

Dr. Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall, Board Member

SUBJECT: CHOOSE PEACE, CHOOSE YOUR FUTURE: STRENGTHENING STUDENT CONFLICT PREVENTION, INTERVENTION, AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION THROUGH A DISTRICTWIDE STUDENT SUPPORT FRAMEWORK THROUGHOUT MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

COMMITTEE: ACADEMICS, INNOVATION, EVALUATION & TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

LINK TO STRATEGIC PLAN: SAFE, HEALTHY, & SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The safety and well-being of our students must remain one of the highest priorities of Miami-Dade County Public Schools. While the District has developed and continues to strengthen comprehensive systems addressing school security, threat assessment, emergency response, discipline, mental health, and law enforcement partnerships, our responsibility must extend beyond responding to violence after it occurs. We must also ask a difficult but necessary question: What can we do before a fight starts?

Students encounter conflict every day. Disagreements occur in classrooms, cafeterias, hallways, school buses, athletic fields, libraries, restrooms, extracurricular activities, on social media, and wherever young people interact. Conflict itself is not necessarily dangerous. It becomes dangerous when students lack the skills, support, judgment, or confidence to manage confrontation safely.

A disagreement can begin with a comment, a rumor, a social-media post, a relationship dispute, teasing, perceived disrespect, competition, or peer pressure. In a matter of minutes, an emotional disagreement can escalate into a physical altercation with consequences that can affect a student's education, family, future opportunities, and, most importantly, their safety and the safety of others.

Adolescence is a period of significant emotional, social, and developmental growth. Students are learning how to navigate relationships, manage emotions, establish independence, and respond to peer pressure. These are skills that must be intentionally taught, practiced, reinforced, and supported by trusted adults.

Our schools must teach students that there is another option: Get help. This item builds upon the work of the School Board several years ago through July 2021 Board Agenda Item H-11, proffered by School Board Member Dr. Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall, which addressed the importance of introducing conflict-resolution concepts and skills throughout Miami-Dade County Public Schools. That prior Board action recognized an important principle: conflict-resolution skills are not simply academic skills; they are life skills.¹

The Board's earlier effort sought to explore the integration of conflict-resolution concepts into the District's curriculum, the creation of spaces where students could discuss and resolve interpersonal

¹ Additionally, the Board reaffirmed its commitment to this effort through August 2023 Board Agenda Item H-12, proffered by School Board Member Danny Espino, which requested a review of the Code of Student Conduct and associated procedures to address the trend of students using their cell phones to film acts of violence on school premises and then posting these videos on social media platforms.

conflicts, the integration of conflict-resolution concepts into existing courses, and professional development for District personnel.

The passage of time, changes in student behavior, the increasing influence of social media, and the continued concern surrounding youth violence demonstrate that this work must evolve. The District should not have to choose between prevention and response. We need both. The objective of this item is therefore to build upon the foundation established by Board Agenda Item H-11 and move the District from an approach primarily centered on exploring conflict resolution toward a comprehensive, measurable, and sustainable conflict prevention and intervention framework.

Conflict resolution traditionally focuses on what happens after a disagreement has occurred. How do we intervene early enough to keep the disagreement from becoming violence? This proposed initiative would create a continuum of support:

PREVENT → RECOGNIZE → DE-ESCALATE → REPORT → INTERVENE → RESOLVE → RESTORE

This approach recognizes that different conflicts require different responses. A minor disagreement between students may be appropriately addressed through communication and facilitated resolution. A pattern of bullying may require administrative intervention, counseling, parent engagement, and disciplinary consequences. A credible threat, weapon, or imminent danger requires immediate activation of the District's established safety and emergency protocols. Accordingly, this initiative is not intended to replace discipline, security, threat assessment, mental-health intervention, or law enforcement. Instead, it is intended to add another efficacious layer to the District's school-safety system.

Students should not be expected to become experts in conflict resolution overnight. The District should provide students with simple, memorable strategies they can understand and use in real situations. The proposed framework should be built around: Recognize it. Pause. Step away. Speak up. Get help. Resolve it. Move forward. The message should be consistent across schools while allowing principals and school teams to adapt implementation to the age, needs, culture, and circumstances of their individual school communities.

The proposed initiative should provide students with age-appropriate knowledge and practical strategies to recognize when a disagreement is escalating and to safely disengage from a confrontation before it becomes physical. Students should be encouraged to understand that choosing to walk away from a fight demonstrates sound judgment, self-control, and strength rather than weakness, and that seeking assistance from a trusted adult is a responsible and appropriate response to conflict. The initiative should further educate students on how and when to report a threat or other safety concern, how to respond appropriately when they become aware that a friend or peer may be preparing to engage in a physical confrontation, and how conflicts originating through social media or other digital platforms can escalate into real-world confrontations. Students should also be provided with a clear understanding of the distinctions among ordinary conflict, bullying, harassment, threats, and emergency situations. In circumstances in which intervention by trained adults is necessary, students should be trained not attempt to resolve or intervene in the situation among themselves. Ultimately, the initiative should reinforce the message that asking for help before a situation becomes dangerous is not a sign of weakness, but rather an important demonstration of judgment, responsibility, and personal strength.

