



# 2012 DATA BOOK



## Success Story: Talk About the Problems (TAP)

The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life



Conflict is a normal part of life of which adolescents are not immune. Over the course of a typical day, it is estimated that adolescents are involved in three to four conflicts with their parents and one to two with friends (Adams and Laursen, 2007). Often these disagreements occur within the classroom setting and can lead to a disruption in academic instruction. With 35 to 60 percent of teacher time being spent intervening and managing disruptive behavior, it is important that a meaningful avenue of resolving arguments, teasing, gossiping and other forms of conflict be implemented in our schools today (CREducation, n.d.). When both parties negotiate a positive resolution, conflict can be viewed as an opportunity rather than an obstacle; a possibility rather than a problem. A positive strategy that has been used in classrooms

across the country since the 1970's is peer mediation in which students involved in a disagreement resolve their issues with the assistance of peers trained as conflict managers. The results often end in a "win-win" situation in which both sides are heard, and a resolution is found that is satisfactory to everyone involved.



GOLDRING  
WOLDENBERG  
INSTITUTE OF  
SOUTHERN  
JEWISH LIFE



Malkie Schwartz, Director of Community Engagement, Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life

*The use of peer mediation can substantially change how students approach and settle conflicts. In one middle school, 83% of students trained in peer mediation reported 'win-win' settlements, while 86% of untrained controls reported that conflicts resulted in a 'win-lose' outcome."*

### Safe and Responsive Schools

"The point is not to find out who's right or wrong; the point is to acknowledge that there is conflict, understand that people have different feelings about it, and then allow the students themselves to come up with a resolution that will work and determine how to

proceed," says Malkie Schwartz, Director of Community Engagement for the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL), located in Jackson, Mississippi. The Institute has partnered with Blackburn Middle School to implement a creative peer mediation pilot program that has involved students in every step of the process including naming the program itself. It's called TAP, "Talk About the Problems," a reference to the wrestling world when one "taps out" to voluntarily submit to the opponent.

The Hebrew phrase "Tikkun Olam" encourages efforts to "repair our world" through working hand-in-hand with local communities to address issues that concern us all. With that in mind, in 2009, the newly formed ISJL Community Engagement Department began to explore ways to make meaningful contributions to the Jackson community without duplicating work already being done. "In most Southern towns, we [the Jewish community] are a small percentage of the greater community," says Michele Schipper, ISJL Chief Operating Officer. "There is a history of community involvement, not just sitting in our own little enclave, but to really be a part of the overall community in a variety of civic ways." After a series of brainstorming sessions with community leaders, Schwartz was particularly impacted by conversations she had with then Blackburn Middle School Principal, Bobby Brown. "He [Brown] had heard about peer mediation, and he really wanted it to be launched at his school, but with everything else going on, he had not managed to get it started," says Schwartz. "So we jumped on that and said that this [peer mediation] is something that Blackburn wants, and it's something that we see that can be potentially replicated in additional schools."

In the beginning, Blackburn school administrators, counselors and teachers selected 24 students representing a broad snapshot of the 500 member student body to participate in a series of informational workshops examining the various ways to handle conflict. After learning about the qualifications of a student mediator and understanding the responsibilities it brings, the students chose ten out of the larger group to serve as the first class of TAP mediators. Schwartz, experienced in conflict resolution, conducted training sessions over a three week period in which the newly selected mediators learned communication and problem solving strategies such as role-playing, brainstorming, and storytelling. Mediators even had the chance to visit the Mississippi College School of Law and discussed peaceful, rather than adversarial responses to conflict with the Dean.

