighting came in third (22.2 percent).

Incidents Resolved —

Student mediation provided an opportunity for opponents to express their feelings and think about the conflict situation. Most conflicts were resolved in one mediation session. Eighty-six percent of the incidents mediated were classified as resolved. There was a disproportionately large amount of missing data, however, for the Mediator Report Form question regarding resolution. Student mediators may have left that answer blank rather than

report that a dispute was not resolved. Even when a dispute was classified as resolved, there sometimes were comments like “sort of,” indicating that perhaps both parties were not entirely satisfied with the outcome.

Another indicator, of the resolution of conflicts might be how frequently students participated in mediation. Returning for subsequent mediations might indicate that conflicts were not sufficiently resolved at the first session. However, returning for subsequent mediations might also indicate *success* of mediation, in that students and/or their teachers viewed mediation as a viable option for dealing with conflict. Overall about 15 percent of the students mediate were mediated twice and about five percent were mediated three or more times. Occasionally the same pair of students returned to be mediated again. Eighty percent of the students mediated were mediated only once.

How did student mediation and conflict resolution training affect schoolwide student behavior?

Changes in student behavior were assessed using the records of referral incidents for misbehavior maintained in the school district’s Student Case Management System (SCMS). The

rates of referral incidents in Region II that fell under the category of “general disruptive behavior” are presented in Figure 1. Rates of incidents recorded in SCMS were highest in middle schools and lowest in elementary schools. There were no statistically significant changes in the rates of incidents from 1991-92 to 1992-93 at any of the levels.

There was however, a significant reduction in the rate of incidents from 1991-92 to 1992-93 in the elementary schools that had the highest levels of implementation of *student mediation* (See Figure 2 on page 13.) These four schools, three of which were among the schools having the highest rates of misbehavior referrals, had substantially lower rates of referrals for general disruptive conduct in 1992-93.

This decline in incident rates could be attributed to an improvement in behavior at the schools. It also could indicate that teachers and administrators were using student mediation rather than disciplinary referrals as a means of handling a significant proportion of disruptive behaviors. Despite the improvement, these schools still were among schools having the highest rates of incidents.

No statistically significant difference in rates of incidents was observed the elementary schools that had high levels of implementation

