



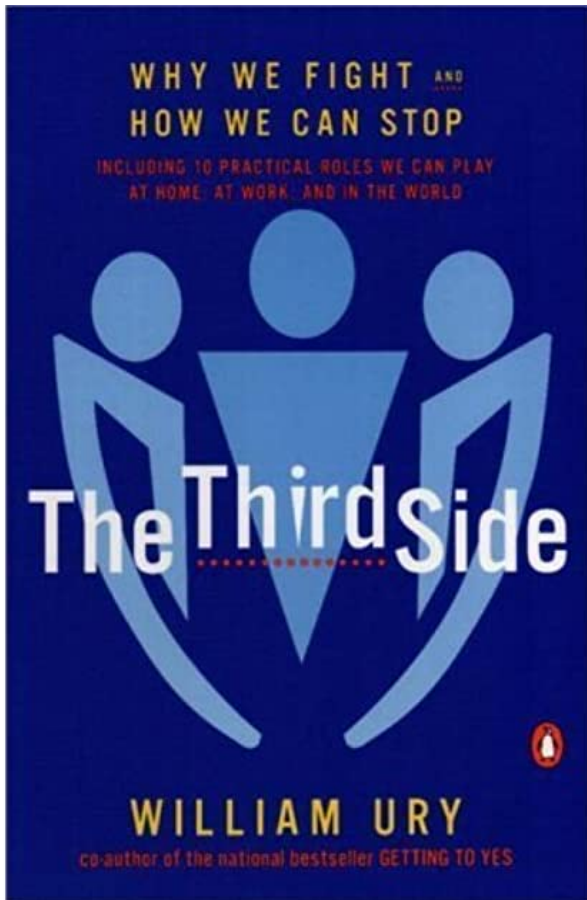
NAVIGATING CONFLICT WITH PARENTS

MNSAA
FALL
CONFERENCE
2022

David Fremo
Superintendent, Diocese of Saint Cloud



WHAT IS CONFLICT?



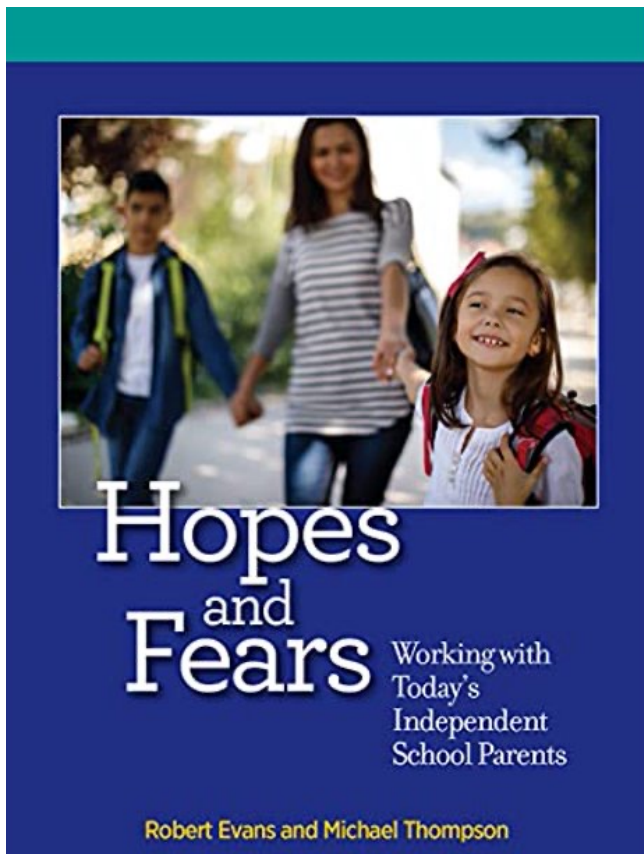
“No more important challenge faces us today than how to deal with our differences.”

“The biggest destroyer of relationships is our habit of falling into fights.”

Fighting is “the kind of destructive conflict that ruins relationships, wastes money and destroys lives.”

Anthropologist and negotiation expert William Ury (2000)

WHAT IS CONFLICT?



