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Peer Mediation in United States High Schools

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Abstract

This paper will first discuss the start of peer mediation programs in high schools. It will go on to discuss Avalon School as an example of an existing peer mediation program in a high school. From there it will discuss some details of certain elements of Avalon's peer mediation program, including looking at the alternative options. It will conclude with comments on what this information tells us about future generations' ability to positively resolve conflicts and where the reader can go from here.

Introduction: What we will cover in this paper

The topic for this paper is peer mediation programs in high schools in the United States. It was co-authored by two students in a mediation/conflict resolution course at the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University in the first few months of 2012.

This paper begins by looking at the history of such programs. Where/when/why did they start? It will consider Avalon's peer mediation program, and discuss how effective that program is. From there it will discuss certain elements of that program in more detail by mentioning alternative options and discussing what those elements reveal for the future generation. To explain what this information may mean for the future this paper will discuss what the growth of these programs can tell us about future generations' ability to mediate conflicts. From there this paper will close with where the reader can go from here regarding these programs.

First, however, this paper must set out how it intends to measure effective mediation within the example it will discuss. This paper will assess the effectiveness of mediation programs on both the number of mediations that resulted in solutions agreed to by all disputants and the relationship the disputants maintain afterwards. This way we have a quantitative measure that can transcend all layouts of peer mediation programs, and we have a more qualitative measure that shows if the mediations were ultimately successful.

Background: Where, When and Why Peer Mediation Programs Got Started

Peer mediation programs started as a means of teaching students a more peaceful problem-solving approach to resolving conflicts. At the same time, they teach students valuable skills in decision-making, communication, and seeing another person's perspective. There are two reasons why schools wanted to put in place mediation programs or peer mediation programs. The first reason is to make schools safer. This means that schools will have better learning outcomes and that students can relate to each other in more positive ways. They wanted to stop the violence that was happening in schools and other types of disputes. The second reason is to help students become young adults, building on the problem-solving skills that they will need in the future for successful careers, relationships, families, and whatever else they decide to do.

The first program to address conflict resolution in schools was the Teaching Students to be Peacemakers Program (TSP), developed in the mid-1960s at the University of Minnesota by researcher David W. Johnson and his brother, Roger T.

Johnson. It was started as a result of research the Johnsons had done on “integrative negotiations and conflict, our development of social interdependence theory, and our training of thousands of elementary, secondary and college students, faculty and administrators in how to manage conflicts constructively” (Johnson and Roger Teaching Students). Beginning in 1966, teachers were trained to help students solve problems. The Peacemaker Program taught students the value of conflict, five strategies for managing conflicts, negotiation procedures, and peer mediation procedures. There is now a network of school districts using the Peacemaker Program throughout North America, Europe and several other countries in Asia, Central and South America, the Middle East, and Africa. The program has also been used to teach delinquents, runaways, drug abusers, and married couples (Johnson and Rogers Teaching Students).

Another place where mediation started was among the Quaker community in New York City. In the early 1970s, Quaker teachers became interested in conducting nonviolent training with their students. Known as the New York Quaker Project on Community Conflict, it resulted in the founding of the Children’s Creative Response to Conflict in 1972. Workshops are still given weekly in public schools to teach that “the power of non-violence lies in justice, love and caring, and the desire for personal integrity” (Conflict Resolution).

In the early 1980s, conflict resolution programs began to be called peer mediation programs, and were often started with the help of community mediation centers. The San Francisco Community Board introduced the most prominent of these programs, Conflict Managers, for Policy and Training (Carei). It works at both

the elementary and secondary levels. Teachers receive 15 hours of training in mediation and conflict resolution skills and, in turn, train groups of students. The training focuses on listening, teamwork, mediation steps, and role-playing. The Conflict Manager program was so successful that it attracted the attention of schools around the country. School-based peer mediation programs became organized in 1984 with the development of the National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME). NAME has become an important source of information for schools trying to promote conflict resolution. When it was first established there were only a few other programs like it. By 1988, the number had grown to well over 200. Now there are thousands of peer mediation programs in the world (Carei).

