

**Reach In, Reach Out, Reach Over:
A Conflict Management Pilot Program In North Carolina**

Lessons Learned Report

prepared by

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Executive Summary

The North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - Center for the Prevention of School Violence conducted a pilot project in North Carolina on conflict management for pre-service educators over the course of the last two years. Funded by the U.S. Department of Justice - Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the project was intended to enhance the skills of pre-service teachers in the area of conflict management so that they are able to improve their skills for managing conflict. The projects was also designed to improve the skills of school administrators so they are supportive of teachers in handling conflict and provide the leadership and direction necessary to establish safer learning environments. As the Center for the Prevention of School Violence moved forward with the pilot project valuable lessons were learned about how to achieve success with such an effort:

LESSON ONE: Know the “Place”

Understanding the “place” or environment in which a project is undertaken, project activities, and the needs of those who endorse the project and supply the financial or other resource backing to support the project.

LESSON TWO: Know the “People”

Knowing the “people,” key individuals and major stakeholder institutions, who can contribute to the success of a project.

LESSON THREE: Know How to Generate Buy-in or Support

Knowing “people” involved and how to generate their buy-in or support for the initiative.

LESSON FOUR: Know How to Sustain Buy-in

Sustaining buy-in takes generating buy-in a step further through “people” relationships by creating a sense of stakeholder ownership that empowers those involved in project activities.

LESSON FIVE: Know Your People

Knowing the capabilities of project staff.

LESSON SIX: Know How to Advocate for the Project

Knowing how to promote the project through advocating for the initiative.

LESSON SEVEN: Know the Status Quo

Knowing the status quo of the arena you are trying to impact.

LESSON EIGHT: Know the "Purpose" of the Project

Identifying a clear sense of the project’s “purpose.”

LESSON NINE: Know How to Seek and Provide Assistance

Knowing how goals and objectives will be met.

LESSON TEN: Know the Importance of Evaluation

Recognizing the importance of evaluation from the project’s outset.

Generally, knowing “place,” “people,” and “purpose” when conducting projects is essential to success. The lessons related to such knowledge are intended to provide a general understanding and perhaps some direction to those governing bodies or agencies that may want to embark on initiatives similar to the conflict management project.

Introduction

The North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - Center for the Prevention of School Violence conducted a pilot project in North Carolina on conflict management for pre-service educators over the course of the last two years. Funded by the U.S. Department of Justice - Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the project was intended to enhance the skills of pre-service teachers in the area of conflict management so that they are able to improve their skills for managing conflict, provide conflict management skills and knowledge to students, and serve as role models for appropriate conflict management behavior. The project was also designed to improve the skills of administrators so they are supportive of teachers in handling conflict and provide the leadership and direction necessary to establish safer learning environments. An additional goal of the project was to enhance teacher certification requirements to better reflect skills (proficiency) in conflict management.

Many lessons that can be beneficial to various stakeholder groups, agencies, or states that choose to work on similar projects were learned over the course of the two-year project. These lessons can help those undertaking similar initiatives gain a better understanding and perspective of the triumphs and challenges to be faced in such efforts. The lessons learned from the North Carolina pilot project are highlighted in this document. Before reviewing them, background information about the project is provided.

Background

The opportunity to create a pilot program in conflict management for pre-service educators arose from two major efforts in 1999 to create safer schools in North Carolina. The State Board of Education's Task Force on Disruption Free Classrooms focused on the importance of school climate, which is directly affected by classroom and conflict management. Recommendations were drafted which called for better training of teachers and school administrators so that classrooms and schools are able to operate in a "disruption-free" climate. The second effort was initiated by Governor James B. Hunt. The Governor's Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety produced an action item requesting that the Center for the Prevention of School Violence focus upon setting up a conflict management project resulting in all pre-service teachers and administrators being trained to better manage conflict. Developing curriculum for pre-service educators became the emphasis of this project.

