

P.S. 24

427 38th Street
Brooklyn, NY 11232
Principal: Christina Fuentes

P.S. 24, a dual-language school for international studies, serves a culturally diverse student population. Families in the surrounding community are well acquainted with hardship, poverty, and violence. The schoolwide approach highlights the value of conflict resolution, tolerance, and cultural diversity. The 2007–08 Learning Environment Survey, administered by the New York City Department of Education, reflected the positive impact of the school’s approach to social-emotional learning as evidenced by the high ratings in the areas of safety and respect (the sections below outline the practices employed by P.S. 24 to reduce behavior problems and promote students’ social skills).

- ◆ Elementary (Pre-K–5)
- ◆ 91% Hispanic
- ◆ 3% Asian
- ◆ 3% Black
- ◆ 3% White
- ◆ 94% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 43% English Language Learners

Conflict Resolution

Emma Gonzales, the peer mediation consultant at P.S. 24, trains teachers and students on how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful and respectful manner. Building on the model of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), over 60 students in grades 3–5 serve as peer mediators. Mediation occurs between two peers who have had a dispute or a conflict and is facilitated by a team of two peer mediators. All students understand that they can request a mediation by filing a request form, speaking with their teacher, directly asking a student mediator, or being referred by an administrator for mediation. Mediations are conducted in various areas throughout the school such as the cafeteria, the playground, and the hallways. The five-step approach to peer mediation guides students into discussion about their feelings during conflict and ultimately leads to conflict resolution. The steps of the process are: introductions, defining the problem/dispute, gathering additional information about the problem, reflecting on the conflict, and finding solutions. In addition to serving as mediators, these trained students are called upon to guide younger student mediators and in turn become role models for all students in the building.

Building upon the positive results achieved from the peer mediation program, Emma Gonzales and the school also developed a peer mediation program for kindergarten, first-, and second-grade students in 2004. The students in the lower elementary grades who facilitate the peer mediation process are known as “Peace Helpers.” Peace Helpers are also trained to follow the steps of peer mediation. However, they help to resolve conflicts primarily in the classroom setting in an area designated as the “Peace Corner.” A Peace Corner is a place in every kindergarten, first-, and second-grade classroom where students who are having trouble can go to calm down, read, think, and perhaps discuss their situation with a mediator or Peace Helper. Students and teachers at P.S. 24

have found that Peace Corners help defuse conflicts, reduce disruption, and provide solace to many students. According to Christina Fuentes, the school principal, “Becoming a peer mediator or Peace Helper is a much desired position by the student population!”

Peace and Diversity Education

Students at P.S. 24 represent over 10 different countries and a variety of Spanish dialects. Teachers encourage students to embrace their differences (e.g., ethnicity, gender, culture, etc.). Furthermore, a month-long diversity celebration takes place each year during which students participate in daily academic activities related to peace such as creating collages that represent persons from various cultures or completing writing assignments. The school’s Diversity Panel also travels throughout the school speaking to students and teachers. Students on the Diversity Panel represent various cultures and ethnicities. They use this platform to share their personal experiences of discrimination that have taken place in the school or in the community. A primary purpose of the Diversity Panel is to encourage fellow students to understand and respect differences.

Forming Partnerships with Parents

The staff of P.S. 24 provides informational workshops for the parents of students. The topics of the workshops vary and may change based on the needs of the parents. Topics include health and nutrition, preventing domestic violence, parenting skills, and social-emotional learning. A particular workshop entitled “Peace in the Family” helps parents understand how to be assertive without being aggressive when disciplining their children.

In this way, positive behavior management skills are integrated into the students’ lives at school and at home. P.S. 24’s Parent Coordinator, Tamara Estrella, comments, “The parent workshop has visibly improved the ability for students and their parents to communicate. Students take pride in seeing their parents take an active role in their education.”

A Focus on Student Behavior and Emotional Needs

According to Mariana Gaston, the vice principal of P.S. 24, “Adults at P.S. 24 are respectful to students. We do not raise our voices. We help students understand their emotions and solve their behavior issues. We train our students to be assertive; if you stand up for yourself, and for other people, the community will listen.”

The school also holds a “Lunch Club,” a meeting that takes place during lunch time in which fourth- and fifth-grade girls get to come and talk with the school psychologist and mediation consultant about any home or school issues that may be bothering them. Typically, these students have been struggling with behavior management for a long period of time; during the Lunch Club, they are able to celebrate small victories and reflect on the causes of their behavior. The main purpose of this additional intervention (besides their ongoing behavior programs) is for the school psychologist and mediation consultant to meet with these young ladies in order to better understand their emotional needs and encourage their positive behavior.

Strategies that teachers use to help students manage their behavior include writing in personal “feelings notebooks” about how they are feeling, and art work about student emotions. The staff also teaches social responsibility by encouraging students to help someone heal when they have been hurt so that students will not feel victimized. Staff members at the school model the behaviors and social skills that they seek to instill within their students. It is this schoolwide approach that helps the school demonstrate consistent skill at promoting social-emotional learning in order to reduce behavior problems and create a safe and positive learning environment.