Columbia University's International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR) looks at the training and results of conflict resolution. The ICCR encourages schools to use mediation programs by training teacher and students, put conflict resolution programs into the schools curriculum and hoping the schools will develop cooperative communities.

The Ohio Commission on Conflict Resolution and the Department of Education pushed schools to use conflict resolution by awarding grants to Ohio's k-12 grade schools. They pushed them to design, carry out and evaluate conflict resolution programs that they put into place.

Avalon: A look at one high school's peer mediation program

Avalon School is a project-based charter school in Saint Paul, MN serving grades 7 through 12¹. Avalon has an active Peer Mediation program that we'll use as our example of a mediation program that exists in a high school today. This program came into existence alongside Avalon itself in the 2001-2002 academic year, based on the knowledge of one of the original advisors² from teaching in Quaker schools (so the roots of the program can be found within advocates of nonviolence), methods learned in a training session done with Como High School students, and a purchased peer mediation program from the CRU Institute (A. Martin, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

Avalon formally trains each of their peer mediators once a year in restorative circles and peer mediation. They leave the school building for this daylong training, and learn the mediation process after discussing nonviolent resolution. The student coordinator³ leads this training, with staff support only as needed (R. Goldner, personal communication, February 29, 2012). Here is a description of the training:

After eating breakfast they all circle up and introduce themselves as well as sign in with their contact information. They then go on to answer the first set of questions that are on the schedule for the day (see Appendix C for the schedule from the 2011 training session). Once everyone has gone around and answered the questions, the student coordinator passes out the Peer Mediation Handbook, which includes information on what makes a good mediator, seating arrangements, and

¹ For full disclosure, Alexander Celeste is a 2010 graduate of Avalon

² Andrea Martin is the original advisor referred to here

³ The current student coordinator is Cailleán Magee

ideas of what to do if the mediation isn't going anywhere. It also has a copy of all of the paperwork needed for peer mediation (see Appendixes A and B for this paperwork). Once they have gone through the whole handbook past mediators role-play a mediation session. When that is over and they have answered any questions that came up they get into groups of four and the coordinator gives each group two different scenarios (this way each person gets a chance to be a mediator and a disputant) to role-play themselves. The advisor and student coordinator let this go on for a while and makes sure that everyone is doing all right. Once everyone is done they take a lunch break. After lunch, the staff expert on circles does circle training for the new peer mediators. This is a way to bring the entire group together and give them more listening skills. That is the end of the training, so they all head back to school (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012).

The training occurs in mid-October to give the coordinator time to pick qualified candidates as mediators. The coordinator picks the peer mediators based on a recommendation from each advisor, with one student from each advisory recommended to be in the program. This is done in order to keep the quality of peer mediators at the standard the coordinator desires. Following Avalon's general mixing of grades, anyone in the school can become a mediator, just as anyone in the school can ask for mediation (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012).

By nature of training a small number of peer mediators this program can be categorized as cadre, versus one where the entire student body is trained (Johnson 1996, p. 460). Here is a description of how the program, which has not changed since

its start (A. Martin, personal communication, February 26, 2012), operates on a day-to-day basis:

The student coordinator, and not the staff advisor⁴, manages the administrative work behind mediation requests and the 25 others who are the mediators. When a conflict arises one of the disputants (student or staff) fills out a "Peer Mediation Request Form" (available from the student coordinator; see Appendix A for these forms, one for students and one for staff) and submits it to the student coordinator (C. Magee, personal communication, January 27, 2012).

The program does not have peer mediators settle violent episodes, but any other disputes are fair game for mediation (R. Goldner, personal communication, February 29, 2012). An argument, misunderstandings, rumors, disagreements, general dislike of a person, pranks (anything that isn't physical), are all acceptable to go to peer mediation. For staff it can be used when a student feels uncomfortable because of something a staff member has done, or the student feels that what the staff member did was inappropriate (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012).