Although the creation of curriculum materials in conflict management for pre-service educators was not a new idea, as referenced by Kathryn Girard and Susan Koch's Conflict Resolution in Schools: A Manual for Educators, the idea served as a promising strategy to improve classroom and school climate through providing teachers with the tools to understand the nature of conflict and how it relates to student behavior management issues. The pilot program in North Carolina set itself apart from past efforts in that not only would it provide for a curriculum for pre-service educators but also would involve a teacher licensure enhancement in conflict management as part of project activities. Because the educational programs in the colleges and universities across the state have the authority and flexibility to offer a range of experiences to their teacher candidates in the area of student behavior and classroom management, specific guidelines on how and when pre-service teachers receive this instruction vary by institution. The idea to include a state licensure enhancement was

brought forth to encourage college and university faculty to examine course and experience offerings in relation to conflict and classroom management and institutionalize curriculum materials that would further develop the skills of new teachers as they deal with student behavior and conflict in the classroom. Although a major undertaking, this was seen as an opportunity to convince colleges and schools of education that pre-professional development was needed in the area of conflict management and that these institutions must take the lead in this preparation. Although enriching the standards for teacher licensure was a focal point of the pilot, the need for the enhancement of skills for pre-service administrators was not lost. School administrators must be supportive of teachers as they manage conflict in the creation of safer learning environments. With this in mind, a curriculum on building the capacity of administrators to support teachers handling conflict was designed to be used by university faculty as well as others who prepare pre-service administrators for the professional experience.

The Center for the Prevention of School Violence moved forward with the pilot project and valuable lessons were learned about how to achieve success with such an effort. The Center's established three "P's" school safety framework of "place," "people," and "purpose" provides a mechanism for organizing the "lessons learned" from the pilot. Through acknowledging the environment in which change is initiated, knowing the key individuals and major stakeholder institutions involved, and understanding the true objectives of the initiative, perspective can be gained that will assist others in the successful implementation of similar projects.

The Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned from the Project

1. Know the "Place"
2. Know the "People"
3. Know How to Generate Buy-in or Support
4. Know How to Sustain Buy-in
5. Know Your People
6. Know How to Advocate for the Project
7. Know the Status Quo
8. Know the "Purpose" of the Project
9. Know How to Seek and Provide Assistance
10. Know the Importance of Evaluation

LESSON ONE: Know the "Place"

Understanding the "place" or environment in which a project is undertaken is of great importance. In a statewide initiative such as this, knowing the political and societal climate as well as the processes surrounding the institutions that will be involved in project activities is important. The political climate in North Carolina was favorable regarding top-level governmental support for a plan that would involve addressing disruption and misconduct in the schools, as evidenced through the State Board of Education's effort and Governor's Task Force. These political influences had an effect on the societal climate as well. With teacher retention being an issue and difficulties dealing with students, parents, and administrators being part of the reason for turnover, officials with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction as well as deans and directors of the colleges and universities saw the potential of a conflict management undertaking.

Knowledge of “place” also relates to a state's department or office of education, such as North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction. Knowing which areas within the department are responsible for teacher development is important in targeting programs that affect standards as well as for determining how this department may connect with colleges and universities. Understanding the characteristics of the public and private schools, colleges, and departments of education includes having insight on the fundamentals of teacher preparation, the certification or licensure process for educators, and the role that the department or office of education has in overseeing proposed requirements and implementing standards. This is also the “place” for thinking about the big picture in analyzing possible resource needs as the project develops. For example, early in the project, community mediation and dispute resolution centers, inter-institutional service centers, and professional organizations and associations were looked upon as potential resources for the project, yet later were not utilized because the scope of the project was redefined and the services did not fit the needs of the project as it developed. Although full partnership may have not taken place with these entities in the case of the North Carolina conflict management project, it may be reasonable to consider working with these groups in other efforts.

Knowledge of “place” also involves understanding the needs of those who endorse the project and supply the financial or other resource backing to support the project. This organizational support may often have a plan that drives the project. There must be a convergence of this plan with the “place” in which the project is set, and this convergence will likely have to be shaped by project efforts rather than just be assumed to be in existence.

LESSON TWO: Know the “People”

There are specific lessons learned in regard to knowing the “people” who can contribute to the success of a project. First of these involves acknowledgement of key individuals and major stakeholder institutions. Once knowledge of “place” is firmly established, identifying who the people and major stakeholder institutions who will need to be worked with as the project moves forward becomes easier. Since one of the goals of the conflict management project included developing curriculum material to be infused in educational programs, individuals such as the vice president of school-university programs, deans and directors of the schools of education, program coordinators, and methods teaching faculty became key individuals in establishing contact and rapport. Targeting key individuals working within the state department or office of education who work with these institutions on teacher preparation and setting standards for teacher certification was a priority. As the project progressed, it became evident that certain key players, such as a council of deans of education for the various institutions, would play an important role in allowing access to their faculty for formal input and feedback in curriculum creation and pilot activities. During the early stages of the project, under the suggestion of the project's grant administrator at the time, a group of university deans, program coordinators, and identified faculty members were brought together to form a project advisory board. This helped to establish a core set of individuals who could provide information on the educational programs on their campuses and provide ideas as to how an initiative such as conflict management would best fit in their current curriculum. Although the advisory board provided the mechanism needed to gain direct access to the programs, there was still a need to have specific faculty on board who would be teaching the proposed material. While there was some vision of conflict management being a part of the educational program for pre-service teachers, some university officials believed that their institutions were already providing enough material on the subject to their teacher candidates. Also, they felt that if

