

Recommended Guidelines for Effective Conflict Resolution Education Programs in K-12 Classrooms, Schools and School Districts

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The Development of these Guidelines

The Recommended Guidelines for Effective Conflict Resolution Education Programs ("Guidelines") presented here are the product of work begun by a committee of the Conflict Resolution Education Network (CREnet) and completed by the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR). The Guidelines outline how elementary and secondary school teachers, administrators, conflict resolution education practitioners, and policy makers can measure progress toward effective conflict resolution education programs. By addressing core goals, components, content and qualities of effective school-based conflict resolution education programs, these Guidelines are intended to also help leaders to make decisions about the resources and strategies needed to support such educational programs in their schools.

Introduction to these Guidelines

The challenge to which this document responds is to help clarify basic assumptions and expectations regarding the unique contribution that conflict resolution education can make in achieving safe and welcoming school communities.

Setting the context for conflict resolution education involves:

1. defining conflict resolution education
2. describing conflict resolution education goals and processes
3. clarifying the impact of cultural assumptions on conflict resolution education
4. recognizing the importance of balancing structure and flexibility in program implementation
5. underscoring the importance of program assessment and evaluation

1. The Meaning of Conflict Resolution Education

Conflict resolution education models and teaches, in developmentally relevant and culturally appropriate ways, a variety of processes, practices, and skills designed to address individual, interpersonal, and institutional conflicts, and to create safe and welcoming learning environments. These skills, concepts and values help individuals to understand conflict dynamics, and empower them to use communication and creative thinking to build healthy relationships and manage and resolve conflicts fairly and nonviolently. Conflict resolution educators envision a peaceful and just world where citizens act responsibly and with civility in their interactions and in their dispute resolution processes.

Conflict resolution education is important to:

- **individuals**, to build competence in life skills;

- **schools, classrooms, and school communities**, to support effective and safe learning environments; and
- **society**, to ensure a functioning and peaceful democracy.

2. Conflict Resolution Education Goals and Processes

Conflict resolution education programs include a wide range of processes, all of which are based on conflict resolution education principles and are intended to be developmentally and culturally appropriate.

The goals of conflict resolution education within a school community are to:

- create a safe and welcoming learning and teaching environment for all;
- increase cooperative and problem-solving behavior among children, youth and adults;
- reduce violence and violence-related behavior among and between students, teachers and staff;
- improve student participation and achievement by solving problems that would otherwise detract from teaching and learning;
- integrate conflict resolution concepts and skills into the curriculum;
- provide effective alternatives to punishment-based discipline programs.

Below are some of the ways conflict resolution education may be used in schools and classrooms, and supported at the district level.

Classroom processes

- *Conflict Resolution Corner* is an area of the classroom set aside for students who agree to talk out/resolve a problem. This physical area includes helpful materials, such as procedure steps, posters, and other guidance, which assist students in practicing conflict resolution skills. The area may be a permanent part of the classroom or set up at specific times each day (after recess, for example). It may be used at the teacher's discretion, or according to other guidelines established through classroom meetings.
- *Classroom meetings* are facilitated processes where students and the teacher discuss and/or resolve classroom issues and disputes using communication and problem solving skills.
- *Collaborative decision-making* involves working on problems with another person or group to seek solutions that satisfy all parties. This means accepting both parties' concerns as valid, while examining underlying issues in order to find innovative solutions.
- *Curriculum Infusion* weaves conflict resolution skills, concepts, and themes into core components of the classroom curriculum, teaching style, classroom rules and conflict resolution practices.
- *Curriculum Integration* focuses on integrating conflict resolution skills and concepts across and between various academic disciplines. For example: anger and impulse control might be taught as part of a psychology class; language arts classes could help students master active listening and other effective communication skills; a social studies curriculum provides opportunities to examine events from

multiple perspectives and seek alternatives; a history class unit on the Holocaust could include teaching bias awareness/bias interruption.

School-wide programs

- *Cross-cultural awareness and appreciation initiatives* examine conflict and conflict resolution pro-actively and positively, by addressing cultural, racial and ethnic differences as learning opportunities, and by fostering cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding among and between students, teachers and staff.
- *Peer mediation* is a formal conflict resolution process in which one or more student(s) act as neutral facilitators, guiding disputing peers through a voluntary process intended to help them reach a mutually satisfactory agreement.
- *Alternatives to suspension* may focus on conflict resolution skill building, social and emotional learning, or other problem solving programming, during the specific period of time in which a student has been removed from the classroom as a disciplinary action.
- *Restorative justice* is a set of practices designed to repair harm (to the greatest extent possible) done to a person, group or community. The goals are to hold the offender accountable, restore the victim's dignity, engage in joint problem solving to repair damage to the victim and the community, and reintegrate the offender back into the community. Restorative justice generally involves group conferencing, sometimes known as healing circles.