The student coordinator asks the other disputant if they'd be willing to be in mediation with the disputant who submitted the request form. If they'd like to, or are at least willing to, then the coordinator selects who she thinks the best two mediators would be for the specific situation. In picking the mediators for the co-mediation⁵ peer mediation, the student coordinator generally picks mediators that are not connected very much with the disputants. This is hard in a small school, but

⁴ Regina Goldner is the current staff advisor for Avalon's Peer Mediation Program

⁵ Co-mediation is where you have two mediators, not just one

generally works out. To keep the mediation balanced, if one disputant is a 7th grader, and one a 12th grader, then the coordinator will try to get one 7th grade mediator and one 12th grade mediator, etc. (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012). The coordinator then locates and sets up a private room to use for the mediation, and schedules the mediation for later on if it isn't a good time for the four people involved right then. The table in this room is set up in a specific way so that the power is balanced: one disputant has a mediator next to him, yet also a mediator directly across from him, and the other disputant is sitting diagonally across the table from the first disputant (C. Magee, personal communication, January 27, 2012).

Once everyone is seated, the mediators go over the ground rules and ask both disputants to sign the contract (see Appendix B for this contract) agreeing to the rules and agreeing to find a solution. The mediators usually start the conversation by asking the disputant who requested the mediation to start. Once both disputants can state the problem out loud the mediators put it together and reword it so that everyone is on the same page. Once the problem has been uncovered the mediators put it on the contract and start looking for solutions with the disputants. The mediators try to encourage the disputants to find the solutions on their own, but will usually give some ideas on what could work as a solution to the problem. Once an agreement is reached, the solution is written down on the contract and both mediators and disputants sign it. Both mediators must fill out a contract, so every mediation has two contracts. Once they are done the mediators

bring the contracts back to the coordinator and the mediation is over (C. Magee, personal communication, January 27, 2012).

A mediation program is only valuable if it is effective, and the question must be asked if the Peer Mediation program at Avalon truly works to solve conflicts at the school. According to the current student coordinator, the mediation is very effective for most situations, though (as with any environment) there are some situations where mediation isn't the best resolution. Generally arguments and misunderstandings are the easiest to mediate; misunderstandings that become rumors are the most common issues that go to mediation (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012). For a mediation to be as effective as it can be both disputants must be willing to participate; if one of them isn't interested in doing it and they are there reluctantly, the mediation doesn't go anywhere (C. Magee, personal communication, January 27, 2012). These kinds of mediations generally happen when one of the disputants is accusing the other one of doing something. What they say the other did differs so much that you could think of any solution and you would still not come to an agreement (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012). Avalon has seen a lot of mediations that have been successful and the relationship between the two disputants has improved greatly because of the mediations. Mediation is a really effective form of conflict resolution for such a small and independent school as Avalon; the students still feel like they have say in what is going to happen. In the past two years combined Avalon has had roughly 40 mediations (C. Magee, personal communication, January 27, 2012).

The above description shows that Avalon's Peer Mediation Program is effective, but it doesn't include much that can be used to compare its success to other programs. To do this, we must add to the qualitative measures above the quantitative details relating to how many students utilized the program versus the total number of students at Avalon, and how many mediations during that school year resulted in agreed-upon solutions. In the 2010-11 academic year 180 students were enrolled (Avalon's normal enrollment as Alex understands it), 17 of them used peer mediation (R. Goldner, personal communication February 29, 2012), thus 9.4 percent of the student body utilized peer mediation in the 2010-2011 academic year. During this time, only four mediations were repeats/revisits (R. Goldner, personal communication, February 29, 2012), which gives you an idea of the success rate of the peer mediation program, although the percentage of students who used the program is still quite low.

The student coordinator has heard of some of the mediators in the program using their skills outside of school or even outside of mediation. Being a mediator in the program gives these students the ability to compromise, listen, and settle conflicts in any situation, useful skills that they can use anytime in their future (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012).

The student coordinator is seeing that more females are participating in the mediation program and more females actually use the program to settle disputes, than males do. The student coordinator feels that the way that teenage girls work, compared to male students, plays a role in this discrepancy. The student coordinator has noticed that Avalon has a larger female leadership body than male (something

that, now that he thinks about it, Alex realizes was true when he was a student there) and also that girls tend to hold grudges for longer periods of time, and those build up and burst, and those are the kinds of disputes that usually go to mediation. Girls are also more willing to do mediation (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012).

