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### Providing Dispute Resolution Expertise to the Community

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# Providing Dispute Resolution Expertise to the Community

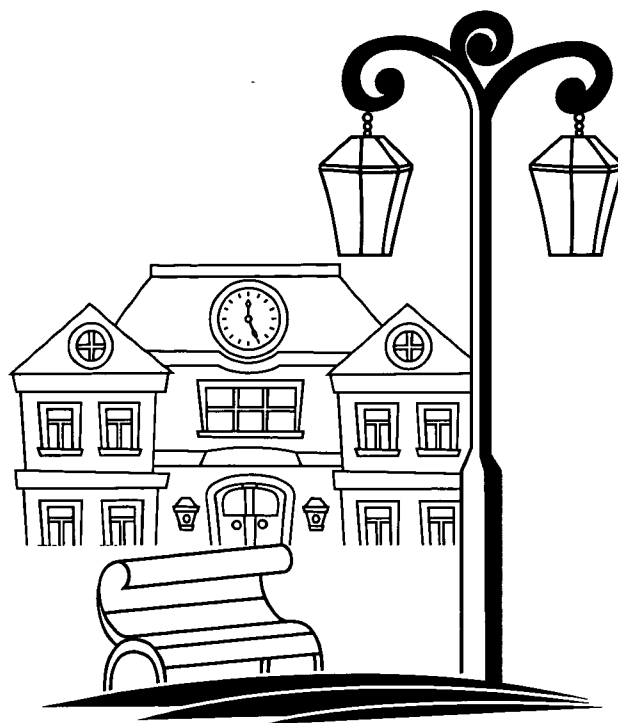
By Rishi Batra

**A**s schools and other public institutions struggle for funding, law schools and their students have new opportunities to fill unmet needs by providing consulting expertise in facilitation and dispute resolution. Such partnerships can provide valuable service for the institutions while giving students a chance to apply their skills to issues in nearby communities.

At The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, we wanted students in our Multiparty Mediation course to have an experience in which they could use the mediation and facilitation skills they had learned in the classroom in a larger, community-oriented setting. To that end, we worked with a local school district that had recently established a new policy for cell-phone use in its high school. The district superintendent had heard that the policy was causing complaints and conflicts, but he was unsure how to collect and resolve these systematically. We saw this as an opportunity for our students to provide substantive information about how the policy could be improved and, more importantly, to create dialogue among the many stakeholders to resolve the underlying discontent.

The students served as a consulting team for the high school. After an initial meeting between the course professors and the district superintendent, the students were assigned a project with two goals: help gain the perspectives of stakeholders, and gather information about cell-phone policies from other schools for comparison. The students divided themselves in teams of two to meet with the different interested groups identified by the school, such as parents, students, teachers, and administrators. Using the facilitation skills taught in our class, the students conducted interviews with the different stakeholders, often with one student acting as the facilitator, the other as recorder, and then switching roles. Two other students served as group coordinators, moderating the interaction inside the law school classroom, planning assignments, and synthesizing group findings.

The results were illuminating for all involved: The interviews revealed common interests, such as a desire for uniformity of implementation, which administrators, students and parents all thought was lacking. Teachers were frustrated about what they saw as a lack of clarity



about cell-phone use between classes, and parents were frustrated that they were not contacted when cell phones were confiscated. Surprises also surfaced: Teachers, it turned out, were bringing their own lockboxes to school to secure confiscated cell phones.

Our students compiled a report of the various interests and mapped out a clear plan for the school, including announcements of clarifications to the policy as well as a facilitated follow-up group meeting. Back in their own classroom, the law students were able to reflect on their performance and the consulting project as a whole, offering suggestions about how to improve communication among members of the consulting team and how to increase the diversity of stakeholders. For instance, the students noted that the district had identified all of the stakeholders with whom they met. The team thought the findings may have been different had there been greater diversity of voices and they brainstormed how they could broaden the group of stakeholders in future projects.

We see this model as a way for law schools to use their dispute resolution expertise and provide direct benefit to local organizations. Schools, governments and nonprofit groups often have projects that can benefit from conflict mapping and systematic dialogue, but many lack the expertise, funding and personnel to get started. By reaching out to these organizations, law schools can provide valuable learning opportunities for their students and bring about positive change in the communities around them. ♦



**Rishi Batra** is a visiting assistant professor at Whittier Law School. He was previously the Langdon Fellow in Dispute Resolution at The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law. He can be reached at [rishib@gmail.com](mailto:rishib@gmail.com).



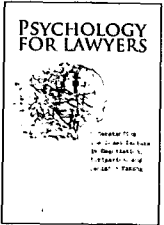
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Bringing together the forces of political debate, this book outlines civic fusion and the process of successful public policy mediation. To help mediators understand how powerful the tool of mediation is and help them reach their full potential, this outlines what civic fusion is and provides real world examples of cases with positive outcomes.

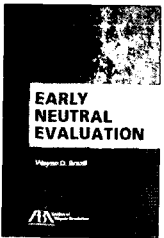
2012, 6x9, 400 pages, PC 5100022  
\$59.95 - DR Members: \$49.95



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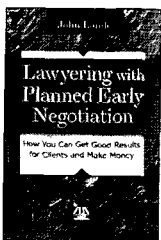
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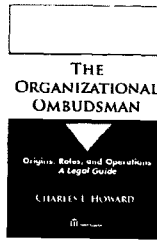
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