District and State or National Level

- Sustained support for development of the above programs and initiatives in multiple schools across the system, including providing necessary funding, training, professional development, and performance expectations, so that conflict resolution programs can grow and succeed.

3. The Impact of Culture on Conflict Resolution Education

Cultural assumptions, beliefs and values affect conflict resolution education. In the United States in recent years, conflict resolution education programs predominantly have been based on the needs, worldviews, and norms of a dominant Western culture. This dominant culture has influenced virtually every aspect of work in conflict resolution education. Conflict resolution education initiatives should examine and explicitly state their cultural assumptions, beliefs and values, in order to avoid unconscious imposition of one value or belief system over another, and to support multiculturalism.

- *Assumptions* are concepts that underlie and pervade a person's or group's outlook and behavior, defining the nature of their reality. Examples of assumptions made by dominant culture that have influenced conflict resolution education include the idea that individualism is more important

- than the needs of the whole group or community, and the belief that explicit verbal communication is better than more subtle forms of communication.
- *Beliefs and values* are opinions or convictions regarding what is 'good' or 'ideal.' Examples of dominant culture beliefs and values that have influenced conflict resolution education include: the supreme importance of individual autonomy and responsibility; admiration of direct communication, and face-to-face confrontation of problems, more than other forms of communication; and a preference for treating all people the same way, and avoiding emotion in favor of rationality.

Conflict resolution education can and should broaden the above base of assumptions, beliefs, and values, to affirm the value of cultural diversity. The true potential of conflict resolution education cannot be realized without honoring differences.

4. Balancing Structure with Flexibility in Program Implementation

Conflict resolution education programs develop over time. Programs often go through a beginning phase, a consolidation phase, and an institutionalization phase. Therefore, this document provides a set of guidelines that reflect an ideal balance between the need for structure (following what is known about implementing effective conflict resolution education programs) and the need for flexibility (adaptation to local school interests and conditions).

Conflict resolution education is dynamic and interrelates with many other goals, programs, and reform initiatives in education. A crucial component of conflict resolution education, for example, is communication skills, including the ability to listen, understand, and rephrase. These skills are equally relevant to conflict resolution education and to other educational goals and initiatives, including:

- social and emotional learning and character education
- multicultural and bias awareness education
- violence and bullying prevention
- peace and nonviolence education
- drug/alcohol prevention
- law-related education
- critical thinking
- collaborative problem solving
- cooperative learning

Many conflict resolution educators consider themselves part of, and/or close allies with, some of these educational efforts. In addition, the broader field of conflict resolution involves several different conflict resolution strategies, such as negotiation, mediation, and collaborative problem solving. To varying degrees, conflict resolution education programs and curricula integrate key aspects and insights from each of these areas.

The process of conflict resolution education is dynamic: each school, practitioner, educator, or district may add or emphasize certain elements of related practices and initiatives in education, in order to effectively meet their particular needs and goals. School conflict resolution education programs may have different characteristics, depending on the interests, cultural make-up, and readiness of each school community. At its best, conflict resolution education is becoming more "comprehensive," integrating multiple strategies for handling conflict and facilitating and grounding students' conflict resolution learning.

5. The Importance of Program Assessment and Evaluation

Needs assessment

Before any conflict resolution education program is launched, one of the most important things to do is to assess the school's readiness and commitment to such a program. Some of the things that are important to consider when assessing school readiness include:

- the needs of the school;
- the level of commitment to conflict resolution education on the part of school leadership, staff and teachers;
- prevailing assumptions about conflict resolution education programs;
- access to conflict resolution training and other resources;
- program funding availability;
- support from the local school district; and
- parent and community interest and involvement.

Interviews, surveys and/or focus groups, may help to assess school readiness. In order for conflict resolution education programs to be successful, it is critical that major stakeholders from all groups in the school community understand and commit to the program and its principles.