Although anyone can become a peer mediator (and because many students choose to do so yearly, this covers for graduating mediators), the position of the student coordinator is not as open. The former student coordinator, Holly, selected Caillean Magee, the current student coordinator, in her junior year. Caillean plans to hold onto the position until she becomes a senior, and will then hand pick the next student coordinator (C. Magee, personal communication, March 27th, 2012). This represents a very different process from the more open process of choosing peer mediators.

Discussing Some Details on Elements of Avalon's Peer Mediation Program

Now that we have looked closely at Avalon's Peer Mediation Program, we will choose some specific elements of the program and discuss what would happen if another program handled an element in the opposite way. What that might mean for the big picture will be discussed in the concluding section.

Avalon has a formal peer mediator training in October of every school year that is held offsite and run by the student coordinator. Another way of doing this would be to have the training run by an external group onsite in the first week of school. A formal program/training could also be eliminated entirely, and instead

conflict resolution could be built into the core curriculum. These changes would not render nearly the same results as Avalon has seen. The training being run by the student coordinator means that it is tailored directly for the specific program. If you were to train onsite you would not have the benefit of being separated from, and thus relieved of, the usual burdens of school. Training a small group of mediators means that there will be a more unified and controlled mediation experience.

The student coordinator manages the administrative work surrounding the peer mediation at Avalon. Many schools have a staff member manage these tasks. At Avalon, a disputant need only fill out a half-sheet form at the coordinator's desk to get a mediation session, but in many schools this may be a much more complex and staff-reliant process. This process demonstrates that Avalon's program is wholly run at the student level (hence "peer," meaning a program run by the students for the students and not just mediators that are of the same class standing), but most schools will put it underneath a counselor's oversight and this means that, in essence, the "peer" mediation program relies heavily on school administrative staff to keep it running.

At Avalon, mediations take place in whatever private room can be arranged, and co-mediation—making sure that mediators match disputants in grade (or as staff)—is used. Some schools may have a reserved room for such purposes, but more will possibly need to resort to using stairwells or similar places that are normally public. Schools may also not be as careful about having mediators (especially if there are just one or two) match disputants, which will upset the balance of the mediation.

Peer mediation is used for anything that isn't a physical fight at Avalon, a policy that covers a wide array of acceptable disputes, but one that does leave out the violent disputes. Though most schools stick to such a restriction for reasons tied to safety rules and procedures, mediation could work for every dispute if the mediators were trained extremely well and truly hadn't ever seen the disputants before (neither of which is likely in most high schools). Thus, if a verbal argument turns into a fight, with large objects getting thrown around, the disputants have gone beyond the remedy of peer mediation and find themselves at the mercy of (quite often) an assistant principal.

The student coordinator of Avalon's program described it as effective. Instead of providing specifics here just look at the previous section for why the program is effective. Overall the positive view on the peer mediation program at Avalon lends credibility to the methods the school uses in every corner of the program.

In the 2010-11 academic year 180 students were enrolled at Avalon with 17 having used mediation, meaning that 9.4 percent of the students used mediation. This tells us that although the majority of students didn't use peer mediation, it was used by nearly 1/10, and it must be remembered that Avalon is a small school. In the same year only four mediations were repeats/revisits, which shows that Avalon's methods were effective for those students who chose to utilize peer mediation. Statistics at a larger school might look better, but you would need to take every aspect of that school into account, and still will run into the issues of using numbers to measure effectiveness.

At Avalon the student coordinator has heard of some of the mediators using their skills outside of school, and even outside of mediation. We can infer from this that those mediators are willing to take their skills beyond the physical boundaries of school property and the mental boundaries of the framework of peer mediation. This can be yet another factor to look at when seeing how these programs have impacted the students involved over time. To truly see if this has lasting impacts we would need to look at student mediators years after their college graduations to see if they have maintained and used their mediation skills in their lives.

The student coordinator at Avalon stated that she has noticed that a larger proportion of disputants asking for mediation are girls, and she hypothesized that this may have to do with girls holding more grudges, and being more open to mediation. There is little to say here without drifting into debates about gender differences and looking at the specifics of the environment in which a school exists. But overall this issue suggests that use of peer mediation may hinge on some variables that we did not have the ability to explore with peer mediation in this paper.