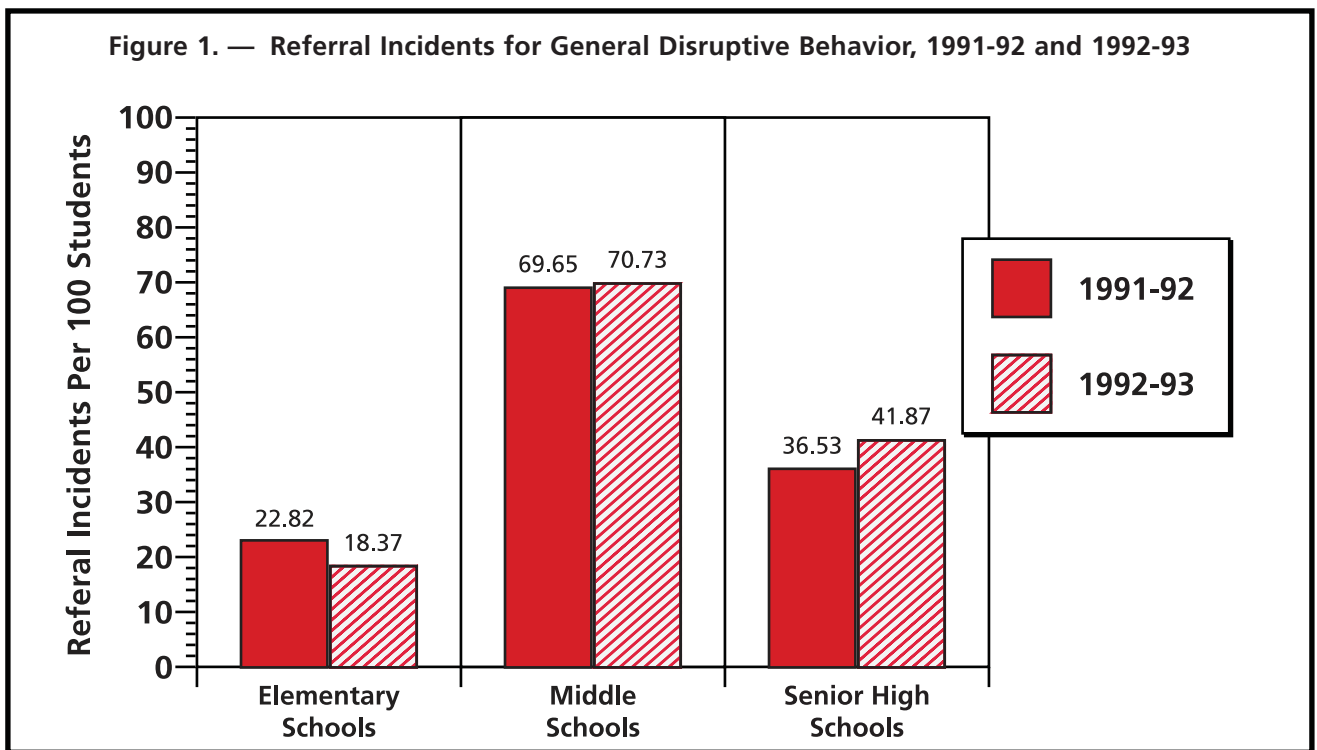
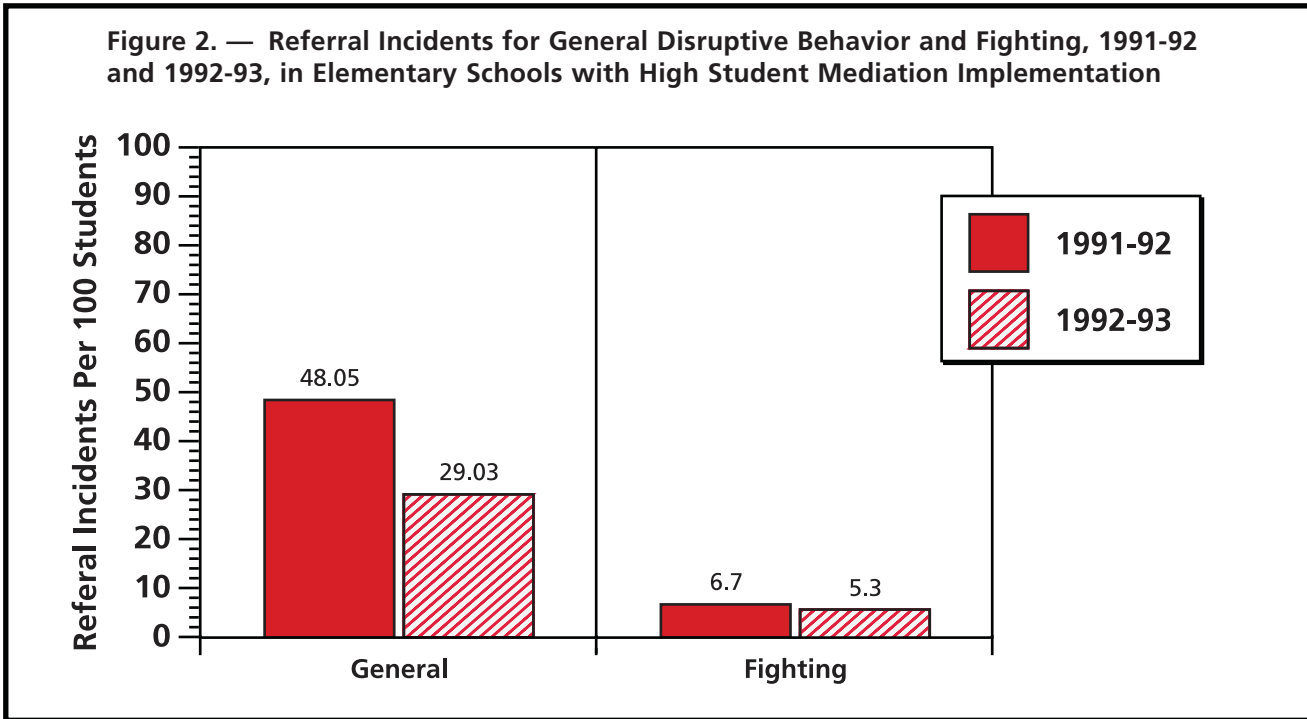


