

**Taft High School  
Woodland Hills, California**

**STUDENTS PROBLEM IDENTIFYING  
AND RESOLVING IT TOGETHER  
(S.P.I.R.I.T.)  
December 1-2, 2005**

**A Collaboration of:**

**THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
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# Introduction

The United States Department of Justice Community Relations Service, U.S Western Region (CRS), the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations (County Human Relations), and the Los Angeles City Human Relations Commission (City Human Relations) routinely work together, using a variety of methods and programs, to reduce racial tension and violence in communities throughout Los Angeles. Each agency works to apply the principles of mediation, problem solving, and full engagement of schools, community and government agencies to help improve the intergroup relations in schools and their surrounding community.

Following intergroup conflict that occurred on the Taft High School campus in May 2005, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Local District 1 Superintendent Jean Brown and Taft High School Principal Sharon Thomas requested that the DOJ-CRS, and County and City Human Relations conduct an assessment process bringing together a cadre of ninety student leaders, both elected and “natural,” truly representative of Taft’s diversity, to identify issues, develop solutions, and take action on conflicts within their school. The three agencies worked together to conduct the DOJ-CRS’s “S.P.I.R.I.T.” (Students Problem Identifying and Resolving it Together) assessment for Taft High School, 5461 Winnetka Ave., Woodland Hills, California on December 1-2, 2006. The program itself was conducted at nearby Devonshire Training Center at 10045 Jumilla Street in Chatsworth, California. Building and improving human relations and available support resources were the goals. This report provides the methodology used with the students in identifying school problems and resolutions to those problems. This program utilized DOJ-CRS and County and City Human Relations conciliators to facilitate the process of gaining student perspectives of identified concerns and possible solutions at Taft High School.

## Methodology

On the first day, we began with a program introduction and a welcome by the Principal. Grouping students homogeneously, we tasked them with identifying problems and issues of concern. Following this first break out session, students identified representatives to form a Campus Action Team who would work with the principal towards the goal of implementing student recommendations for improving school climate. Students reconvened after recording the problems and concerns of their respective groups and reported out to the collective body on their lists.

Facilitators gathered all recordings and developed a compilation of common problems and themes. Students, on the second day, worked on ‘problem resolution’ using a 5-step problem solving process. Students were placed in mixed affinity groups to develop their solution(s) to prioritized concerns. (Students recognize during this grouping that their individual group concerns were common among other groups). Note that this information is essentially raw data. Only minor edits were made to assure a clear understanding of students’ ideas.

At the end of the second day, the Campus Action Team was introduced to the larger student-working group. These students then met in the context of a 5 unit human relations class that was established by the principal to implement the student-onceived campus improvement recommendations arrived at during the S.P.I.R.I.T process.

### **Day 1: Problem Identification**

SPIRIT invites students to share concerns about what they see as problems at the school. Students met within homogeneous groups for problem identification and issue recording.

**Breakout Session 1:** Students were broken up into 6 racially/ethnically homogeneous groups of students: African American, Latino, White, Asian, Persian, and Bi-Racial/Mixed. This was done so that each group of students would feel comfortable enough to voice all of their perceptions and concerns about problems at the school. The facilitators then began the individual group sessions starting out with ice-breakers, introducing communication guidelines, and then facilitating student dialogue on what they felt were the most important issues to them at Taft High School. **The following are a list of unranked priority issues raised by the respective ethnic groups:**

**African American students**

- Stereotypes
  - There is peer pressure to stereotype
  - Parental attitudes play a role in why students stereotype
  - There are lots of cliques on campus
- Teacher/Student Relations
  - There is preferential treatment of certain groups by teachers
  - Certain racial groups are singled out
  - Conflicts are not always based on race
  - Teachers judge students by the way they dress/look
  - One's attitude plays a role in the teacher/student relations
  - Some teachers are unenthusiastic, unengaged and "rely on movies too much."
  - Some teachers are unwilling to extend themselves
  - Some students are disrespectful to teachers
- Some students mad dog
- There is a lot of gossiping/talking behind one's back
- Re: food
  - Long lines for food
  - No variety
  - Too expensive
  - People cut in line
- Some black girls resent black boys talking to non-black girls
- Sports Administrators spend money on white sports/guidelines for how money is spent is not clearly communicated
- Dress code should be revised
- Bathrooms
  - Supply issues (no tampon dispensers, mirrors, etc.)
  - Long lines for girls/not enough bathrooms
  - Bathrooms closed without notice
- Deans single out/watch black students
- Persian students dominate lower lunch area
- Large Campus
  - Too many people
  - R building too far
- Graffiti
- Mexican gang members try to keep others from talking to Mexican girls
- Tension between Mexican and Black gangs