One of the most important components of this initiative should be ensuring that every student can identify at least one trusted adult at school. The question should be simple: "If something is wrong, who do I go to?" That adult may be a teacher, counselor, administrator, coach, security professional, bus driver, school staff member, or another trusted employee. The District should examine ways to intentionally strengthen these relationships, particularly for students who may be experiencing recurring behavioral, academic, social, emotional, or interpersonal challenges.

The District should also examine whether existing information, school-based practices, and available student-support resources can be utilized more effectively to detect recurring or escalating conflicts and to identify opportunities for early intervention before such conflicts develop into serious incidents. School employees and students should be encouraged to recognize patterns that may indicate an increased likelihood of escalation, including repeated confrontations between the same students, ongoing bullying or harassment, relationship-related disputes, social-media conflicts that migrate to

the school environment, repeated incidents occurring during arrival, dismissal, transitions, lunch, transportation, athletics, or extracurricular activities, as well as circumstances in which students repeatedly report feeling unsafe. The purpose of identifying such patterns should not be to label, stigmatize, or predetermine the behavior of individual students, but rather to provide schools with an opportunity to connect students and families with appropriate support, supervision, counseling, behavioral interventions, conflict-resolution resources, and other preventive measures before a conflict escalates into violence.

The Superintendent should also examine the feasibility of establishing appropriately supervised "Student Reset and Resolution Spaces" within schools where students experiencing conflict, heightened emotions, or interpersonal difficulties may receive timely assistance before a situation becomes disruptive or dangerous. Depending upon the circumstances and the needs of the student, such spaces may provide access to a trained adult, school counselor, behavioral support personnel, facilitated communication, de-escalation strategies, or assistance in developing a plan for safely returning to the learning environment. These spaces should be designed as supportive and preventive resources and should not serve as informal disciplinary holding areas or replace established emergency-response procedures, threat-assessment protocols, disciplinary processes, mental-health services, or law-enforcement intervention when such intervention is warranted.

Students should also be recognized as important partners in creating positive and supportive school environments. The District should explore the development of a structured, voluntary peer-leadership component through which appropriately selected and trained students may serve as Conflict Ambassadors, Peace Leaders, Student Climate Leaders, or other similarly designated student leaders. Such students may assist in promoting positive school culture, encouraging their peers to seek assistance from trusted adults, supporting welcoming and inclusion activities, participating in violence-prevention and school-climate campaigns, and helping communicate constructive alternatives to violence. Student leaders should not, however, be expected or authorized to physically intervene in fights, investigate allegations, conduct threat assessments, determine disciplinary consequences, or perform any other duties reserved for trained District personnel.

The success of a student conflict-prevention initiative also requires that the adults who interact with students each day have consistent and practical tools for recognizing and responding to escalating conflict. Accordingly, opportunities to strengthen professional development for teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, transportation personnel, school security personnel, and other appropriate employees in the areas of recognizing early warning signs of escalating conflict, verbal and non-verbal de-escalation, safe adult intervention, bullying and harassment response, appropriate referral procedures, utilization of student-support resources, conflict-resolution and restorative practices when appropriate, documentation and follow-up, and recognition of circumstances requiring immediate escalation to school administrators, mental-health professionals, threat-assessment teams, or law enforcement should be examined. Providing faculty and staff with consistent strategies and clear protocols will strengthen the District's ability to intervene early, respond appropriately to student needs, and ensure that situations requiring a higher level of intervention are promptly identified and addressed.

This item does not appear on the published Agenda. There exists good cause to vary from the published Agenda based on recent troubling events that have occurred after the publication of the Agenda involving student health, safety and welfare. Corrective measures must be implemented as soon as possible to ensure that we explore all appropriate means to support and protect students' and employees' health, safety, and welfare, and to reassure the public.

This agenda item has been reviewed and approved by the Office of the General Counsel as to form and legal sufficiency.

**ACTION PROPOSED BY
DR. DOROTHY BENDROSS-MINDINGALL:**

That The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, direct the Superintendent to:

1. explore the feasibility of developing a Districtwide "Choose Peace. Choose Your Future." Student Conflict Prevention, Intervention, and Peer Leadership Initiative, building upon the foundation established by Board Agenda Item H-11 proffered by School Board Member Dr. Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall;
2. explore the feasibility of establishing age-appropriate student instruction and resources addressing conflict recognition, emotional regulation, de-escalation, safe disengagement, help-seeking, bullying, peer pressure, social-media conflict, and bystander responsibility;
3. explore the feasibility of developing a "One Trusted Adult" strategy and evaluate the feasibility of supervised Student Reset and Resolution Spaces at schools;
4. explore the feasibility of developing professional development for appropriate District personnel focused on conflict prevention, de-escalation, early intervention, and appropriate referral;
5. explore the feasibility of developing a student peer-leadership component, parent/community engagement strategy, and Student Conflict Response Toolkit;
6. identify any recurring student-conflict patterns and opportunities for early intervention through available school and District data;
7. identify any existing District resources, community partnerships, grants, and other potential funding sources to support implementation;
8. if the initiative is deemed feasible, establish measurable outcomes and baseline data to evaluate the effectiveness of the initiative; and
9. if the initiative is deemed feasible, provide the School Board with a comprehensive implementation plan, including recommendations, timeline, pilot opportunities, and performance measures at the December 9, 2026, Academics, Innovation, Evaluation & Technology Committee Meeting.