Figure 2. — Referral Incidents for General Disruptive Behavior and Fighting, 1991-92 and 1992-93, in Elementary Schools with High Student Mediation Implementation



of conflict resolution training, or in the middle school with exemplary implementation of both programs. None of the latter schools were among the schools highest in rates of discipline referral incidents.

How did conflict resolution training affect student attitudes toward resolving conflicts?

A student survey was used to assess the attitudes of students who received training in conflict resolution and students who did not receive such training. Survey items were obtained from the Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, California. Students in six classes in a Region II elementary school were given the survey in February before their training in conflict resolution began and in April after the conclusion of their training. Students in six classes at the same school and students in six classes in another school, none of whom had received training in conflict resolution, were given the survey at the same two points in time. The classes were matched for grade level and racial/ethnic makeup.

Responses to the survey were coded to represent a gradation of conflict resolution strategies — from aggression or threat (1) to compromise or sharing (5). Thus, the highest scores show a

tendency to resolve conflicts more peacefully, and the lowest scores represent a tendency to resolve conflicts more violently.

Survey results indicated that conflict resolution training changed student attitudes toward resolving conflicts positively. The mean pretest and posttest scores for students in each of the three groups are shown below.

Conflict Resolution Survey Mean Scores (Grades 2 through 6)

	Pre-test	Post-test
School A (Trained)	2.40	2.64
School A (Not Trained)	2.26	2.19
School B (Not Trained)	2.41	2.29

The mean post-test score for students who received training was higher than the mean scores for the other groups. This difference was statistically significant.

Conclusion

The Conflict Resolution/Student Mediation Program in Region II had made good progress toward implementation by the end of the 1992-93 school year. The evaluation also found some evidence of change in the methods used to deal with conflict on the part of both school personnel and students.

- ◆ Student mediation was used to deal with real conflicts and not just as an exercise. Eighty-six percent of conflicts mediated were reported to be resolved. Eighty percent of students who were mediated experienced mediation only once.
- ◆ On the whole, schools evidenced no significant change in relevant indicators of behavior from 1991-92 to 1992-93. However, elementary schools that had the highest levels of implementation of student mediation did evidence a significant reduction in the rate of referrals for general disruptive behavior.
- ◆ Training in conflict resolution affected student attitudes toward resolving conflicts positively. Results from a survey of students who received training and students who did not receive training indicated that trained students were more willing to respond to conflict situations with compromise rather than threats and violence.

Student mediation and conflict resolution training are programs that require time and patience for implementation. They require that school personnel and students alike not only learn new skills but also take advantage of everyday opportunities to practice them.

The difficulty of adopting these practices is evidenced in many ways in this early evaluation. For example, teams of student mediators were trained at a high proportion of the schools in Region II, but few schools provided evidence that the methods were used to even a modest amount. Similarly, after two months of training in conflict resolution, students' attitudes toward handling conflicts had changed only slightly.

However, it is believed that more dramatic (and lasting) changes may occur as students see conflict resolution and mediation methods used in classrooms and are encouraged to use the methods in their own disputes. □