- Drugs
- Latino workers sometimes make inappropriate comments to Black female students
- On rainy days students are bunched up/crowded

### **Latino students**

- Lack of unity among students
- Teachers and staff not enforcing rules/standards equally
- Racist difficulty between students, and between teachers and students
- Stereotyping is often based on personal styles
- There is tension/judgments between Valley kids and L.A. kids
- Long lunch lines
- Some teachers are racist/prejudice
- There is a lack of programs that allow students to communicate
- Individual fights turn into a larger group/race issues
- Fights are also intra-group
- Students aren't allowed to wear beanies, chains, hats, or muscle shirts, listen to music on personal devices or use cell phones
- Students make racial comments about other people's groups
- Teachers disrespect students
- Problem with students ditching
- Problem with graffiti

### **Asian students**

- Problems with taggers/graffiti (carve into desks, rival schools tagging campus)
- Campus segregated into cliques/racial groups ("China Town" by the stairs got moved and in invaded by other races; "Little Asia" is another Asian area)
- Stereotypes of Asians: "chinky" (have Chinese looking eyes); rich/successful; short; smart
- Family pressure to succeed in school
- Problems with racial segregation
  - AA vs. Latino
  - Persian vs. Russian
  - Asians among each other
- Problems with theft (cell phones, clothes, electronics)
  - No mechanism to address theft, its causes, and confrontations among students as a result of it
- Students trash talk
- Fights-Riots caused negative attention
- Some teachers ignore or ignite tensions & some discriminate
- Response from security is slow
- Students encourage/jump into fights, most people watch, some people run
- Violence addressed with crisis-response, not prevention
- Problems with attendance/ISIS program
- Lack of respect for each others culture

### **Mixed Race Student Group**

- Fights and tension
  - fighting over race, gangs, family/friends
  - overcrowded, people bump into each other
  - racial tension
  - gossip/rumors
  - taking sides/racial group
- Teachers/administration
  - don't say hi
  - lack of respect
  - derogatory comments
  - impersonal
  - play favorites
  - counselors, difficult scheduling
  - exclusive
- Security
  - Dress code too strict
  - Random searches make students feel uncomfortable
  - Security harassment, guilty by association
  - People stealing, nothing gets done
  - Parking tickets: in the morning, not enough time to parks, lots of tickets
- Buses
  - Can't sleep
  - Can't listen to CD players
  - Unfair treatment by some bus drivers
  - Some bus drivers use bad words
- Electives
  - not interesting
  - poor placement
- Student Needs
  - ID's too expensive
  - Money is not being spent on student needs
  - Football games too expensive for students
  - Bathrooms: inaccessible/locked, no tissues, no mirrors
  - R building too far
  - Food: Need better, more affordable choices
- Students listen to CD players in school/class
- Basketball Court: poor nets & bent rims
- Tagging: too many people doing it
- Unfair trash pick-up assignments
- Textbook Room: not helpful
- Vending machines: expensive, don't work properly
- Need longer passing periods
- People steal and nothing gets done
- Too many drugs (peer pressure)
- Hallways overcrowded

### **White Students**

- Individuality is dead, people act the same, get their information from media

- People on campus separated by what they listen to: metal, pop, psychobilly
- Segregation occurs mostly by individual interests
- Teachers are frustrated with the district
  - District dictating what to teach, how to teach, when to teach
- Teachers don't have enough time to teach
- Teachers need leeway about how to teach
- Some teachers are biased and they stereotype
- Most adults think teenagers are naive- a few students ruin it for everyone
- Tensions between AA and Latinos occurs when someone wears a certain color or starts something minor
- Individual fights between two people becomes racial because students support friends
- There's segregation during lunch

### **Persian Students**

- Graffiti
- Taft HS has a bad reputation
- School should start later
- Dress code is too strict
- Persians have a bad reputation among teachers for cheating
- A lot of pressure from parents to do well in school
- Lack of security in parking lot
- Tension between group
  - Persian vs. Black: everybody sticks to themselves
  - Persian vs. Asian: biggest conflict this year
  - Persian vs. Persian: Muslim vs. Jewish
- Teachers not forthcoming about how students can improve performance
- Too many tests
- Stereotypes of Persians
  - They think we are all rich
  - Guilty by association
- Self-segregation by all students
- Drugs on campus
- Security plays favorites
- Food: lack of variety, not tasty
- Student-body has no power
- Vending machines broken
- Fund raising issues
- Bathrooms: need tampon dispensers, mirrors in boys bathroom
- Clubs not allowed to sell candy
- Teachers not reaching out
- R-building too far
- Need swimming pool
- Hallways too dark
- Teachers display inappropriate behavior
- No cell phones
- Need help with counselors

