



Conflict Resolution

Guidance Document

Tennessee Department of Education | October 2024



Introduction

Chapter 676 of the Public Acts of 2024 directed the Tennessee Department of Education to develop a conflict resolution program that may be adopted and implemented by Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and public charter schools to assist students in any of the grades kindergarten through twelve (K-12) in developing the skills necessary for nonviolent conflict resolution, including, but not limited to, communication skills, social skills, and relaxation techniques.

The Conflict Resolution Guidance Document contains best practices and strategies that can assist LEAs in implementing a conflict resolution program.

Guiding Principles

Conflict is a natural part of human interactions, and in educational settings, it can impact individuals and the entire school community. As educators, understanding conflict and equipping ourselves with effective conflict resolution skills is essential.

Conflict arises from differing opinions, needs, or goals. It can lead to tension, stress, and negative emotions. In schools, conflicts may occur among students, between staff members, or involving parents. Recognizing the roots of conflict is crucial for fostering a positive learning environment.

Resolving conflicts peacefully benefits everyone. It models positive behavior for students, encourages collaboration, and maintains a safe and conducive learning environment. Educators play a vital role in teaching conflict resolution as a life skill that extends beyond the classroom. By mastering active listening, assertive communication, and negotiation strategies, educators can model these skills for students. In turn, students are empowered to become effective problem solvers.

Creating Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments

Allow Flexibility within Predictable Structures

Predictable classroom routines create a sense of calm and help students understand what to expect (and what is expected of them) during the day. Routines are a system of actions or series of tasks that contribute to an expected rhythm that starts an event. Without this predictable structure, children can become dysregulated (Siegel, 2012). These behaviors can be mitigated by allowing flexibility within predictable structure in a school and classroom. While helping students feel safe and ready to take on new challenges and developmental tasks, predictable structures and supportive transitions teach all students how to constructively control themselves and their environments.

Classroom Strategies

Create routines: Establish predictable structures and schedules. Routines are essential for establishing a structured and calm environment. They establish norms and set expectations. Students feel at ease and know what to expect. Routines keep students on task and promote cooperation.

Visual Schedule: Posting a daily visual schedule allows students to know what activity is coming next.

Transition Signals: Use a timer, lighting, verbal cues or music to make students aware of transitions. Preparing students for transitions allows them to be calmer and more accepting of change.

Establish classroom traditions: Establish morning meetings. Post pictures of students to create a family atmosphere. Classroom traditions establish a positive culture where students experience belonging and community. Traditions promote connections and establish a sense of identity for the class.

Schoolwide Strategies

Create school routines: Establish predictable structures and schedules. Keep activities the same on set days whenever possible.

Morning Announcements: Make announcements each day to establish the start of the school day. This could include the announcer leading the school in a mantra, breathing exercise, a song, etc.

Build Supportive Relationships

In a school setting, the relationships between students, adults, and peers play an important role in influencing positive school climate and the establishment of a nurturing environment of trust and respect. One of the most important roles that schools can play in the lives of students affected by trauma is helping them to have positive relationships with peers and adults.

Classroom Strategies

Make a connection with each child: Greet students by name each morning. Use classroom circles, morning meetings, and classroom polling surveys to ask students questions and get to know them.

Establish and display classroom values: Involve students in creating values for the classroom. Let students decide how they want their classroom to look and feel and talk about behaviors and actions that lead to a successful classroom environment.

Establish classroom traditions: Establish morning meetings. Post pictures of students to create a family atmosphere. Classroom traditions establish a positive culture where students experience belonging and community. Traditions promote connections and establish a sense of identity for the class.

Schoolwide Strategies

Check in/Check out: Identify students who need extra support. Assign students to an adult in the building who checks in with them each morning and at the end of each day. This strategy promotes positive behaviors by providing routine feedback and increased positive attention to students.

Mentoring: Assign all students a designated adult in the building with whom they can build a rapport and a relationship.

Create a Safe Space

The classroom should be a place of empathy and respect for all for positive academic outcomes to occur. Create a welcoming and supportive environment and get to know students as individuals. Students should feel safe emotionally, physically, and academically.

