

## INTRODUCTION

This *Resource Guide* was developed to help governing boards, educators, and parents throughout California plan and implement new school-based conflict resolution programs or expand existing programs. This document is intended to provide an overview of available approaches for school-based conflict resolution programs, highlight some successful California programs, and offer resources for further investigation. The *Guide* includes descriptions of the components of comprehensive school-based conflict resolution programs, profiles of successful school-based efforts, suggested selection criteria for programs and trainers, recommendations for program planning and implementation, evaluation strategies and lists of available program and training resources. The information and resources provided are presented within the context of establishing programs that help prevent violence, create safe school environments and help students learn concepts and practice skills that enable them to solve conflicts peaceably.

To help students learn to use alternatives to violence and ensure campus safety, many schools and districts are turning to conflict resolution programs. These programs influence the structure of the school environment and learning activities so that students work cooperatively to make fair decisions, solve problems, and manage their anger or fear without threatening or injuring others. These school-based conflict resolution programs are part of broader community-based efforts to prevent violence and reduce crime.

Conflict is a normal, inevitable part of life, and learning to respond to conflict in a constructive manner is a fundamental aspect of every child's education. Yet many schools do not actively teach the skills of peaceful conflict resolution; or without a *comprehensive* program, they may teach the skills to only a few students. Too often, young people and school staff encounter destructive conflict and violence before, during and after school. Students may experience bullying, teasing, and pointless confrontations over clothing, turf issues or hearsay. These conflicts either begin at school or are brought into school from the home or the community.

Recent research indicates it is possible to intervene successfully to prevent the escalation of conflicts into violent incidents. By providing children and youth the knowledge and skills they need to resolve conflict peacefully, schools can create safer environments and reduce the number of suspensions, expulsions, disciplinary referrals, classroom disruptions, and playground fights. (See *References* section of this document for research citations.)

Conflict resolution programs and training can be implemented in a number of ways and existing programs vary considerably across schools and districts. This variation highlights the importance of selecting appropriate content and methods of delivery that best meet the needs and expectations of individual communities, schools or districts. However, a survey of programs throughout California and an extensive review of the national research reveal that certain unifying characteristics are significant to the effectiveness of school-based conflict resolution programs. These characteristics include:

1. a comprehensive approach, involving curriculum, peer mediation, and parent involvement components,
2. introduction in early grades and implementation through grade 12,
3. long-term commitment to maintaining the program,
4. strong leadership and disciplinary policies,
5. ongoing training and staff development, including teachers, administrators, community representatives, other school staff and parents/families,
6. a culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate approach, and
7. ongoing monitoring, evaluation and improvement.