new curriculum was being developed, it could only ultimately result in an add-on course that would complicate already overloaded course requirements for pre-service educators. Center staff suggested the idea to infuse the developing conflict management materials into existing instruction which gained the appeal of faculty who expressed concern.

Other “people” challenges presented themselves as the project progressed. The political scene changed with changes in administration at the state and national level, and turnover of several of the deans of education and changes in grant administration shifted the priority of the initiative. These challenges were met through not totally redefining the project goals and objectives, but through seeing an opportunity to be flexible in addressing on-going needs and concerns. The lesson learned here is that one must understand the people involved in the process and be willing to take on their perspective.

LESSON THREE: Know How to Generate Buy-in or Support

Tailoring the project where possible to address needs and concerns is an important part of generating stakeholder buy-in. Therefore, another “people” lesson involves knowing how to generate buy-in or support for an initiative such as the conflict management project. This should begin with listening to the desires of the stakeholders. One of the major concerns of the leaders within in the institutions of higher education dealt with add-on educational requirements to already overloaded teacher preparation programs. To help generate the support, a move was made to infuse the developing curriculum into existing instruction as opposed to requiring that a new course be introduced. This met the needs of the colleges and schools of education by enabling them to maintain their current course loads while allowing the project staff to fulfill the goals of the project.

Generating buy-in also involves providing useful information to stakeholders. To further substantiate the need for conflict management in educational programs, focus group discussions were held with pre-service and practicing educators which reflected the wish for a more direct approach to conflict management in classroom management, educational psychology, and educational methods courses. Generating buy-in also means helping stakeholders realize the benefits of being associated with the initiative, or in other words, showing them what they have to gain in working with the project. As the project staff establishes a rapport with those involved, there is an opportunity to create a relationship of mutual trust which can stimulate sustained involvement in all phases of the project.

The sharing of information and resources at the project's onset can also generate buy-in and encourage differing groups with similar interests to work together with the project being the binding tie. For example, during the conflict management project, community mediation/dispute resolution centers and university personnel saw an opportunity to pool together resources. By pairing information on community-based conflict management with research and pedagogy on student behavior management, a possibility existed to involve mediation centers with the colleges and universities within the same geographical region. This could have potentially expanded the project's possibilities. The lesson to be learned here is that generating buy-in is not only good for the sake of the overall project but may present positive yet unexpected opportunities for stakeholders.

LESSON FOUR: Know How to Sustain Buy-in

Yet another “people” lesson involves sustaining buy-in. Creating a sense of stakeholder ownership and empowering those involved in project activities in any tangential manner is essential with

regard to sustaining buy-in. This means not only being responsive to their concerns but also offering them a vested interest in the project by allowing them to have a chance to provide input and feedback on project activities. Sustaining buy-in also means trying to keep the project at a profile high enough that it becomes a priority for stakeholders to remain involved. If individuals feel that their involvement is crucial to the success of the initiative, they are more likely to want to make a commitment. By showing the stakeholders the results of the project activities and keeping them informed as to next steps, buy-in is continually generated. Whereas generating buy-in involves establishing rapport, sustaining it takes it a step further by focusing on the development of relationships. Being results oriented and continuing to be responsive to the needs of stakeholders are major parts of this lesson learned.

LESSON FIVE: Know Your People

This “people” lesson learned involves knowing the staff that will work on the day-to-day operations of the project. Thinking through the background and experiences of project staff is crucial and should be one of the first aspects to consider when taking on a project. Project staff should fit the project and even if the fit exists, making the fit perfect will be challenging. Although the conflict management project included individuals who had backgrounds in teaching, counseling, conflict management, and educational credentialing, there was limited experience in curriculum writing and conducting evaluations. There can be advantages and disadvantages to having staff who have specialized experience, and project managers must weigh the pros and cons associated with the different types of experience brought to a project.