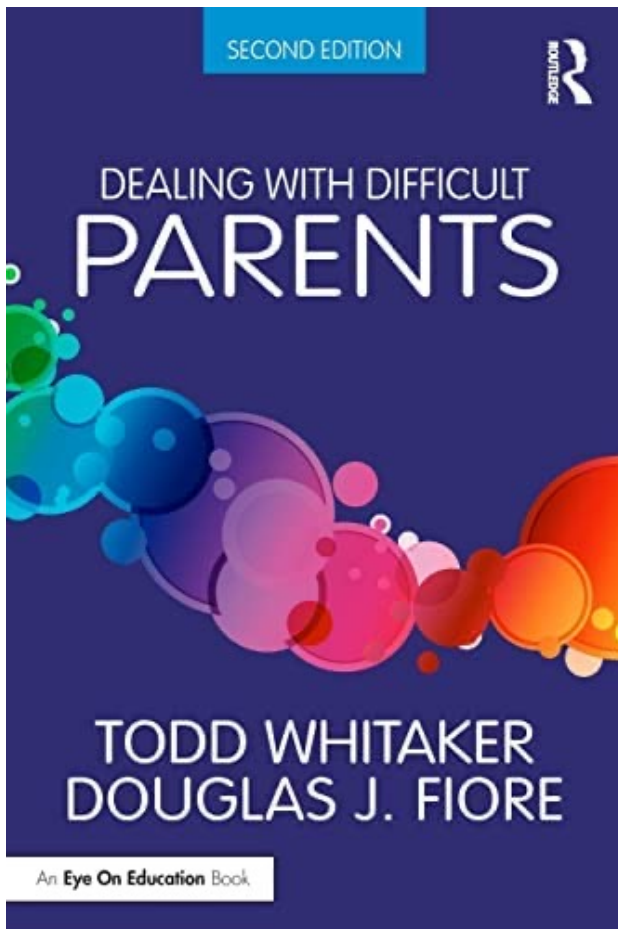
“Independent schools only exist because of the hopes and fears of parents.”

However, independent schools “run every day on the hopes and fears of teachers.

There are “**inevitable collisions**” between the hopes and fears of parents and those of teachers.”

Evans and Thompson (2021)

WHAT IS CONFLICT?



Conflict is grounded in ineffective communication and interaction with parents.

Conflict is a phenomenon that can be met with developing skills and tools to overcome, or at least manage it.

Ailment	—————→	Remedy
Manage self	—————→	Manage conflict

Whitaker and Fiore (2016)

Converging insights

Conflict can be DESTRUCTIVE:

- Harmful to relationships (short and long term)
- Invokes low expectations, morale or feelings of despair
- Worst type of marketing

Prevailing attitude: *Conflict is to be avoided.*

Converging insights

Conflict can be TRANSFORMATIVE:

- Build, or heal relationships
- Build higher expectations, hope and confidence
- Provide a narrative and belief system grounded in success

Prevailing attitude: *Conflict provides a path forward.*

SELF-AUDIT

On a scale of 1 to 10, where do you see the prevailing attitude about conflict in your school?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Destructive

Transformative

PRAXIS

How do we utilize conflict as a **transformational** force?

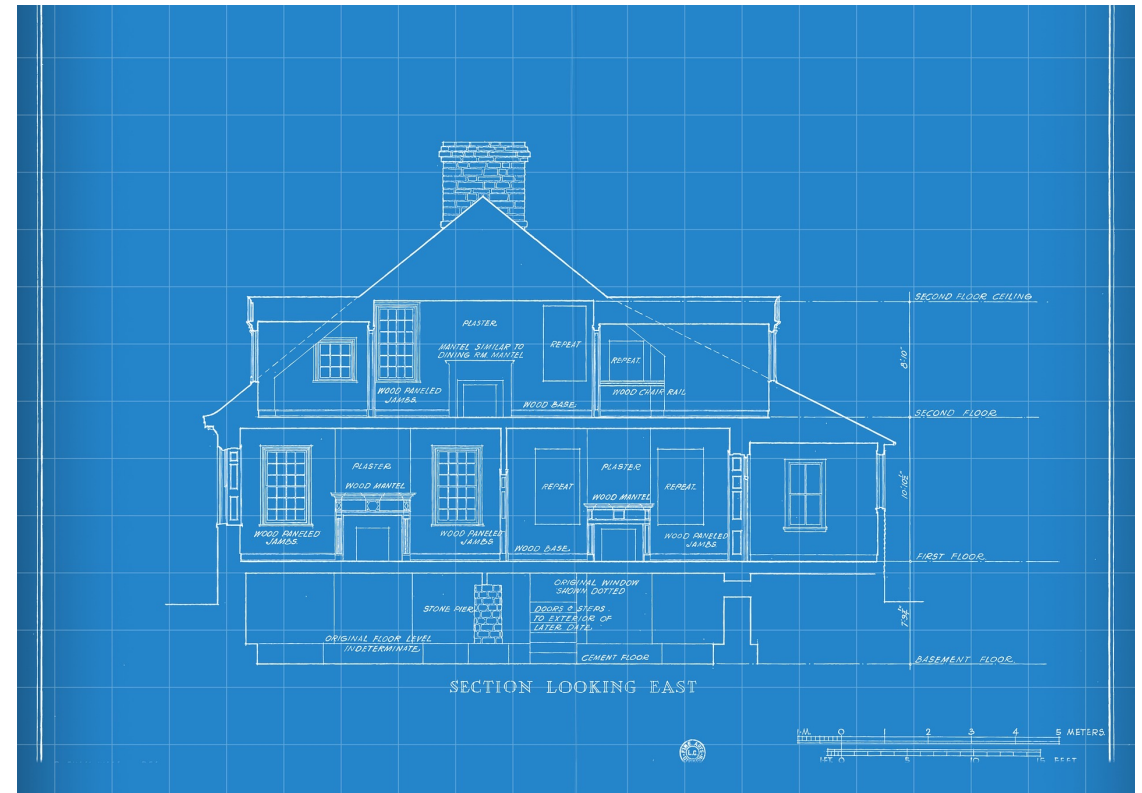
Intentional community design and practice

- Policies
- Formation
- Situational response
- Reflection and resolution

SYSTEMIC

APPLIED
SKILLS

- Set to clear and focused purpose
- Uses language that is common and ubiquitous
- Point of recalibration and redirection in times of uncertainty



Intentional community design

Policies

- Governance and leadership structure
 - Order and function of each component
- Enrollment documents
 - Agreement/Contract
 - Nature/expectations of the parent-school partnership
 - Handbook
 - Guidebook for participation in the parent-school relationship

Intentional community design

Formation

- Calendar and daily schedule
 - Critical, common point of convergence for all community members
 - Establishes routines and expectations
- Learning program
 - Curriculum; content, pedagogy and environment
 - Assessments; rubrics, benchmarks and progress tracking
- Activities and events
 - Intentionally flow from the mission, values, identity of the school
 - Support holistic, creative, deeper growth of community members
 - Invite parent participation in meaningful ways

Intentional community design

Situational response

- **Normal situations**
 - Conflict within the boundaries of “normal” behaviors
 - Resolution is most often within minutes or hours
- **Elevated situations**
 - Behaviors outside of “normal” boundaries
 - Resolution may take days, weeks, months
- **Crisis situations**
 - Behaviors require immediate intervention to limit/stop damage
 - Resolution may not be possible

Intentional community design

Situational response

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Examples:

- Overreaction
- Misinterpretation
- Poor communication
- Failed activity

Remedies for normal situations? (Conflict as transformation)

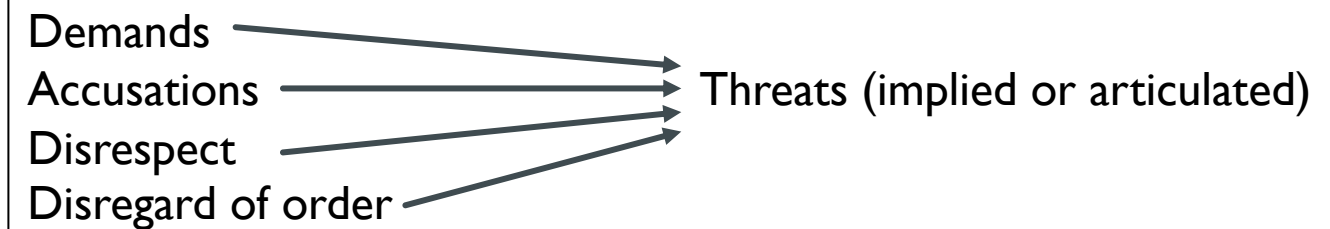
Intentional community design

Situational response

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Remedies for elevated situations? (Conflict as transformation)

Intentional community design

Situational response

- **Crisis situations**
 - Behaviors require immediate intervention to limit/stop damage
 - Resolution may not be possible

Examples:

- Intentional harm/immediate threat caused to another
- Enacted threats
- Pervasive violation of enrollment agreement terms
- Situation that the school is not able to manage

Remedies for crisis situations? (Conflict as transformation)

Intentional community design

Reflection and resolution



Intentional community design

Reflection and resolution



Intentional community design

Systemic Steps

A. Structure the Partnership with Parents around two most important facets of school life:

1. Purpose: What X school is all about
 - **Ubiquitous, clear reference to your central values in ALL efforts.** (like a background track on repeat)
2. Conduct: What it means to belong at X school
 - **Clear expectations for parents and students in their obligation to support the school's values, policies and operations.**

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Practical Systemic Steps

B. Build shared understanding and commitment to your purpose with your teachers:

- Double standards poison the system, and provide parents legitimate places of frustration
- It is the SCHOOL's responsibility to teach its values and form its members, not colleges and universities
- A robust and healthy culture that is formed in your unique purpose can and will provide for conflict to be transformative

