

Keeping the peace

Conflict management is finding its place in the classroom, writes Henrietta Cook

Disputes in the schoolyard and staffroom can turn nasty if left untamed.

But if managed well, these conflicts can blossom into great ideas that satisfy everyone's needs.

Conflict management is the label given to the various ways people work through grievances.

Conflict Management Australia senior consultant Joel Gerschman says this system of resolution makes school a happier place for teachers, students and parents.

"Ongoing conflict deflates the morale among teachers. It also reduces productivity, but conflict management processes help prevent that," he says.

Gerschman teaches conflict management and works for a company established 17 years ago by a teacher from Harvard University's negotiation program.

He says conflict management strategies in schools give students a more positive

learning experience. "Students engaged in conflict management ... are able to focus more on their learning."

Like most practices in schools, conflict management strategies are constantly evolving.

"There's an increased push towards a more collaborative approach," Gerschman says. "In the past, if a conflict arose between a parent and a school, the school would immediately go to their policies and launch an investigation – or the parents might launch legal proceedings – but now there's a growing recognition that collaborative processes are better."

One of the most well-known conflict management programs in Australian schools is peer mediation – an early intervention strategy that encourages students resolve disputes without the help of adults.

Gerschman says this method empowers children by allowing them to take part in decisions "that affect their life".

However, one school that has steered clear of peer mediation is Eltham College. Principal David Warner prefers to take a more holistic approach.

"We believe you have to have a culture that is about developing skills and attitudes that prevent conflict."

Learning to understand others is the key, he says. "With empathy you can go a long way. You are able to negotiate and listen to the other person."

In the rare cases conflict does arise at the school, staff sit down with students and work through the issues.

"We may use a counsellor, we may use a learning advocate or a life work manager when we think it's necessary, but usually most conflicts that arise are dealt with by the people most closely associated," Warner says.

"If something happens and someone comes down heavy on someone we stop them and say, 'That's not how we do things'."



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