- not enough counselors
- hard to drop a class
- poor scheduling
- progress reports don't allow time for improvements
- ISIS attendance system ineffective: won't let you leave early for personal issues
- Bad busing system
- Campus overcrowded
- Tickets for being late to school

**ALL GROUPS RE-CONVENED IN A GENERAL SESSION AND EACH OF THE SIX GROUPS REPORTED ON THEIR FINDINGS. MAJOR PROBLEMS WERE IDENTIFIED, CONSOLIDATED, AND PRIORITIZED BASED ON STUDENT VOTES.**

**(Each student received 5 dots and placed a dot by the top five issues most important to them).**

**THEIR PRIORITIZED CONCERNS REVEALED THE FOLLOWING:**

**1. Teacher/Student Relation**

- Some Teachers are disrespectful to students
- Accusations of theft by teachers
- Some teachers stereotype based on how you dress, race, hairstyle, and people you associate with
- Some Teachers favor students with good grades
- No clear process for complaining about harassment/discrimination
- Some teachers make inappropriate comments
- Some teachers are racist
- Some students are disrespectful to teachers
- Some teachers single out ethnicity for punishment
- Too many students in class
- Some teachers don't want to teach/don't care
- Some teachers do not repeat things
- Teachers frustrated with the district
- District dictating what to teach, how to teach, when to teach
- Teachers don't have enough time to teach
- Teachers need leeway about how to teach

**2. Stereotyping & Cliques**

**3. Racism/Racial Comments & Cultural Misunderstandings**

**4. Fights**

**5. Tensions between LA and Valley Students**

**6. Dress Code**

**7. Theft**

**8. Food**

**9. Bathrooms**

**10. Graffiti/Taggers**

**11. Buses**

**12. ISIS program/Attendance**

**13. Lack of Unity among students**

**14. Parking lot security**

## **PROBLEM RESOLUTION**

### **Day 2:**

Day 2 moves students to resolving problems. They are first introduced to the 5-step problem-solving method, and then briefed on the common themes that ran across racial lines in the previous day's discussion. Students are assigned into heterogeneous groups to develop/ brainstorm solutions.

**General session 2:** The 5-step problem-solving method:

1. Identify the problem
2. Brainstorm possible solutions
3. Pick the best solution(s)
4. Develop a plan of action and implement the solution
5. Follow-up on the success of the implementation

**Breakout session 2:** Students were then divided equally into four racially mixed groups to brainstorm potential solutions to concerns. Students were encouraged to come up with as many ideas as possible and not to judge or evaluate them until the end of the session. Using the 5 Step Problem Solving Model, each group below indicates the problem addressed and corresponding recommendation for resolution. All groups were given the same #1 listed concern for maximum contribution of ideas followed by alternating concerns.

### **Group 1- Resolutions to concerns:**

#### **Concern 1. 'Teacher-student relation'**

##### **Resolution recommended:**

- Have a conference with students and teachers
- The first day of school we should go over expectations of teachers and students
- Teachers should not stereotype students
- Students should not judge teachers
- Teachers should have consequences for actions like students
- Give and receive respect- works both ways
- We could have a statement that we write together, and students and teachers sign it
- Student tutors and tutoring time
- Talk to teachers about not judging us by the clothes we wear
- Have principal or deans address issue

#### **Group 1 also focused on 'Food'**

##### **Resolution recommended:**

- Show ID to leave off campus at lunch
- Bring more good healthy food/fruits

- Hire people to cook food-taste better
- More food line entrances
- Make a menu
- Better choices that way people don't feel need to leave
- Fix vending machines

**Group 1 also focused on '*Bathrooms*'**

**Resolution recommended:**

- More mirrors in all bathrooms
- Need to unlock both female and male bathrooms
- Different Soap for both bathrooms
- More materials for bathrooms- air vents, pad/tampon dispenser, condom dispenser, lotion