Classroom Strategies

Listen and Give Reassurance: Students need to feel heard and supported.

Give Attention to Classroom Design: Classrooms need to be an organized space with limited distractions.

Provide Brain Breaks: Allow students to use all types of movement to give their brains a break from the content. Educational brain breaks are a way to help your students redirect their energy and focus when they start to fade.

Schoolwide Strategies

Calming Room/Space: Designate a space in the school or in each classroom that is intentionally structured to help students take a break, regulate, and deescalate before they get too overwhelmed.

Set High Expectations: All students should be expected to reach their full potential by receiving what they need to develop academically and socially. They have different strengths and talents, and it is important to recognize students' strengths in a variety of ways.

Empower Student Voice and Choice

Student voice and choice inspires and empowers students to take charge of their lives and their education. Students, particularly those impacted by trauma, should be made to feel that they matter and are included

in the classroom and in the school. Students who feel belonging are more motivated to participate actively in the school's life.

Classroom Strategies

Decision-Making: Let your students make decisions. From classroom design to input on projects, allowing students to have a say makes learning fun and helps create ownership in their learning environment.

Social and Personal Skills: Teach emotions, self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. Interventions that target these skills may contribute to improved academic performance and reduce behavioral problems.

Student-Led Conferences: Student-led conferences allow students to take ownership of their own learning. Instead of the teacher leading the conference with their caregiver, the student leads the conference and focuses on the subjects or skills they view as strengths and weaknesses.

Cooperative Learning: Cooperative learning is a student-centered, teacher-facilitated instructional practice that gives responsibility to a small group of students to achieve a common goal. Cooperative learning is a practical strategy to establish and reinforce social and personal competencies in the classroom. When students work together, they are more likely to form more meaningful and caring relationships with one another. The research indicates that cooperation promotes greater efforts to achieve, more positive relationships, and greater psychological health than competitive or individualistic efforts (Johnson et al., 2010).

Classroom Jobs: Assign classroom jobs. Give students classroom responsibility.

Schoolwide Strategies

Student Ambassadors/Youth Councils: Allow youth to work with supportive adults to improve schools and communities. Youth advisory councils allow youth and adults to make decisions together and have a positive influence on others.

Service- Learning Opportunities: Structured out-of-school youth activities promote positive youth development. These activities typically included (adult-organized) extra-curricular and community activities that are structured by goals in which participation is voluntary (Eisenkraft, 2015).

Peer Mediation: Peer mediation is a voluntary process in schools where student mediators help other students resolve conflicts and disputes. It can be an effective schoolwide approach to implementing a safe and inclusive learning environment. Several studies have indicated that a peer mediation program positively impacts school climate (Burrell et al., 2003). In addition, the operation of peer mediation programs is

associated with a reduced perception of school conflict by administrators and teachers and greater feelings of safety at school on the part of students, teachers, and parents (Eisenkraft, 2015).

Teach and Support Regulation

Students exposed to potentially traumatic experiences often demonstrate emotional and behavioral difficulties that dramatically interfere with their ability to engage in school. When students who have experienced past trauma are overwhelmed, they become dysregulated and have difficulty appropriately expressing and managing their emotions.

Classroom Strategies

Self-Regulation Activities: Breathing exercises, body reflection, meditation, and movement.

Classroom Design: Limited wall and ceiling decorations, sound machines, and soft lighting.

Calming Corners: Fidgets, sensory devices/materials, noise-cancelling headphones.

Schoolwide Strategies

Calming Room/Space: Designate a space in the school or in each classroom that is intentionally structured to help students take a break, regulate, and deescalate before they get too overwhelmed.

Use Discipline to Teach

Discipline means to teach and focus on desirable behaviors. Discipline is proactive and begins before there are problems.

