**Handy Hints for LtPM Coordinators at Secondary Schools**

**By Donna Hourigan-Johnston**

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I read once that there are three rules to life: kindness, kindness, kindness. I think this is true because kindness begets kindness. However, I am well aware there are many things that can upset us. When we are upset we may not feel like being kind. Feeling angry with unfairness; being hurt or abused by others; being in conflict . . . the list is endless.

When I think about the Peer Mediation Service and what it gives students, I think ultimately it helps them be kind to one another. It gives an opportunity for students to become more personally aware of themselves, to gain understanding of those around them and learn self-control. It grows stronger relationships and gives students skills to resolve differences.It helps students feel connected and have a stronger sense of belonging. It gives students a sense of purpose an agency in making a positive difference to their world, whether it’s their school, family, or community. This ultimately creates a safer, more respectful environment.

When Christina Barruel asked me to write this article about *“Handy Hints for LtPM Coordinators at Secondary Schools”,* I immediately thought *‘every school needs to create their own service in their own way’.* You cannot compare one school to another. Each school has its own culture. Its’ own personalities. Its’ own strengths and weaknesses.

We have had Peer Mediation Services at MRGS for 25 years. It has taken time, perseverance and patience for it to become a successful part of the cultural tapestry of our school. The following are some main reflections of what I think helped set up and strengthen the Peer Mediation Service at MRGS:

* We developed our own vision with our students. This empowered us with a clear rationale of why we need a Peer Mediation Service and what we want it to achieve. Many schools do it differently and difference is good.
* We gave as many students as possible the opportunity to train as Mediators. We have 240 trained Mediators at any one time, which is approximately 10% of the school. They have the opportunity to work at the grass roots level of the school supporting students to get help when needed. This had a reinforcing effect on the students. I remember a student applying to be a Mediator saying they had always wanted to be a Mediator since Year 9 when a Year 13 Mediator helped them when they were bullied.
* 100 new Mediators are trained each year, with a further 80 receiving advanced training from the Peace Foundation; Rainbow Youth; Youthlaw; Julie Watson (Race Relations); Dr John Fenaughty (‘Inside Out’ Program); SHINE and Brainwave Trust.
* 40 Mediators each year also experience a two day Mentorship training (Sunday/Monday) with Julie McCracken from Mindflow. I believe as the Mediators are in a position of power helping others, they need to have the opportunity to learn more about social issues and to challenge their own belief system.
* All Mediation training and Mediations are done in school time. This is important as it shows that the school fully supports and values the Peer Mediation Service as an integral part of the school.
* When selecting Mediators, I make sure all ethnicities and genders are represented within the team. I head hunt students and encourage them to apply. It is important for the Mediation Service to reflect the student body and who the students will relate to. I have heard on a number of occasions from Advanced Mediators that the thing they love is that “anyone” can be a Mediator; there is no hierarchy. They can apply in Year 11 and 12 at our school.
* Every August, we have a major International Peace week where the students organise a wide range of activities. These include Peace assembly presentations, Peace T-shirts, Peace Banners, White Ribbons, Peace Quote competitions, Random Acts of Kindness, Face Painting, and an ‘Embracing Diversity & Anti Violence Stall day’ where many agencies come in and share important information to students. We also have a Peace March around our Mt Roskill Community.
* Remember this has been developed over a 22 year period!
* Be visible! We have a Mediation Banner hanging outside Student Services. We create posters, pamphlets, and assembly presentations. We take lots of photos of events like Peace week and have a Peer Mediation photo board. If you have time, it is really effective for Mediators to go into Year 9 classes and facilitate a lesson on ‘anger and conflict resolution’. We did this a few years ago, and I really want to do this again.
* We have a budget to pay for badges, training, peace week activities and administration costs.
* We have a Peer Mediator od Mediators of the Year at end of year Prize giving.
* We attend the Annual Peace Foundation’s Secondary School’s Peace Symposium. It is inspirational!

I think Mediation skills are very important if we are serious about standing up against violence in our society. I want students to be ‘Ambassadors of Social Justice’, standing up against bullying in the school community and standing FOR respect and fairness for all. This means a Mediation Service is more than having confidential mediations behind closed doors, (of which we do about 40 a year). It is about being part of a large social justice movement within the school, where people and diversity is appreciated and valued, and injustice addressed.

These are some ideas of how to set up or strengthen your LtPM Service but please remember that you and your students are the experts on your school, so develop a Peer Mediation Service that fits with your vision for your school and your schools’ needs.

**Everything starts somewhere. Better to start than to do nothing at all.**