

Reducing Aggression in Juvenile Facilities: Ohio's Plan

By Thomas J. Stickrath and Sarah Wallis

*A youth, frustrated with his schoolwork, throws a desk and injures a teacher.
During a basketball game, a fight for a ball sends one youth to the hospital.
In a fit of rage, a youth punches his arm through a window and severs
his tendons in the process.*

Unfortunately, incidents like these are all too common within juvenile facilities across the country. Like many other juvenile justice entities, the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS) has struggled with reducing aggression and physical violence within its institutions. During the past two years, initiatives like reworking policies, conducting vulnerability assessments at each facility, and holding staff and youths more accountable have had a positive impact on decreasing conflict, but more are needed.

The youths in DHS do not differ much from those in secure, state-run facilities around the country. Committed for felony-level crimes, most of the DHS youths have experienced a lifetime of adversity during their short lives. One-third are on the mental health caseload, half have a parent or close family member who has been incarcerated, almost half are in need of special education services, one-quarter have committed sex offenses, and nearly all have been abused in some way prior to their commitment to DHS. While there has been a decrease in population during the past 10 years, the youths who arrive at the eight Ohio institutions are older and have committed more serious crimes than just a decade earlier.

Considering the profile and high needs of the DHS population, it is easy to understand why conflict often erupts between the youths and with the staff. Unfortunately, many of

the youths limit their responses to conflict to the often dysfunctional "fight or flight" approach. Because of this, there are still too many incidents in which the primary means of issue resolution is physical contact.

The curriculum in this program will build the skills needed to provide youths with behaviorally and emotionally appropriate alternatives to "fight or flight."

To address this concern and increase safety for the youths and staff, DHS is taking a fresh look at how youths and staff resolve conflict. With the implementation of conflict resolution training, strategies to avoid physical conflict will be infused throughout different aspects of a youth's stay at DHS. The training, provided by the Ohio Commission for Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management, uses a curriculum that is designed to manage the variety of conflicts that occur in institutional environments. The model of problem-solving presented in the training is designed to first equip staff with

the necessary tools to interact with the youths and then to help the youths learn how to work through conflict peacefully.

Training Curriculum

In designing the program, DHS and the commission examined the best way to integrate this curriculum into existing structures and programming. The integration of the curriculum into employee in-service and preservice training, as well as training multiple levels of staff, will increase sustainability and enrich the skill-building process.

Conflict resolution education (CRE) has been defined as "a spectrum of processes that use communication skills and creative and analytic thinking to prevent, manage and peacefully resolve conflict."¹ The curriculum in this program will build the skills needed to provide youths with behaviorally and emotionally appropriate alternatives to "fight or flight."

Both the youth and staff curriculums were adapted from training materials designed to address conflict in schools. Adaptations were made to directly address staff issues, place a greater emphasis on adult learning and address situations with disruptive youths. The curriculum is based on realizing the underlying needs that affect people's behavior, understanding how individuals engage in conflict, and knowing ways to problem solve with appropriate and constructive responses. These skills enable participants to

understand themselves more fully and develop their own responses to conflicts that arise. This flexibility is imperative to success because two conflicts are never the same, even when the conflict is with the same person. This curriculum enables trained participants to apply these new skills to a variety of conflicts.

The conflict management resource guides that will be used with the youths are based upon the same principles as those used with the staff. This provides a common language for understanding conflict, expressing emotions (especially anger), interpreting nonverbal and verbal communication skills, and engaging in problem-solving to develop solutions. The guides were developed as resources for schools to infuse conflict management skills into school culture and existing classroom curricula and contain hundreds of lessons that are cross-indexed according to the conflict concept. These resource guides, while focused on the youths, are adaptable to a variety of situations both inside and outside of the classroom. Many Ohio schools have been trained on this program and Kent State University found considerable evidence to suggest that the tool makes a difference in the schools that embrace it.² In addition, Vanderbilt University is also conducting an extensive evaluation of the curriculum to determine the tool's candiacy as a federal best practice.

Training Details

The training will be delivered in four phases. Phase one will include a six-day "Train-the-Trainer" advanced verbal strategies course for select DYS staff. The trained DYS staff will then go back to their respective institution and present a three-day training to all staff who have regular contact with youths. A fourth day of training will be conducted to train certain staff on teaching conflict management techniques to youths.

Phase two will be an agencywide roll-out of the initiative to outline general concepts of the training through two, half-day orientation sessions to be delivered to employees. To reinforce the general concepts,

phase three will include a preservice and in-service training that will highlight specific conflict management tools.

During the last phase, the conflict management techniques will be taught to the youths using the resource guides. Conflict resolution will become part of the youths' daily experiences, as social workers, teachers and other staff utilize a simple, yet proven, curriculum to equip all youths with conflict resolution skills.

To complement this initiative, other programs addressing conflict will continue such as an anger management program led by DYS social workers and other volunteer-led programs designed to give youths tools to handle their problems in the appropriate manner.

A year from now, with a focus on conflict resolution and other key initiatives, DYS hopes the real-life scenarios described in the beginning of this article will have a different ending.

A youth, frustrated with his schoolwork, approaches a staff member, expresses his frustration and asks for help.

During a basketball game two youths begin to fight for a ball and a third youth steps in to help them talk it through.





A trained team of staff jumps in to work with an outraged youth and talk him through his anger, saving a window and his arm in the process.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jones, T. and Kmita, D. 2001. *School conflict management: Evaluating your conflict resolution program, A guide for educators and evaluators*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Commission for Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management. p.1.

² Hart, Raymond. 2003. *Program evaluation of the Ohio School Conflict Management Initiative*. Canton, Ohio: Bureau of Research Training and Services, Kent State University. p. 35.

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