Marketing the TAP program was also a charge given to the newly formed mediators. After naming the program, they started a media campaign within the school to promote TAP, informed the student body of the services provided, and partnered with Mad Genius a



*Michele Schipper, Chief Operating Officer, Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life*



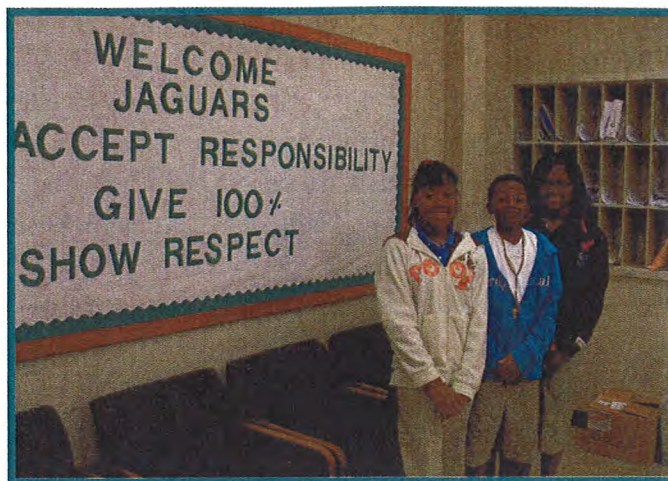
*Bridget Harkins (L), Learning Strategies Teacher, Blackburn Middle School, and Marietta Carter, Principal, Blackburn Middle School*



*Malkie Schwartz and Michele Schipper, Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life*

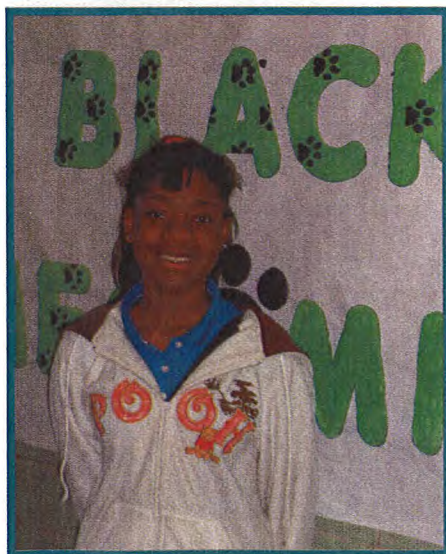
# School Safety

Ridgeland-based company to produce a promotional video demonstrating the steps of the mediation process. By November 2010, the TAP program was in place and ready to begin mediation sessions, and even though the number of sessions has been smaller than at first anticipated, the outcomes of those sessions have been positive. "It's going to take a little while for the students to buy into this because it's really a new thing," says Bridget Harkins, a Learning Strategies teacher at Blackburn. "Actually talking about their problems with student mediators is a new tool for them." Schwartz agrees once students as well as teachers have direct experience with TAP, the program will take hold. "It's really about incorporating mediation into the culture of the school. When the school community makes peer mediation the accepted norm, the program will grow," says Schwartz. Noting that Blackburn held 13 peer mediation sessions during its first year, Schwartz adds, "That's 13 less recurring conflicts in the school, and that's a big deal. In class all you need is one disturbance, one fight to break out, and the kids don't learn for the next 45 minutes because all the attention is focused on that conflict. So they are definitely seeing the positive results and the potential for the growth of the program."



*Dazhia Stewart, Malcolm Nelson, and Jessica Stewart, Blackburn Middle School Peer Mediators*

Marietta Carter, Blackburn's principal believes that TAP is a perfect complement to the positive behavior intervention system now in place in the Jackson Public Schools and says that the other 11 middle schools in the district have expressed an interest in starting similar programs. "TAP is a great teaching tool for students and a way to empower them to take care of their community," says Carter. "I tell them, 'Irrespective of what goes on outside these buildings, this right here is your community, and you can decide if it's a good or a bad one.'"