This is a look at elements of Avalon's Peer Mediation Program in a little more depth. More details on the program alone can be found in the previous section. In the upcoming section we will take this information and explore what it may mean for the future, as well as give our readers some places to go after reading this paper.

Conclusions: What all this can tell us about future generations' ability to mediate conflicts and where the reader can go from here

Looking at what issues led to the creation of high school peer mediation programs, examining what an existing program looks like, and digging deeper into some aspects of the program gives us a picture of the positive conflict management that today's high school students may be exposed to. Students in these schools, especially those who are mediators in those programs, are learning the skills of conflict resolution that could someday enable them to find positive alternatives to violent warfare. We see this potential because of mediators using their skills outside of school and mediation. Of course, these programs alone won't do that; they are merely one piece in the puzzle of positive alternatives to today's violence. They don't provide the full picture of what peace education could look like by any means.

As the reader, you can take this deeper look at high school peer mediation and apply it to your own community. Although this paper provides a look at these programs in general, it also provides (partly by way of the appendices) a solid example to learn from if you wanted to create your own program. Or, barring authority to do such, you can always just be aware that programs like this exist and try to make sure that nothing happens to make them disappear, and that support continues for the use of mediation skills outside of school-based peer mediation. Perhaps you could see the value of a class on peer mediation being introduced at your high school, to teach students what mediation is and the ways in which it could improve the spirit of friendliness in your school, and lessen the feeling that a

student has no recourse if s/he feels s/he has been wronged. A class like this could lead to the creation of a peer mediation program.

With the problems of physical and cyber bullying, racial profiling, violence in schools, and other problems gaining national media attention daily, the ways to apply what was discussed in these pages are limitless.

Further, though not every source was directly cited in this paper, the questions that were asked of our Avalon contacts, and the way we organized this paper, were partially drawn from information gained in a literature review on this topic. Thus we hope that this study of Avalon's Peer Mediation Program and the resulting discussion of details, as well as our conclusions, can all be situated within the existing body of literature on this topic.

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Avalon School (<http://www.avalonschool.org/>) and the four direct contacts that were in email communication with Alexander Celeste as he was writing the section on Avalon's peer mediation program.

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Appendix A

Peer Mediation Request Form:

(Please fill out and return to Caillean Magee)

Date:_____.

Disputant:_____ . Advisor:_____ .

Disputant:_____ . Advisor:_____ .

Please "x" one of the following that best describes the situation:

Fight____. Almost Fight____. Rumors____. Argument_____.

.....
Office use only:

Mediation date:

Assigned Mediators:

Peer Mediation Request Form (Staff) (Please fill out and return to Caillean Magee)

Date:_____.

Staff Member:_____.

Student:_____ . Advisor:_____ .

.....
Office use only:

Mediation Date:

Assigned Mediators:

Appendix B

Peer Mediation Contract:

Date: _____.

Disputant: _____ . Disputant _____ .

Mediator _____ . Mediator _____ .

Rules: No interrupting, no name calling, no putdowns, and no swearing

Problem:

Solution:

I agree to the solution that we have set:

Disputant: _____ . Disputant: _____ .

Mediator: _____ . Mediator: _____ .

Follow up mediation: No ___. Yes ___. When: _____.

Appendix C

Mediation Training Schedule 19th October 2011

9:00: Meet in the Cafe and talk about what we are going to be doing today.

9:10: Arrive at Sacred Paths Center, eat breakfast.

9:40: Check in, introductions, introduction to Mediation, get mediator information.

- What problems do we have at Avalon?
- Why do we mediate?
- Why is it important to the Avalon community?
- What is the difference between judge and mediator?

- What do we want this year to be like?
- What are we looking forward to?
- What are we nervous about?

10:30: Pass out handbook and go over it.

11:00: Example mediation:

- What did we notice?
- What should be included in a mediation?

11:30: Role plays (2 mediations per table)

12:30: Lunch

1:15: Circle Training with Monessa