Trauma-Informed Discipline

The goal of student discipline is to support students to behave in ways that contribute to academic achievement and school success and to support a school environment where students and staff feel safe physically, socially, emotionally, academically, and professionally. In all instances, school discipline should be reasonable, timely, fair, age and developmentally appropriate, logically connected to the behavior, relationally based, and should match the severity of the student's misbehavior. School discipline should be guided by the following principles:

- Effective and **engaging instruction** and classroom management are the foundation of effective discipline.
- School discipline is best accomplished by **preventing** misbehavior before it occurs and using positive, safe, and respectful interventions after it occurs. Discipline is **proactive**.
- Effective school discipline should hold students **accountable** without compromising school safety, respect, and dignity.
- Disciplinary actions should foster **awareness of behavioral patterns** and trigger and restore relationships with peers and adults in the school community.
- School safety is strengthened when all school staff build positive relationships with students and refer students to appropriate **mental health support** when needed.
- Exposure to adversity and trauma may interfere with a student's ability **to regulate** his/her emotions and behaviors, putting them at greater risk for disciplinary issues.
- School staff should understand the potential **effects of adversity and trauma** on student behavior and consider the reasons behind negative behaviors when determining disciplinary action.
- School staff should avoid **re-traumatizing** students by eliminating the use of potentially traumatic, violent, or shaming disciplinary practices.
- School discipline that offers students an opportunity **to learn** from their mistakes is more likely to result in getting the student re-engaged in learning.

Challenging Behavior	Connect and Regulate	Teaching Logical Consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •View challenging behavior as a sign of stress •Respond vs. React •Give emotional space and ask yourself the right questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •First seek to reduce stress •De-escalation strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Discipline procedures and policies that are clear and reasonable •Set up consequences that are logical and reasonable

Enforcing Boundaries with Relational Support:

Classroom Strategies

Time-In: Student is removed from their seat or the activity and sits next to the teacher. With the teacher’s assistance, the student is given a chance to regulate.

Calm Corner: The student remains in the classroom to continue a sense of belonging but is removed from the activity.

Schoolwide Strategies

Walk-Talk-and-Regulate: Student is paired with a designated adult with whom they have a relationship. They walk through the hallways to connect and to help the student regulate.

Designated Adult Visit: Student visits with a designated adult with whom they have a relationship.

Calm Room: If the school has a calm room monitored by a staff member, the student leaves the classroom and goes to the calm room for support in getting regulated.

In-School Suspension: Student is sent to ISS room to connect with an adult and receive assistance.

Supportive and Collaborative Practices

When schools do things **with** students or proactively, the results are better. Fair process means that people are treated in a respectful way. The central idea of fair process is that "...individuals are most likely to trust and cooperate freely with systems-whether they themselves win or lose by those systems-when fair process is observed" (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003). Fair process relates to how leaders handle their authority in all kinds of professions and roles: from parents and teachers to managers and administrators. A schoolwide approach to trauma informed discipline that embodies fair process asserts that people are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in behavior when those in authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them.

The Three Principles of Fair Process include:

- Engagement- Everyone affected by a decision is given the chance to provide input and have an opportunity to discuss various possible courses of action.
- Explanation- After a leader has made a decision, that decision and the process and reasoning behind the decision are made clear to all. "This is the decision I have made and why I have made it."
- Expectation Clarity- Everyone involved understands the implications of that decision, the specific expectations and the consequences for failing to meet those expectations. New rules are stated and understood.

Evaluation and Resources

When implementing any programmatic approaches to conflict resolution, it is important to evaluate the execution to determine program fidelity. Some basic steps to an effective evaluation of your conflict resolution program include:

- Assess the needs: Determine what you want or need the program to do and identify what resources already exist.
- Set goals: Develop specific goals (results) and objectives (actions).
- Decide what to look for: Select the right tool for measuring the goals and objectives (qualitative or quantitative data).
- Making sense of the results: Analyze and interpret the results.
- Let others know what you have found: Summarize information and share it with staff, stakeholders, and other community members (Jones & Kmitta, 2001).

Department Resources

[*School-based Mental Health Supports \(tn.gov\)*](#)

[Social and Personal Competencies \(tn.gov\)](#)

[School Climate \(tn.gov\)](#)

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