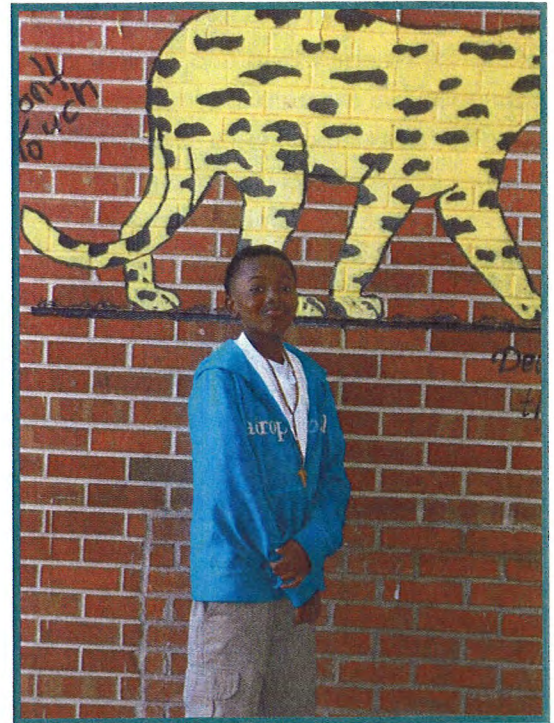
*Dazhia Stewart, Peer Mediator*

Students involved in a conflict such as arguing, teasing, gossiping or threatening are given the option to participate in the peer mediation process or handle it in the more traditional manner of serving detention or out-of-school suspensions. During a session, two student mediators guide their peers through the process. Adults are not present, and everything said during the session is kept confidential. After arriving at a reasonable solution, both parties sign an agreement committing to certain actions to resolve their conflict. "We tell them it's okay to talk about your problems to us [the mediators], and since we are their age we may understand better than teachers do," says Jessica Stewart, a peer mediator. She has seen firsthand that the program works. Recalling a session she mediated last year between two girls who had each been the topic of gossip, Jessica noted, "They were mad at the beginning, and at the end they started talking to each other and became friends again." Schwartz agrees that the student-led sessions take the burden off the teachers and empower the students at the same time. "What's great is that the students who are

involved in the conflict become the experts on what the resolution can be," says Schwartz. They come up with the resolution and make sure it's enforced. Once they come up with it, they are very likely to follow through with it because they thought it would work, and usually they are right."

*"The point is not to find out who's right or wrong; the point is to acknowledge that there is conflict, understand that people have different feelings about it, and then allow the students themselves to come up with a resolution that will work and determine how to proceed."*

**Malkie Schwartz, Director of Community Engagement, Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life**



Malcolm Nelson, Peer Mediator

The ISJL prepares materials and curriculum, conducts training sessions and assists with developing a process that facilitates the effective implementation of the program in the school. "We don't come in with a formula of how the program will work," says Schwartz. "We want to make sure that the objectives are met, but in a way that really complements what the school is trying to do." The Blackburn faculty and administration are equally grateful for the partnership. Principal Carter says that schools should welcome faith-based organizations such

as the ISJL. "Anytime we can have community stakeholders such as the Institute of Southern Jewish Life come over and lend a hand and help us to get a program started such as this mediation program, it is much welcomed." "I knew what I wanted to do, but I just didn't know how to get it together," says Harkins about starting a peer mediation program. "Malkie brings all of her strategies and skills to the table. I didn't know how to train the children, but she did." And so merging the strengths of both the ISJL with those of the school community has resulted in a peer mediation program with great potential for replication in the Jackson Public Schools and beyond.



