



"Words from the Woods"

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Project PEACE: Enhancing Civic Engagement through Conflict Resolution

We live in interesting times involving many types of conflict. And one of the most important jobs of educators today is to teach our children how to handle

conflicts that arise in creative and constructive ways. Too many forces in our culture reinforce the opposite message, that conflict is somehow bad and something that we must avoid. Or, that all conflict must result in a winner and a loser.

But without the development of effective democratic skills we know that our young people are less inclined to want to be involved in finding peaceful resolutions to their conflicts. They can't practice what they haven't learned.

Good schools and committed educators must find ways to teach children to handle conflict more effectively than just avoiding it if we wish to have our young people grow up to be active and involved participants in our representative democracy.

The nexus between conflict resolution education, and the goal of Green Woods Charter School to instill a sense of environmental stewardship through civic engagement, has been realized this year through Project PEACE (Peaceful Endings through Attorneys, Children and Educators).

This program offers a chance for our students to find their voice in their school, community and, hopefully, one day, our nation.

Project PEACE is the peer mediation training program that we recently provided to our Jr. School Leadership Team. (Jr. SLT) This one-day of intensive training,

delivered by conflict resolution expert, Leon Stimpson, was made possible by a partnership between Green Woods Charter School, the PA Bar Association, the Office of the Attorney General, and Third Circuit Court of Appeals Judge and First Lady, Midge Rendell.

Project PEACE utilizes conflict resolution education with students and offers them strategies and problem solving skills that are necessary for positive civic participation in our schools and the community beyond.



A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically.

The conflicts associated with school governance often mirror the conflicts found in environmental issues, political life, and in the larger society as a whole. The need for skill development is vital if the experience for students is to be positive and meaningful.

Brought to Pennsylvania by Attorney General Mike Fisher after the tragedy at Columbine High School, the program continues to flourish under current Attorney General, Thomas Corbett.

At a two-day Project PEACE conference attended by Green Woods CEO, Jean Wallace, A.G. Corbett remarked, "As you work on your mediation plans today and tomorrow...it's so important for us all to work together to address these problems – schools, law enforcement and parents. We must give our children the tools they need to make wise decisions."

In this era of high stakes testing, Project PEACE offers a valuable means of providing real-life civic learning in our schools. The skills learned help work to reduce conflict and violence by teaching our students how to discuss and mediate disagreements peacefully. It empowers our students, who are still in their formative years, with the important life-skills that promote constructive communication, problem-solving, critical-thinking and self-esteem.



Since receiving this training, our Jr. SLT students have been anxious to practice their mediation skills with our younger students. As they become active participants in helping to change some of the negative behaviors in our school by using the mediation process, they have also impacted our school climate by using the skills of conflict resolution to work out disputes on their own.

Teachers will tell you that in the field of education, trends come and go every two or three years. Someone is always promoting the latest and greatest. Measured by that yardstick, Project PEACE, at nine years of age, supported by nine PA Bar Presidents in Pennsylvania, has survived a couple of lifetimes. Why? Perhaps it is the program's emphasis on self-determination in resolving conflict that connects with youth who clamor for greater independence. Students learn that with greater independence comes greater commitment and responsibility. Our Jr. SLT students have willingly and enthusiastically accepted this challenge for additional responsibility.

In a world where violence and disruptive behaviors have become increasingly common, Project PEACE promotes civility and tranquility. This program was selected by PennCORD, the Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy, that is the embodiment of Judge Rendell's vision of improving civic education, as one of its six primary Keystone Programs for enhancing the civic mission of our schools. Citizens in our participatory democracy need to be able to work out



problems peacefully. Also, a recent research report found that students who participated in Project PEACE were able to resolve more problems themselves or through other student intervention. That, in turn, enabled teachers to devote more of their time and energy to teaching rather than discipline.

This does not mean that Project PEACE is a substitute for student discipline. In fact, it means just the opposite. Peer mediation does not replace discipline—it enhances it. Students involved in the program learn firsthand that there are consequences for their behavior and that they must accept responsibility for their actions as well as any consequences that follow.

As part of a comprehensive and ongoing plan to further build a cohesive learning community at Green Woods, in August 2008 Green Woods entire staff will be partnering with the PA Bar Association and receive training in Project PEACE. Taking the lead from our students, our teachers and support staff will be armed with the power of knowledge as they help all of our students, and each other, resolve conflicts that might negatively impact our positive learning environment.

Project PEACE and Green Woods Jr. SLT prove that in direct contrast to the rebellious, irresponsible youth that we often read about in the newspapers, there are also resourceful, compassionate students who are willing to take ownership for making their school and community a better place. Green Woods is proud of the level of commitment our Jr. SLT students have given to this program.

In addition to providing an opportunity for our students to play an active role in our school, one of the primary benefits of Project PEACE is that it teaches our students that conflict is an inevitable part of life that they should not fear or avoid.

Through their direct and ongoing experiences in helping other students mediate disputes, our Jr. SLT students see how conflict can create opportunities for growth and development.

After going through Project PEACE mediation training, our students reported that they now feel, "much more confident in their ability to handle conflict." How many adults do you know who wish they felt that way?

Green Woods Certified Project PEACE Mediators are:

Ceyla Murphy, Arionna Hart, Cheyenne Chapman, C.J. Walsh, Tyler Coughlin, Gabriella DiGiovanni, Jayla Russ, Nicole Bevan, Rebecca Fenton, Barry McGrorty, Rebecca Todd, Olivia Smith, Quinn Platzer, Madison Donlen, and Gabby Carden.