Evaluation

Ongoing evaluation is critical to the success of conflict resolution education programs. Whenever possible, it is helpful to use outside evaluation (such as a university or the central administration office) for a school's program. In evaluating programs, it is important to assess not only students' progress, but also the processes used to implement the program and teach the concepts. Gathering this information will help a school to modify its program training and content, and thus to increase effectiveness. Also, funders may be more willing to give additional monies to support program growth if they see results along the way. By making the results of program evaluations available to the school district and interested community stakeholders, a school helps to build public support for its conflict resolution education program. *For specific recommendations about program evaluation, please see Assessment and Evaluation Guidelines in Section IV.*

How to use the Classroom, School and School District Guidelines

The guidelines that follow are minimum recommendations for effective school-based conflict resolution education programs. Many schools may find that they are able to go beyond these minimum guidelines as their programs grow and become an everyday part of the school's design. Guidelines are presented for each level at which conflict resolution education may be implemented – classroom, school, and school district. The classroom level is addressed first, in order to encourage program implementers to understand and advocate for programming in the classroom and school, while also encouraging more comprehensive district-wide support for conflict resolution education programming. A section on how to conduct program assessment and evaluation follows these guidelines.

I. Guidelines for Classroom Conflict Resolution Education

The classroom environment in which teaching and learning happens is strongly influenced by a teacher's goals, objectives, ways of teaching and curriculum selections or emphases. Effective classroom conflict resolution education emerges from, and directly impacts, teacher development, teaching strategies, parental involvement, curriculum, and program assessment and evaluation.

Staff Development Guidelines

- take basic conflict resolution training, with regular opportunities for further skill development
- use conflict resolution skills and strategies in daily interactions and teaching
- participate in conflict resolution education curriculum development planning and in-service sessions with others who teach similar topics
- read literature about conflict resolution and conflict resolution education
- attend professional conflict resolution education conferences and in-service trainings
- maintain active memberships in conflict resolution organizations
- participate in local, regional or national conflict resolution events and organizational committee work

Classroom Climate Guidelines

- Differences are handled with civility and respect.
- Wherever possible, teachers and students work together to design and use mutually agreed upon rules and policies for classroom interaction and conduct.
- In a safe and welcoming classroom, students, teachers and other classroom personnel successfully use a variety of strategies to discuss and resolve conflicts, including:
 - collaborative decision-making
 - designation of a specific classroom area where students talk out and resolve problems
 - classroom meetings
 - facilitated dialogues and discussions
 - mediation, negotiation, or other formal conflict resolution processes that result in agreements that resolve disputes

Curriculum and Program Implementation

Teaching Methods

- infuse conflict resolution skills, concepts, and themes into core academic disciplines such as language arts, math, social studies, science, art, and music;
- use cooperative learning and experiential education activities that engage all students and give a wide range of students opportunities to share leadership;
- incorporate multicultural perspectives and diversified teaching techniques into all lessons;
- emphasize the development of critical thinking, perspective taking, and the ability to consider and analyze options;

- provide reflective time for students to process what they are learning by journaling, or by taking part in other activities that help them to think about ways to integrate conflict resolution education into their daily lives.

Conflict Resolution Education Core Concepts

- Effective classroom resolution helps students recognize the following concepts: what conflict is and how it operates
- the difference between conflict and violence - violence is a symptom, or a kind of response, while conflict is the underlying problem or disagreement
- how conflicts increase and decrease
- cultural variations in conflict styles and conflict resolution processes
- personal conflict styles and diverse approaches to conflict
- the difference between fight-flight (aggressive) responses, avoidance responses and assertiveness
- basic human needs and the role that unmet needs play in causing or exacerbating conflicts
- the distinctions between needs and wants, between interests and positions
- recognizing one's own and others' emotions
- anger triggers and responses to those triggers
- group communication and interaction patterns and challenges
- the nature of "bullying" and harassment, and how to interrupt and/or deter it
- how conflict resolution skills can be useful "life skills" at school, at work and at home
- responsibility: taking ownership for one's role in the conflict and the outcome of conflict

Conflict Resolution Education Core Skills

- cooperative group interaction: turn-taking, sharing responsibility
- communication: paraphrasing, active listening, non-verbal communication, validating, reframing, giving and receiving effective messages, including feedback
- affirmation and empathy: learning to feel better about oneself, appreciate others, and provide emotional support for oneself and empathy for others
- anger management: impulse control, capacity to identify anger and effectively respond to it, in self and others
- mediation and negotiation: ability to initiate and successfully complete formal conflict resolution process steps, such as brainstorming, selecting from among alternatives, understanding positions and interests, and analyzing various perspectives of a conflict
- bias awareness: identifying bias (personal, cultural, institutional), understanding bias in self and others, knowing methods for interrupting and countering bias
- problem solving: defining the problem, identifying and evaluating options, selecting the most appropriate resolution strategy
- collaborative decision-making: learning democratic, consensus-based, and other ways of helping people make decisions