Intentional community design

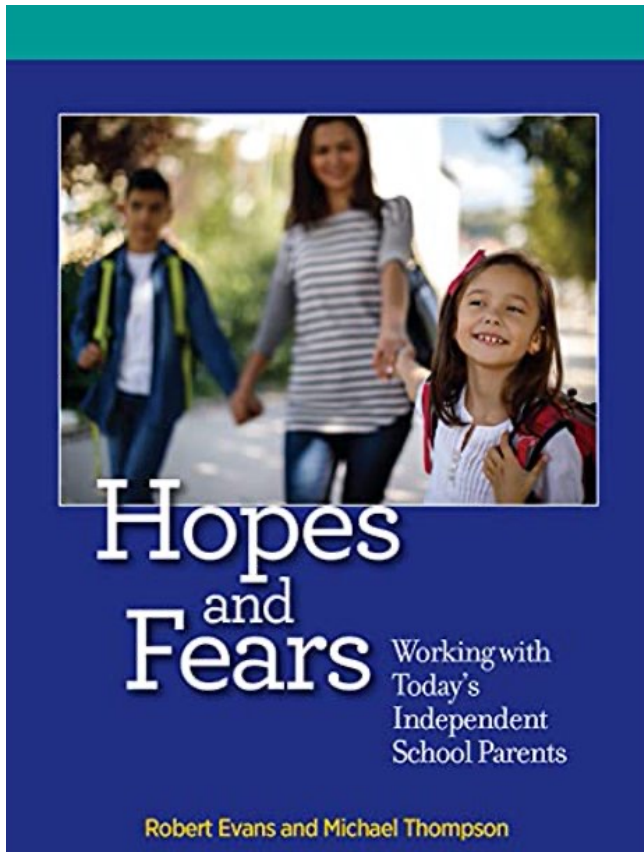
Practical Systemic Steps

C. Coherence, not rigidity:

- Focus is on your purpose—your central values
- Policies that hold true to your purpose provide for flexibility and adaptation
- Leave room for respect in every situation

Intentional community design

Applied Skills



“Independent schools only exist because of the hopes and fears of parents.”

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Evans and Thompson (2021)

Situational Responses

Starting points with parents

I. Parents are sincere – and not without anxiety, causing many to lead with:

- Exaggeration
- Emotional projection
- Accusations and defensiveness
- Projection of home issues on the school environment

It's hard to be a parent. Be kind and don't take things personally.

Situational Responses

Starting points with parents

2. Problems are going to happen – and often they are valuable:

- Parents can provide great insight into their kids
- Trust is built through shared experiences, even if they are difficult at times
- More interaction with parents can provide for better consistency in communication

Cool heads prevail. Parents need models just as their kids do.

Situational Responses

Starting points with parents

3. Educators are authorities – and the same skills that work in the classroom can be applied with parents:

- Remember, the teacher is the specialist in child development and schooling.
- “Remember your training.”



Situational Responses

Working with parents

Timelines for responses are at the school's discretion:

- Consulting before decisions is recommended
- 24 hour “cool off” period is a healthy minimum
- Allow parents time to reframe/rethink
- Allow yourself time to reframe/rethink

Situational Responses

Working with parents

Finalized responses should be in writing:

- Stick to the facts
- Connect response back to the school's purpose/central values
- Connect back to conduct expectations
- Acknowledge any consultation that has taken place
- Thank parents for their support of the school

Situational Responses

Working with parents

When writing to parents:

- Think: You are writing a press release
- Be polite, but firm
- It's not personal, but should reflect your school's values and characteristic traits
- Brevity is your friend

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Situational Responses

The most difficult parents

Boundaries are set by the school,
even when parents do not respect
them. Set limits. Hold them.

Situational Responses

The most difficult parents

Profile One: Anxious and Incompetent

- Demanding the teacher/school take on the parent's responsibilities
- Constantly reaching out to the teacher with requests
- Seeking the teacher's validation of their concerns or projected reality

Inform administration. Firm “no” on intrusive requests.
“That’s really a parent’s responsibility” needs to be said.

Situational Responses

The most difficult parents

Profile Two: Unresponsive

- Absent from the picture
- Blow off, or dismiss teacher/school concerns about child
- Need to be hounded in communications

Inform administration. Connect behavior to expectations in the parent partnership/policies/enrollment. Focus on the needs of the child and the school's inability to meet them unilaterally.

Situational Responses

The most difficult parents

Profile Three: Intimidators

- Self-professed “experts” on what the school should do
- Policies are for the “weak,” not me

Inform administration. Do not engage in personal attacks or out-of-bounds communication patterns. Communicate about behavior, not the content of what is said. Connect clearly to expectations of enrollment agreement. Set and hold limits.

Tips for Nuclear Options

- Contact jurisdictional leader
- Contact legal counsel
- “Disenrollment” versus “expulsion”
- “Irreconcilable relationship”
- Adhere to confidentiality at all times
- Be reasonable with refunds/prorated tuition
- Note clearly policy/practice changes that should be made
- Don’t dwell on what could have been

FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

Have patience with all things,
but first of all with yourself.

St. Francis de Sales