Once hired, project staff must have an adequate understanding of “place” and “people” (including stakeholder) issues as well as the task at hand or considerable time may be lost. Staff changes may occur, meaning that there may be shifts in responsibility. This type of project work requires time, flexibility, responsiveness, and patience. Curriculum writing and implementation can be a slow, tedious process which requires many revisions. Expectations must be kept realistic regarding the timeliness of input from the stakeholders, yet this does not mean that project staff should not be proactive in moving the project to its next phase. Anticipating the needs of the stakeholders and finding constructive ways to overcome challenges that may arise are also valuable assets. Project staff may be required to work closely with the grantor to ensure that goals and objectives are met, or in some cases, possibly redefined as the project is pursued. The lesson to keep in mind here is that background and experience of project staff can be most important, yet having a staff that is diligent and has foresight to see big picture issues is also beneficial.

LESSON SIX: Know How to Advocate for the Project

A final “people” lesson involves knowing how to promote the project. Just as knowledge of project staff is essential to achieving goals, knowing how to advocate for the initiative calls for being proactive, continuous problem solving, and various ways to overcome challenges. If deadlines or priorities change, stakeholders may become non-responsive, or if individuals in key positions in relation to the project change, there still needs to be a drive to continue to move the project forward. A major part of this involves project staff being willing to showcase project information to appropriate audiences, tailoring it to fit specific needs. In the case of the conflict management project, the concepts related to self assessment (“reach in”), effective communication (“reach out”), and conflict management strategies (“reach over”) that can be found in the pre-service educator curricula were presented to educator audiences on numerous occasions. Creating venues to

spotlight project activities is part of advocating for the project. This can also give the stakeholders a chance to showcase their involvement in the project. Advocating for the project in this way helps with sustainability in an effort to keep the project's goals in the limelight.

Being able to be the motivation behind one's own project can be important in realizing that as the political and societal scenes change, there may be a shift in the project truly being a priority. This may be particularly true for a project that has operated for an extended amount of time. During the course of the conflict management project, the federal and state level political administrations changed, emphasizing differing educational priorities from those expressed at the onset of the project. During the project's inception there was much focus placed on the importance of conflict management by key stakeholders, and therefore much emphasis was placed on project activities. At the same time, personnel changes occurred within the project's grant administration. As priorities change at varying levels, project staff must continue to see what they do as being important and substantial enough to wade through a continually changing tide. The lesson to be learned is that a grantee must be proactive in taking ownership of the project and be willing to be what may seem like a lone drummer marching to a single beat.

LESSON SEVEN: Know the Status Quo

Knowing the status quo takes the understanding of "place" and "people" a step further. This involves gaining field information on the arena you are trying to impact. It includes researching to find out if other similar projects have been done and understanding their results. This was done at the start of the conflict management project by reviewing the work of the 1993 Conflict Resolution in Teacher Education Project (CRTEP). Put forth by the National Institute for Dispute Resolution and the former National Association for Mediation in Education, the goal of this project was to create curriculum material that could be used with both pre-service and experienced educators in teaching the concepts of conflict resolution. Although eleven colleges and universities participated in the piloting of the material, there was no educator credential piece that was tied to the project. In an attempt to learn more about the curriculum that was generated, project staff found that despite the good reputation it enjoys among many who work in the field of conflict resolution, it does not appear to be widely implemented because of a general lack of awareness of its existence on the part of college and university education methods professors as well as a lack of available information on implementation.

Project staff also spent considerable time researching curricula and web resources and collecting articles and evaluation information on conflict resolution programs and related topics. This included programs on problem solving, joint decision making, negotiation, mediation, classroom management, and behavior management. Information was also collected from the colleges and universities to gain insight on program offerings, particularly in the area of classroom management, which is often linked to student behavior management and conflict. Focus groups of pre-service teachers and administrators and experienced teachers were held to gather information about their perceptions of the types of experiences that colleges and schools of education offer in terms of student behavior management. General background information was also gathered on the licensure process in North Carolina. This included discussions with agencies responsible for teacher licensure as well as other bodies that influence standards, such as the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission. Charged with the task of restructuring teaching licensure categories under legislative mandate to recommend to the State Board of Education, project staff made contact with

the Commission to find out about these changes. Gaining information on previous initiatives and obtaining background knowledge can save time and provide direction.

LESSON EIGHT: Know the "Purpose" of the Project

Once one has recognized the “place” and identified the “people,” one has a clearer sense of project “purpose.” The lesson here is to know where you are to understand where you are going or, in other words, to know your “purpose.” A major part of knowing the project is actively combining “place” and “people” in outlining a “purpose.” This includes defining the goals and objectives that will be accomplished to successfully complete the project. As previously mentioned, a considerable amount of time can be lost if project staff is unclear on the tasks involved in working toward generating the deliverables. If not already done, time needs to be built into the front end of the project to account for designing a plan to execute the activities that leads to the accomplishment of the goals and objectives. Knowing the project includes recognizing the expectations of the grantor and keeping contact and obtaining feedback on a regular basis. There were three grant administrators with varying managing styles and background knowledge on the topic of conflict management that worked on the conflict management project within a two-year period. Such changes have a significant impact on project design and progress. It may also be expected that there may be a lack of language compatibility that exists between the grantee and the grantor. For example, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention requested that the term “classroom management” be part of the formal title of this pilot, while not realizing that there are significant differences between classroom and conflict management in the eyes of people in the education arena. Subsequently “classroom management” was removed to help define the project’s “purpose” and narrow its scope.

LESSON NINE: Know How to Seek and Provide Assistance

Another lesson learned in reference to “purpose” involves clear knowledge of how goals and objectives will be met. With changes in politics and those involving stakeholders, knowing how to seek assistance when the need arises becomes important. Throughout the course of a project, questions may arise regarding all aspects of the pilot, whether it be informational need regarding the technical aspects of the project or fiscal needs in terms of the project’s operation. The larger the initiative, the greater the chance that more people will be involved and the greater the likelihood that there will be an established process or chain of command that must be followed to ensure that needs are met. Knowing how to get questions answered and to whom to turn to for assistance throughout all phases of the project is important. Most projects such as the conflict management project have a prescribed set of guidelines to follow and offer a form of technical assistance that is specially designed to support projects in developing deliverables. Oftentimes these technical assistance groups are willing to review material even if not solicited. This provides grantees an opportunity to have project resources and deliverables previewed, which can save time. Being proactive in asking questions and gaining clarification should not be looked at as a weakness. Establishing a relationship with the grantor that supports an exchange of ideas is vital to the success of project outcomes. The grantor can point to the steps that need to be taken to help solve problems or possibly put the grantee in contact with others who may have dealt with similar issues. The lesson to be learned here is that project staff should not be intimidated when it comes to asking for and seeking out assistance. Familiarizing oneself with the appropriate process and procedures for doing so can serve as a form of empowerment.

Just as grantees must know how to seek assistance from the grantor, a plan must be developed to determine how technical assistance will be delivered to those who receive the project's deliverables. In the case of newly developed curriculum material, it includes plans for dissemination, a process for assisting sites as they initially utilize the information, and guidelines for addressing concerns in implementation. In the case of the conflict management project, college and university faculty were part of the target audience and were also key stakeholders. If a strong rapport has been established because of this initial connection, maintaining a relationship in building a plan of technical assistance should not be difficult. Once again, project staff would want to be mindful of the needs of individual sites and apply the plan accordingly.

LESSON TEN: Know the Importance of Evaluation

Lessons learned involving “purpose” also relate to the evaluation phase of the project. Careful consideration must be given to the evaluation portion of an initiative from the beginning. In the case of the North Carolina pilot program, information outlining the structure of the evaluation for the curriculum materials that were to be developed was included in the initial grant package request. Government bodies and/or agencies that may pursue a project such as this would want to develop a plan for testing the curriculum to help measure its impact in the field. The evaluation can provide useful and timely information for decision making and provide those individuals who are interested in developing similar programs specific "lessons learned" on how they may approach their project. Knowing and following the process and procedures for evaluation as determined by the grantor is also important, and obtaining information and maintaining clear communication make this possible. The nature of the project may determine whether more focus needs to be placed on short-term or long-term outcomes, but in most cases both should be addressed. Projects that focus on long-term outcomes need to account for the extra time necessary to gather the data in the original grant proposal. Although challenges may present themselves, (such as limited knowledge and experience of project staff in conducting an evaluation or difficulty gaining access to a specific population that needs to be exposed to the material), the lesson to be learned here is that testing must be done, even if short run. If the initial plan does not work out, alternative plans can be generated that do not compromise the integrity of the testing. The opportunity may present itself at a later date to further test the material with additional available resources.

Conclusion

There are many lessons to be learned from North Carolina's conflict management pilot project. Generally, knowing “place,” “people,” and “purpose” when conducting projects is essential to success. The lessons related to such knowledge are intended to provide a general understanding and perhaps some direction to those governing bodies or agencies that may want to embark on initiatives similar to the conflict management project. The hope is that these lessons can too be applied to other projects within educational and juvenile justice environments.