Guidelines for Parent and Caregiver Involvement

- provide parents/caregivers information about conflict resolution so that they can support and reinforce their children's conflict resolution skills at home and school
- send parents/caregivers notes of particular successes or challenges related to a student's conflict resolution skills and knowledge
- provide opportunities for parents/caregivers to visit the classroom, lead activities, or (once they are trained) co-facilitate conflict resolution activities with the teacher

II. Guidelines for School-Wide Conflict Resolution Education Programs

An effective school-wide conflict resolution education program is impacted by: school climate; curriculum; selected means of program implementation; teacher and staff development; community and parental involvement; and results from regular assessment and evaluation of these, and other, program goals. Although schools may choose to begin a program by focusing on one or two of these aspects, a comprehensive conflict resolution education program should aim to incorporate all of the following aspects.

School Climate Guidelines

- The school's stated mission includes a strong commitment to conflict resolution education.
- All school administrators, teachers, staff and students have access to conflict resolution training, and are encouraged to model effective conflict resolution skills in school interactions and organizational meetings and practices.
- School problem-solving and disciplinary policies are student-centered and include:
 - an active, viable mediation program;
 - an anti-bullying and anti-harassment commitment; and
 - classroom-based conflict resolution lessons and activities.
- The school publicly celebrates and supports conflict resolution education efforts through posters, artwork, newsletters, and other visible artifacts, and hosts celebrations (at minimum, annually) to honor all members of the school community who participate in conflict resolution education activities and/or demonstrate healthy conflict resolution behaviors.

Curriculum and Program Implementation and Training Guidelines

- The school makes a strong commitment to develop and expand its conflict resolution education programs over time.
- The school has at least one staff member whose job it is to coordinate, support and monitor the school's conflict resolution education program. This staff member should have significant conflict resolution education training and experience.
- Students participate in key phases of the planning and implementation of the school's conflict resolution education programs, where appropriate.
- Students, teachers and staff make accurate and culturally diverse information about conflict resolution alternatives and processes available at school.
- The school planning and assessment documents spell out the links among core curriculum, academic achievement, and conflict resolution education

goals. These documents specify how to integrate conflict resolution education with academics, to the benefit of both sets of goals.

- School-wide grading policies encourage the inclusion of information about students' application of conflict resolution skills in written assessments and on grade cards.
- School requirements make at least one for-credit, elective conflict resolution course available to every student prior to high school graduation.
- The school creates a library of age- and curriculum-appropriate conflict resolution education materials and makes these available to all interested students, teachers and staff.
- All full-time staff and teachers are encouraged to take part in a one-day introductory conflict resolution orientation offered through the school.
- The school offers staff and teachers in-service opportunities for continuing conflict resolution skill development and conflict resolution education lesson plan sharing at least two times per year.

Guidelines for Parent/Caregiver and Community Involvement

- The school invites and includes all stakeholders in conflict resolution education program design, implementation and evaluation, where appropriate.
- The school provides at least one public forum or workshop focused on conflict resolution skills training every academic year for parents, other caregivers, and interested community members.
- The school encourages parents, caregivers and community members to complete in-depth conflict resolution training and to actively volunteer in the school's conflict resolution education program.

III. Guidelines for District-wide Conflict Resolution Education Programs

Effective district-wide programs demonstrate commitment to conflict resolution education by creating a climate in which district staff support schools and classrooms in program development programs. When leaders and district-wide facilities are involved, the conflict resolution education programs that are established in schools are more successful.

Climate Guidelines

- District's stated mission includes a strong commitment conflict resolution education.
- District superintendent, staff, administration and board set measurable, professional goals and objectives for the implementation of conflict resolution programs in schools throughout the district.
- All levels of District administration (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendents, support staff, administration, board members, and principals) are able to take part in a three-hour introductory conflict resolution workshop hosted by the District.
- District offers its staff in-service opportunities for beginning and continuing conflict resolution skill development (at minimum, annually) so they may better support program development and evaluation in their individual schools.

- District offices promote and advocate for conflict resolution education through a variety of initiatives and public relations efforts. For example, school districts may sponsor peace essay contests or poster contests, highlight new conflict resolution education programs in district schools, and/or use conflict resolution procedures in their own offices.

