

## “It Worked!”: A Story of Community Engagement

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I stood outside of the Mississippi College School of Law building, waiting with middle school students whose parents were on the way to pick them up. We had just finished a peer mediator training attended by 18 students from three local middle schools, including Blackburn Middle School, where T.A.P., our peer mediation program, has been in existence for 3 years. The day's training was led by students from the Black Law Student Association (BLSA), all of whom had spent time with ISJL staff, mastering the curriculum so they could effectively teach and implement it. It was clear that all who participated learned a lot and had a great time.

It was dark, windy and rainy, and all of us huddled close to the doors where we were less likely to get wet. Next to me was a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student who was staring at the ground. When I asked how he thought the training went, he shrugged his shoulders. I asked whether he was excited for T.A.P. to come to his school. He looked up at me, smiled and said “It’s

not going to work at my school.” I asked him why he felt that way and, reluctantly, he explained why he didn’t feel that his fellow students would choose to talk through a conflict rather than fight it out. An experienced Blackburn mediator overheard our conversation and immediately jumped in. “That’s what we thought about our school,” she said. I asked her how the program is going today, and she proudly talked about its successes—38 mediation sessions during the last academic year, an improved school environment, and an exciting leadership opportunity for her.

The exchange between the two students took me back to my initial conversations with the first cohorts of student mediators at Blackburn Middle School. At first, they resisted the peer mediation program. They were adamant that it would not work. We made a list of all the reasons that they believed the program would not work—and there were many. Then, we went through each challenge and talked about how we could address it.

It seemed unrealistic to the students that any form of conflict resolution



Malkie Schwartz with student mediators receiving an award.

would seem like a genuine alternative to their classmates. For many of their classmates, using their fists instead of their words was the norm. But the students in that room had been selected to be mediators because they were going to *change* the norm. The question now was whether they were up for the challenge of taking on the role of an agent of change.

They were afraid that T.A.P. wouldn’t work – because it was their responsibility to make sure it would work, and the task was daunting. The students understood that fighting was always going to be an option, but that through their leadership, they could help make their peers aware of another, more peaceful, option.

A moment later, the Blackburn student’s mom pulled up to the curb. The

student grabbed her bag and began skipping to the car. “Wait!” I called after her. “What did you say when you first heard about T.A.P.?” “It wouldn’t work!” She yelled back from across the pavement. “And what happened?” I asked. “It worked!” She shouted triumphantly.

Hearing those words, directly from one of the student leaders, really brings home why we do what we do. I hope her experience, and endorsement, and enthusiasm, resonated with the doubtful new student as much as they did with me. I hope we all hear the cheerful student’s message loud and clear – that even when you think “it’ll never work,” if you put in the effort, you can look back and yell out: “It worked!”

T.A.P. makes it possible for the students themselves