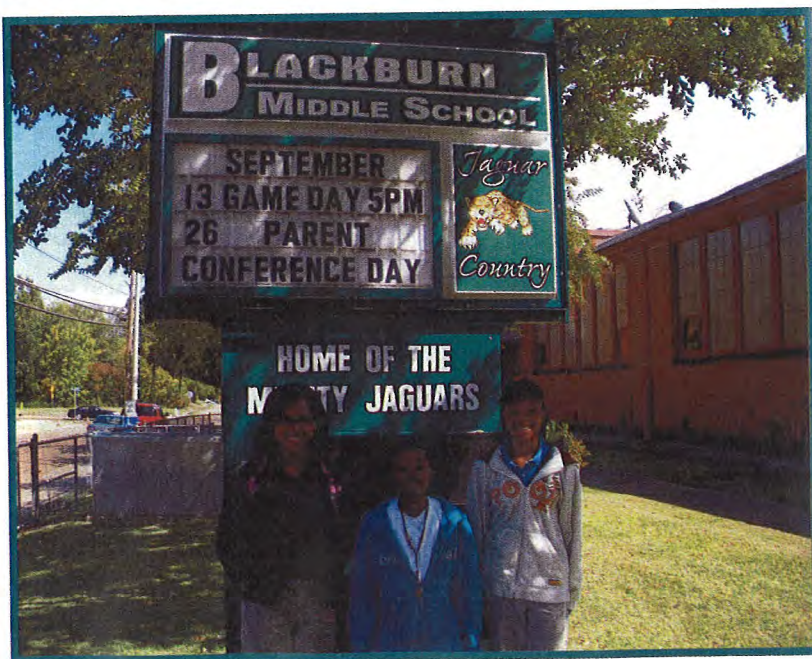
# School Safety

The process for expansion and replication of the TAP program is already in place. Blackburn mediators are taking their negotiation and communication skills with them as they advance to Jim Hill High School where administrators are eager to implement TAP. As those students progress to the upper grades, incoming Blackburn students are selected and trained to serve as mediators. The ISJL is also looking at ways to make TAP available to other interested schools in the Jackson Public School District and throughout the state. They want to establish a Community Engagement Fellowship Program in which fellows, selected and employed by ISJL, would provide training services to participating schools and insure that TAP programs are launched successfully in Jackson schools and across Mississippi. Similar to the existing ISJL Education Fellows program which provides Jewish educational support to local congregations, the Community Engagement fellows would make regular site visits to the schools in which they are assigned. Since the ISJL represents 13 states, (Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Texas, Oklahoma, and the Florida Panhandle), the TAP program could be expanded beyond the borders of Mississippi. "We want to replicate the fellowship piece and also eventually bring mediators from across the region together for youth-led conferences," says Schwartz. "It could turn into a much larger force than ten students located in isolated schools; instead they would be a part of a youth movement that is working towards more peaceful schools across the South."

*"TAP is a great teaching tool for students  
and a way to empower them to take care of their community."*

***Marietta Carter, Principal, Blackburn Middle School***

Expansion of TAP creates the need for additional funding. The ISJL, established in 2000 by Macy Hart, was created to promote Jewish life in Southern communities, preserve the history of the Jewish South, and offer Rabbinic services, as well as cultural and educational programs to smaller congregations. Although much of their work is rooted in preserving the past, a major focus is on the future through the educational services offered to Jewish children and the work of the Community Engagement Department in recognizing their role in local communities. "We are all responsible for raising this next generation" says Schipper. "We want to make sure we're doing our part to invest in our collective future." The ISJL is funded by the New Orleans-based Goldring Family Foundation and the Woldenberg Foundation for whom the Institute is named, and receives substantial gifts from foundations across the country including one from a New York foundation which funds the community engagement work. A partnership with



AmeriCorps, a division of the U.S. government's Corporation for National and Community Service provides one member to assist in the current operation of the TAP program, and a reading program at Blackburn. TAP, including the on-site support of the AmeriCorps member, comes at no charge to the Blackburn community for TAP's operating expenses, and the ISJL hopes that future partnerships with local and regional foundations will allow the implementation of new TAP programs without any expenses from the schools themselves.

*"We are all responsible for raising this next generation."*

***Michele Schipper, Chief Operating Officer,  
Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life***

When carefully planned, a peer mediation program such as TAP can reap positive outcomes. Research tells us that peer mediation can improve school climates resulting in fewer fights, fewer referrals to the office, a decrease in school suspensions, and even an improvement in self-esteem and academic achievement among the mediators themselves (Safe and Responsive Schools, 2000). It is a slow process in making it succeed, and those interested in starting a peer mediation program must be committed to a significant amount of planning and training prior to full implementation. When students as well as faculty are open to the concept of peer mediation, an environment is created that calls on the students themselves to seek resolution. According to Principal Carter, "It gives them [students] the opportunity to determine what will happen in their community and have a part in making it a more positive place to be."

## ***Reflections on Peer Mediation***

*"It's another way to solve a problem. Instead of a negative way, it's positive."*

***Dazhia Stewart***

*"I think you see less fights in school, and you don't have to worry about other students having problems being safe in school."*

***Jessica Stewart***

*"When you get sent to the principal's office, you really don't want to go home because you don't want to miss your work. With the peer mediation program, you will still be in class and can do your work."*

***Malcolm Nelson***