Program Implementation and Training Guidelines

- District staff includes at least one full-time professional, who has conflict resolution education experience, knowledge, and training, and whose job it is to coordinate, support and monitor in-school programs throughout the district, and provides needed administrative support and resources for that coordinator.
- District makes available introductory conflict resolution workshops for representatives from district schools.
- District provides ways for school personnel to network and share resources and strategies for successful program implementation.
- District facilitates in-service conflict resolution education and training as a fulfillment of requirements for continuing education in teacher and administrator credentialing and personnel assessment.
- District provides funds, writes grants, or cost-shares with schools for conflict resolution education programs in all pre-kindergarten – 12th grade schools. This includes providing ongoing monies for staff development.
- District offers at least one stand-alone conflict resolution course for every student prior to high school graduation.
- District commits to a 5-year plan to develop, implement and expand conflict resolution programs over a realistic time frame.

Guidelines for Community Involvement

- District holds annual, school-based, open meetings to ask for input and feedback on the conflict resolution programs in the district.
- District encourages positive public relations and media coverage of the conflict resolution programs in all of its schools.
- District sponsors district-wide special events that further advance school-based conflict resolution programs (for example, conflict resolution day, mediation week, appreciation dinners for conflict resolution education volunteers and funders).
- District identifies and works in collaboration with existing community- and Internet-accessible conflict resolution programs, and makes a list of such programs and their contact persons available to all school-based conflict resolution education coordinators.

IV. Program Assessment and Evaluation Guidelines

Implementing a successful conflict resolution education program requires more than just a few days of work and planning. It requires: a significant amount of ongoing training; practical experience; coordination with existing, related school reform initiatives and programs; ongoing evaluation and adaptation; and continuing education support for participating staff, students and teachers. In addition, schools may find it helpful to work with an experienced conflict resolution education consultant who can serve as a coordinator of services, an in-house trainer, and a program evaluator for all conflict resolution education

activities.

Keeping data

From the beginning, it is important to keep data on the ways in which the school offers conflict resolution education. These data might include such information as:

- the number of staff, teachers and students who receive conflict resolution training;
- the number of students who receive conflict resolution lessons in the classroom;
- the number of classroom hours teachers and program volunteers spend teaching conflict resolution education skills and concepts;
- the number of conflict cases referred to a peer mediation program
- the number of peer mediation cases that result in a lasting agreement.

In addition, tracking staff, teacher and student participation numbers and levels will help to assess the growth of interest and support for conflict resolution education over time.

Classroom Conflict Resolution Education Evaluation Guidelines

- Specific, measurable, conflict resolution education-appropriate goals are clearly articulated at the start of each academic year.
- A plan for achieving these conflict resolution education goals is implemented and followed throughout the academic year.
- Grading policies require information about students' application of conflict resolution skills in written assessments and on grade cards, including narrative documentation of the use of conflict resolution skills and strategies in the classroom and school.
- Data is collected from the beginning (see *Keeping Data* section above).
- At the end of each academic year, the conflict resolution education processes used and staff persons involved in implementation are reviewed in order to identify programmatic strengths and areas for improvement.

School-wide conflict resolution education program evaluation guidelines

- Specific, measurable, conflict resolution education-focused goals are clearly articulated at the start of each academic year.
- A plan for achieving these conflict resolution education goals is implemented and followed throughout the academic year.
- An annual review of the conflict resolution education processes is completed in order to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- An annual review of persons involved in implementing conflict resolution education programs is completed in order to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- Annual staff performance review notes participation in conflict resolution training and serious commitment to using conflict resolution skills in adult-adult and adult-student interaction.
- The school seeks student, teacher and staff suggestions for program development, modifications, and expansion at regular intervals.

- An annual assessment of the conflict resolution education program's impact on students, teachers, and school climate is conducted by an outside evaluator.

District-wide conflict resolution education program evaluation guidelines

- The District supports the development of conflict resolution education evaluation tools that may be modified and used in schools throughout the district.
- The District encourages/requires schools to include information about students' application of conflict resolution skills in written assessments and on grade cards.
- The District facilitates ongoing and annual evaluation of school-based conflict resolution education programs, and uses this data as a basis for future program adaptation wherever possible.

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About the Association for Conflict Resolution

The Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR) is a nonprofit, professional membership organization representing more than 6,000 educators, mediators, arbitrators and others involved in the field of conflict resolution and collaborative decision-making. ACR, a professional organization dedicated to enhancing the practice and public understanding of

conflict resolution, was launched in January 2001 when the Academy of Family Mediators (AFM), the Conflict Resolution Education Network (CREnet), and the Society for Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR) merged. In addition to promoting the growth and development of the conflict resolution field in a variety of practice areas, ACR supports quality conflict resolution education programs in schools as an essential part of building safe, welcoming learning environments.

Association for Conflict Resolution

(a merged organization of AFM, CREnet and SPIDR)

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