

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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### Preparing Pre-Service Educators to Break Up Fights ... Before they Happen

By Danya Perry and Joanne McDaniel

“Fight!” “Fight!” “Fight!” Frightening words that can make any educator cringe upon hearing them during a school day. Unfortunately these words are common in schools across the nation as educators try to find better ways to deal with conflict. What’s more frightening is that conflict in today’s schools can be detrimental to existing opportunities for teachers to teach and students to learn in a caring and safe environment. Breaking up fights and preventing conflict, whether verbal or physical, are on the minds of the entire school community. While many efforts currently deal with managing conflict at the school-building level, North Carolina has extended its approach to an earlier start.

Dealing with conflict successfully means to effectively prepare future teachers and administrators who will be responsible for “breaking up fights” before they happen. In early 2000, the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention – Center for the Prevention of School Violence (DJJDP – Center) was afforded the opportunity to work on a project that would assist universities and colleges to prepare teachers and administrators to manage conflict effectively.

The opportunity to work on this project was given to DJJDP – Center by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The need for such a project was also recognized by Governor Jim Hunt’s Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety and the North Carolina State Board of Education Task Force on Disruption-Free Classrooms. Both task forces produced recommendations that highlighted the need for more training in the areas of classroom and conflict management for teachers and administrators.

To address the need, the project included two components that focused on pre-service teachers and administrators. The first component focused on the preparation of pre-service teachers. This component was specifically designed to enhance the training of future teachers so that they are better prepared to handle conflicts, which might occur in their classrooms. The second component was designed for pre-service administrators to improve their skills so that they support teachers in the handling of conflicts and provide the leadership and direction needed to establish safer learning environments.

Over the two-year project period, DJJDP – Center produced a curriculum to be used in the training of pre-service educators. DJJDP – Center solicited input and assistance from college and university administrators and faculty. Feedback from the colleges and universities, combined with information about conflict resolution, dispute resolution, and peacekeeping skills, was used to create the curriculum material, which focuses on the nature of conflict, self-assessment, effective communication

skills, and strategies to overcome conflict. The pre-service educator curriculum is structured into four modules and opens up with a discussion on the nature of conflict. The remaining three modules highlight opportunities to “reach in,” “reach out,” and “reach over” to effectively manage conflict.

### **Module One: Nature of Conflict**

Module One is designed to explore the nature of conflict as it relates to schools by providing definitions and causes, outlining positive and negative characteristics, and addressing common myths about conflict. The definition of conflict management is outlined along with the skills, styles, and strategies needed for successful completion of the conflict management process. This foundational knowledge of the nature of conflict allows for an improved understanding of how one “reaches in” to understand self, “reaches out” to communicate with others, and “reaches over” barriers in the face of conflict.

### **Module Two: “Reaching In”**

Module Two is designed to allow pre-service educators to “reach in,” encouraging evaluation of their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, realizing how these beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors will impact their roles as educators. The module focuses on defining and explaining the purpose of self-assessment and then continues with an exploration of the development of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and management styles. Background knowledge of personal beliefs is important because it helps new teachers and administrators develop a better sense of how they view the world and how their views impact dealing with individual students.

### **Module Three: “Reaching Out”**

Module Three is designed to assist pre-service educators to understand the importance of active and reflective listening, build trust and maintain a good rapport with others, and set clear expectations with students. In addition, information is provided that will help teachers and administrators create a climate that has open lines of communication. This module begins with a discussion of the different factors involved in active and reflective listening. Pre-service educators learn that what they say and how they say it affects their relationships with students. This module provides pre-service educators with skills that perpetuate constructive communication as well as the strategies of active and reflective listening, trust and rapport building, and effective communication to help students resolve conflict among their peers.

### **Module Four: “Reaching Over”**

Module four is designed to provide pre-service educators strategies in effective conflict management. This module focuses on the opportunities and practices for managing conflict. The use of conflict management strategies provides pre-service educators with the tools to manage conflict. The four strategies discussed in the module include: problem solving; decision making; mediation; and negotiation. “Reaching over” a conflict by using the aforementioned strategies requires the incorporation of “reaching in” and “reaching out.” Recognizing how self-assessment,

communication, and conflict management all work together is essential for youth-serving professionals to understand and teach effective strategies to youth.

DJJDP – Center has also recognized the need to expose current teachers, administrators, School Resource Officers, juvenile justice professionals, and other youth-serving professionals to effective conflict management skills. Conflict occurs daily and in various settings in the school and community. All youth-serving professionals need to be prepared to effectively manage conflict in school and community settings. To address the needs of current educators and other youth-serving professionals, DJJDP – Center has created the “Reach to Teach” initiative. This initiative is derived from the pre-service educator project and provides training and technical assistance for both adults and youth. Similar to the pre-service educator curriculum, the “Reach to Teach” initiative offers youth-serving professionals beneficial practices and approaches for school and community settings to deal effectively with conflict. Specific benefits include:

- increasing and empowering youth-serving professionals to model and teach effective conflict management;
- encouraging individuals to self assess to identify strengths and weaknesses for dealing with conflict according to personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors;
- identifying and strengthening skills used in effective communication to better manage conflicts;
- providing an approach that requires individuals to develop intra-and inter-personal skills, particularly during conflict situations; and
- assisting in the use of problem solving, decision making, mediation, and negotiation strategies.

Benefits such as these give youth-serving professionals a background and knowledge base to change personal ideologies and teach youth strategies as well as to model the appropriate behaviors associated with the management of conflict.

The pre-service educator curriculum and “Reach to Teach” initiative are giving North Carolina universities / colleges, public schools, and communities an opportunity to build upon existing skills and increase awareness of the need to effectively manage conflict. DJJDP – Center is also continuing project efforts by assisting other states as they move forward with similar efforts. Creating caring and safe learning environments is a priority for many schools and communities. With continued efforts to “break up fights” before they happen, eventually the chants that once chilled many educators will be replaced with students that are doing what’s “Right!” “Right!” “Right!”

To access the curriculum, please visit the DJJDP – Center’s website at [www.cpsv.org](http://www.cpsv.org) and select “What’s New.” The curriculums and other related components are under “Reach In, Reach Out, Reach Over: A Conflict Management Pilot Program in North Carolina.” For a notebook or CD copy, please contact Danya Perry at [danya.perry@ncmail.net](mailto:danya.perry@ncmail.net) or (919) 733-3388 ext. 336.

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