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A peace kept by the students themselves

By Karen Heller
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A formidable enforcer of school security, Sgt. Giles—"I prefer students don't know my first name"—has worked the blue-and-gold corridors of George Washington High for six years.

"This is a very good school," he says. "What works is the multicultural environment, the discipline aspect of the school, and that students are trained to mediate different problems that makes these kids feel more comfortable." He can't remember the last time there was a significant conflict here.

The Northeast institution, the city's second-largest comprehensive school, should be studied to see how schools can keep the peace.

With 50 nationalities represented, plus the usual trauma of adolescence, Washington had the potential to become a United Nations of pain.

But that is not what's happened. For more than two decades, Washington students have trained in peer mediation to stop minor incidents from becoming ugly. When a dustup occurs, any student can file a report. Two mediators diffuse the issue by meeting with each student separately, then jointly. The students then sign a contract insuring confidentiality. Parents won't be contacted unless the agreement is violated.

Mediation has become such a valued part of Washington's culture, as much as its championship sports teams, that a few years ago the school established Peer Group Connections, a highly competitive, all-senior council of mediators who mentor freshmen to ease tensions while welcoming them to school. Students cry when they don't make PGC. The current group includes school president Farwa Ahmadi, operatic soprano Ebonee Jeffcoat, and several athletic stars, including the massive study in muscle that is Sharrif Floyd, the nation's top defensive tackle.

One woman, the remarkable Bonnie Hughes, is largely responsible. The Dean of Discipline, given to hugs, initiated peer mediation at the school.

"It's preemptive action against bullying and fighting. This allows people to have a voice. There's a willingness to listen from the students," says Hughes. "They've been there, which helps break down this culture of not wanting to be a snitch. Students feel more comfortable talking to peers before it gets bigger and out of hand."



ED HILLE / Staff Photographer
At George Washington High School in Northeast Philadelphia, senior Shakira Weston, 18, mediates a mock dispute between two other students during peer-to-peer conflict resolution.

Freshmen e-mail PGC members constantly with questions during their first, critical year, its on-time completion the most consistent indicator of whether a student graduates. Many freshmen don't have older siblings, fathers, or parents who understand their culture. Several PGC members are called "Dad." They call freshmen "my kids."

At Washington, peer mediation has helped students resolve fights peacefully when parents counseled otherwise.

Jaime Marrero, half Puerto Rican, half Italian, and all wrestler, got into it last year when a student called him a certain name that didn't sit well with the Puerto Rican half. A wrestler, Jaime pinned the student in no time.

"I was being immature. In my culture, when someone messes with you, you fight back." Jaime was suspended, but the antagonism continued, and they sought peer mediation.

"We were at each other's throats," said Jaime. His father and the other boy's Argentine father advised them to fight. "But we signed a contract," Jaime said.

They haven't fought since, and the anger has dissipated. Now, Jaime is a mentor, a role model. He keeps wrestling confined to meets.

The real question is why other schools haven't adopted the peer mediation program and PGC so students can have an active role in reducing school violence while encouraging mentoring, and building a peaceful student community.

Fortunately, the school district's Imagine 2014 plan calls for peer mediation to be instituted by that year in all middle and high schools, a task charged to Curry Bailey and Sharon Arnold.

"These are very profound barriers breaking down," says Bailey, the district's drug prevention and school safety program coordinator. "There's often a lack of trust the children have with teachers and administrators that they don't have with peers."

As PGC was ending the daily meeting, led by teacher Chris Meile, an incident erupted in the halls. Cell phones were seized and texts retrieved to understand the genesis of the argument between two students, once romantically involved and now far from it.

A member of Hughes' staff arrives with three pink student statements: he said, she said, and a friend who wants to stop the fighting said.

Two student mediators slip into the allocated room to meet first with the girl, then the boy, to see if they can put an end to the business, and resolve Washington High's 175th peacefully mediated conflict this academic year.



PGC is a high school transition solution developed by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training. For information about PGC and other transition solutions, please contact Laura Fenster Rothschild, Director of Transition Solutions, at 609.252.9300 x 106 or lrothschild@princetonleadership.org.