**Group 1 also focused on '*Tagging and Graffiti*'**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Art club for taggers
- Deans need to let taggers express themselves on their own notebooks and folders
- Taggers could have their own space to express themselves like a wall or parking lot
- Make the people who tag paint it back
- Announce to class the consequences for tagging
- Do community service for tagging

**Group 2 - Resolutions to concerns:**

**Concern 1. '*Teacher-Student Relation*'**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Teachers to treat everyone equally
- Respect and fairness for all students
- Cameras in classrooms
- Anonymous surveys
- Teacher training on stereotypes, and teaching skills

**Group 2 also focused on '*Racism/Racial comments and Cultural Misunderstandings*'**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Activities to dialogue about racial/cultural issues in class
- More mixed group field trips
- Mix groups in sports
- Assign seating to mix races
- More group assignments with mixed races
- Need more mixed race clubs

- Need other races to join ethnic clubs
- More cultural events
- Mixed music events

**Group 2 also focused on ‘Theft’**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Don’t bring valuables to school
- Teachers should not be allowed to bring electronics./ipods
- Check-in system to check-in electronics and cell phones at beginning of class

**Group 2 also focused on ‘ISIS Attendance System’**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Organize student body to work on campaign to fix attendance issues
- Wait at least 10 minutes before taking role
- Use both methods, on paper and computer

**Group 3 - Resolutions to concerns:**

**Concern 1 ‘Teacher-Student Relation ’**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Create fun projects, not just essay
- More field trips that teach history
- Ask students what interests them
- More TA’s, more student support
- Smaller classrooms, student size
- Add a period to overall schedule
- Get students to help other students
- Talk to teachers about how they treat different races
- Fun projects- jeopardy style
- Competitive group projects
- Tutor days/Review
- Teacher survey to ask how students like to learn
- Customize teaching to students needs through survey (learning styles)
- Give student evaluation without grades to see about student progress
- Cameras in classroom
- Investigate teachers
- Student interview of teachers
- Create scenarios for interviews
- Student review of teachers
- Need a student office
- Teachers need to be held accountable
- Meeting with students and outside organization or District to evaluate teachers

**Group 3, also focused on, ‘Stereotyping ’**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Discuss history to break down stereotype
- Put out facts
- Explain, individual to individual about false stereotypes
- Dialogue
- Involve media
- Leaders leading discussion of facts
- TV announcements @ homeroom
- PA announcements/Taft News
- Get information to Taft news cast- research, planning, interviews
- Talk about events- publicize
- Classroom announcements

**Group 3, also focused on, ‘Lack of Unity among Students ’**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Make clubs of cliques
- Meeting with 1 person/cliue or club
- Equal opportunity to do events for all students
- Open mic event
- Day for culture- one day a month
- Organized fun event that involve students form different races, teachers, cliques and teams
- Dance off campus
- Religious celebrations
- Cultural dress-up day
- All music included in event
- Learn about each others culture, food, clothing, discussion of home, how spend time, religion, history, family

**Group 3, also focused on, ‘Dress Code’**

**Resolution recommended:**

- Clarify between “gang” and style
- Clothes don’t change gang affiliation
- Changing clothes doesn’t stop violence
- Free Dress Day
- Show administration that clothes don’t change violence

**Group 4 - Resolutions to concerns:**

**Concern 1, ‘Teacher Student Relation ’**

**Resolution recommended:**

- If student has good relationship with teacher, student can talk to teacher about comments that may have offended student that teacher might not be aware of
- Set-up a compliant procedure with someone outside of school
- Have teachers confront their own biases
- Teachers could switch and teach at another school for a week
- Anonymous student monitors
- More counselors/less kids
- Re-evaluate teachers
- Limit teacher's authoritative power with giving U's
- Parent informational session
- Have a Teacher's SPIRIT

**Final General Session:** Students then reconvened to report out on each group's proposed solutions. Each group gave a short presentation on their specific highlighted recommendations and strategy to identified concerns.

**Closing:** The program ended with comments and responses from the school's Principal Sharon Thomas and Assistant Principal Kearns. After lunch students were briefed on follow-up steps.

**Outcomes:**

The Campus Action Team made a presentation to 30 Members of Taft High School Faculty on Wednesday December 7, 2005. County Human Relations and DOJ-CRS worked with Taft Administration to establish a 5 unit human relations "SPIRIT" class in which the Campus Action Team would meet daily to receive trainings on human relations topics and work to implement the student-conceived solutions to problems impeding student safety and inclusiveness that were derived during the SPIRIT assessment process. This class has is currently (May 2007) in its second year and has accomplished the following: