

# **Solution Seeking Process**

## **STEP 1: Have a Need for a Solution**

When a student or teacher believes there is a problem that needs attention, either of them may initiate the process by asking the other to meet.

The problem could be a playground-related situation concerning a child or a classroom management difficulty a teacher has noticed — whichever, one person must have a need.

## **STEP 2: Check Perceptions**

This step in the process allows all those involved to share their perceptions of the situation. Whoever initiates the meeting shares his or her perceptions first. If it is you, the educator, tell the students what you saw and how often you saw it. Share your concerns about the situation and your reasons for being concerned. Students listen without speaking during this phase of the process.

When you are finished sharing your perceptions, seek theirs by saying, “Now it is your turn to talk.” Occasionally ask clarifying questions: “What does it look like to you?” “What does it feel like?” “How do you see it differently?” Listen until students have said all they want to say about their experiences with the problem. When you achieve general agreement on perceptions, move to the next step.

## **STEP 3: State the Problem**

What is the problem exactly? It is important to write out a clearly visible, concise statement of the problem on chart paper or on the board. It is easier to discuss exact wording if the problem is displayed where all can see it.

A written statement of the problem provides a focus for the discussion to follow. It keeps the purpose of your efforts visible, and if the conversation begins to drift, you can point to the written problem and remind students what you are working on.

## STEP 4: List Solutions

Brainstorm a list of solutions. Ask students to list ways that the problem may be solved by everyone together. Collect as many alternatives as possible. List every solution suggested without comment. Take the time to write out all ideas, regardless of grade level or reading abilities. Doing so helps students feel powerful and valuable as they see their ideas written down, even if they are not able to read them.

Avoid talking about suggestions during brainstorming. Evaluating ideas is limiting; it shuts off the free flow of suggestions. The strategy here is to generate ideas, not rate, prioritize, or classify them. Do not stop with the first few ideas that seem reasonable to you. Continue to collect ideas until the students have exhausted their supply.

It is helpful during this phase of the process to remind students that you seek solutions rather than punishments. You are not looking for ways to punish; you are looking for ways to see that the problem is solved and the situation does not reoccur.

## STEP 5: Reach Consensus

Consensus is needed to answer the question “How are we going to solve this problem?” Ask students to confine their remarks to the solutions they think have the best chance of working. Keep the focus positive. Some ideas will obviously be more useful than others. Concentrate on those. If you prevent students from criticizing less practical solutions, those students who offered them will be more likely to suggest ideas in the future.

Choose a solution that does something rather than one that prevents doing something. Use Positive Phrasing (say what “to do,” not what “not to do”). It is easier to create a condition you want than to eliminate a condition you do not want.

Occasionally a new, combined alternative emerges. Suggestions such as “One person at a time gets a drink” and “Line up by the closet for drinks” can be combined to create a new solution: “Line up four feet away from the person who is drinking.” The option of choosing a new, combined alternative sometimes reaches consensus easily because more people own the solution, having contributed to the two (or more) solutions that were combined. **The solution selected needs to be one that you and the student(s) can live with.**

You have the adult responsibility to control obscene or unsafe solutions. Role-playing the agreed upon solution is an optional step. Role-playing can serve two purposes. First, it gives you a chance to field-test a solution. If you notice problems when you role-play the proposed solution, you have an opportunity to make alterations before implementation.

Second, role-playing plants a positive picture in the students' minds. By seeing a successful example of their solution, students have an image of how success looks. And because they have a positive picture in their minds, they know what to look for and are more likely to recognize it when they see it. This is especially helpful for students with low mental models. It helps them see the model you expect.

## **STEP 6: Make a Commitment**

Once consensus is reached, it is important to “seal the deal.” Have everyone raise hands, put thumbs up, or sign off on a contract. This symbolic gesture is an act of closure that signifies you all agree or each person is willing to go along for the good of the group.

## **STEP 7: Set Date to Reevaluate**

Setting a date to reevaluate is a critical step. When you reach consensus, set a date and time to check on the solution and see if it is working. Allow enough time to give the proposed solution a real test, but not so much time that students lose interest in the process. Three to five days is a good time span between creating the solution and checking whether or not it is working. Write the reevaluation date and time on the board or chart paper along with the problem and the proposed solution. Be sure they are in plain sight.

### **EXAMPLE**

**Problem:** Dangerous behavior around the drinking fountain.

**Solution:** We will leave four feet between the person drinking and the next person in line.

**Reevaluating:** One week from today: Thursday, October 15, 1:00 pm.

Checking on solutions is important for several reasons.

1. First, if the solution is working, you can use that time to congratulate yourselves and to celebrate your problem-solving ability. This is the time to rejoice in success and yourselves: “We did it!”
2. Second, if the solution is not working, you can “go back to the drawing board.” Continue the search for a solution by repeating the process if necessary (Step 8).
3. A third reason for a reevaluation time is to communicate to students that evaluating their own solution is part of the process. They learn that when they implement a solution, they will be asked later how it is working. They

realize there will be an accounting, and they know they will be involved in taking stock. They become more self-responsible.

### **STEP 8: Repeat the Process if Necessary**

Occasionally a solution proves ineffective, and it becomes necessary to repeat the process. By repeating the process, students learn persistence and see that problems are not always solved with the first attempt at a solution. They also learn to see a solution that did not work as simply a solution that didn't work, not as a failure.