



Left to right: Reinerio Gutiérrez Melo, Principal of Colegio Alejandro Obregón; Claudia Alvarado, Senior Professional at the Bogota Chamber of Commerce; Lorena Quintero, conciliation program consultant; and Martha Rocío Piraquive, conciliation program coordinator

PEER CONCILIATION PROGRAM FLOURISHES IN BOGOTA, COLOMBIA'S SCHOOLS

Introduction

Last year, when I participated in the [XII World Mediation Congress](#) in Bogota, Colombia, I looked for interesting people and programs to write about for this newsletter. Among the several excursions I took, the most memorable was my visit to the [Colegio Alejandro Obregón](#), a public school located in Bogota's Rafael Uribe neighborhood. The school, which provides instruction to students from preschool to eleventh grade, houses a vibrant peer conciliation program. This article describes the conciliation program at that school and the

larger program of which it forms a part.

The Hermes Program for Conflict Management in Schools

The conciliation program at Colegio Alejandro Obregón is part of the [Hermes Program for Conflict Management in Schools](#), an ambitious initiative of the [Arbitration and Conciliation Center of the Bogota Chamber of Commerce](#) (BCC) that began in 2000. The program adopted the name Hermes as a reference to the Greek God Hermes, who was known for his skills as a messenger and mediator, as well as for his ability to facilitate

business and communication. At the end of BCC's 2016 fiscal year, the program had been adopted in 452 schools, 319 of them in Bogota and 133 of them in surrounding municipalities. The Hermes program has two principal purposes: first, to transform conflict through ADR processes and prevent bullying in schools; and second, to offer young people opportunities to develop social skills. The program is directed at the entire educational community—students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and other family members.



Front to back: Karen Sofía Romero Rodríguez and Laura Catalina Parra

The Peer Conciliation Program at Colegio Alejandro Obregón

Patricia Ricco Arias, the director of the Hermes Program, arranged for my visit to the Colegio Alejandro Obregón on September 29, 2016. The program representative who accompanied me to the school was Claudia Alvarado, who introduced me to Reinerio Gutiérrez Melo, the school's principal; Martha Rocío Piraquive, the conciliation program coordinator; and Lorena Quintero, a consultant hired by BCC to work in the program. Through interviews with Ricco Arias, Alvarado, Gutiérrez Melo, Piraquive, and Quintero, I learned that Colegio Alejandro Obregón has approximately 2,200 students. In order to accommodate the large

number of students, the school day is divided into two sessions: the first begins at 6:30 A.M. and ends at 12:30 P.M., and the second begins at 12:30 P.M. and ends at 6:30 P.M. Approximately half of the school's students attend each session. The school offers the conciliation program to all students, and the student conciliators range between ages 13 and 17. The program has existed at Colegio Alejandro Obregón for approximately nine years.

Any student involved in a dispute with another student can contact the conciliation program and invite the other student to attend a conciliation session organized through the program coordinator. If the other student accepts the invitation, the program coordinator works with the students' teachers to arrange a day and time for the conciliation meeting. When the time arrives for the conciliation, the teachers allow the students to leave class and attend the meeting. Conciliations take place on designated days in the school

library. When the students arrive at the library they are greeted by a student receptionist who checks them in and directs them to a conciliation table where two co-conciliators await them.

One of the most interesting aspects of the conciliation program at Colegio Alejandro Obregón is that conciliations do not take place in private rooms. Instead, six tables are arranged in two rows of three tables each, and conciliations take place simultaneously at each of the six tables. Several feet separate each table from the other, so it is possible for the students and their conciliators to have private conversations so long as they speak in low voices, which they do, but the students and conciliators can clearly see the people who are at each table. The absence of strict confidentiality does not seem to affect the student disputants or their conciliators. On the day I observed conciliations at this school, the disputants and their conciliators remained focused on their own cases and did not seem distracted

by the cases at the other tables. Although I was in the room observing the conciliations take place, I could not hear any of the details of the matters the disputants and their conciliators discussed.

One of the primary differences between mediation and conciliation is that conciliators often suggest possible solutions to parties, but many mediators do not suggest solutions. In the Hermes conciliation program, conciliators do make suggestions based upon the information the parties provide them, but the parties retain full autonomy to accept or reject the suggestions. When the parties reach an oral agreement, the conciliators reduce the agreement to writing, and the parties review and approve it before signing.

The conciliators I observed included two pairs of co-conciliators. Karen Sofía Romero Rodríguez and Laura Catalina Parra Pérez were the first pair, and Daniela Jaime Castañeda and Vanesa Cruz were the second



Patricia Ricco Arias, Director of the Hermes Program for Conflict Management in Schools

pair. Interviews with these four young conciliators informed me that they usually conciliate cases once a week for a four-hour shift, and they may conciliate as many as ten cases in a single shift. Most of the cases they conciliate involve simple misunderstandings and rivalries, but sometimes the cases can involve more serious allegations like bullying, and the latter cases can take longer to resolve. Karen, Laura, Daniela and Vanesa told me that almost 100% of their cases are resolved by agreements reached between the disputants.

I also met five boys who were receiving training as conciliators on the day I was there: José Nicolás Veloza, Jhoján Alberto Moreno Gordillo, Steven Alejandro Rivera Parra, Andrés Felipe Barbosa Cárdenas, and Marvin Felipe Roa Gómez. At the time I met them, José, Jhoján, Steven, and Andrés were all 14 years old, and Marvin was 13 years old. They were sitting at some of the conciliation tables and observing conciliations. They all seemed excited about the prospect of conciliating their own cases, and they were pleased to pose for photographs.

Results and Honors for the Hermes Conciliation Program

Since the Hermes conciliation program began in 2000, it has trained 5,369 managers and 26,948 conciliators. Between 2007 and 2016, inclusive, the conciliators conducted 317,504 conciliation processes. In 2016, the settlement rate for conciliated cases was 99%. The [results](#) are published on BCC's website.

The Hermes conciliation program has received recognition for its accomplishments from important international organizations. For example, in 2010, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) evaluated five years of top contestants in the competition known as “Experiences in Social Innovation in Latin America and the Caribbean.” ECLAC listed the Hermes program among the 25 most innovative experiences, the best in education, and with the greatest impact on social development in the region. In 2011, the International Chamber of Commerce organized a competition to recognize the best corporate social responsibility projects, and the Hermes program was one of five finalists in the competition.



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Left to right: José Nicolás Veloza, Jhoján Alberto Moreno Gordillo, Steven Alejandro Rivera Parra, Andrés Felipe Barbosa Cárdenas, and Marvin Felipe Roa Gómez, conciliator trainees

Conclusion

Colombians can point with pride to BCC’s Hermes conciliation program. For approximately 17 years, the program has provided valuable services to students, teachers, families, schools, and their surrounding communities. Those services have contributed to making Colombian society more peaceful today, and they help ensure a more peaceful society tomorrow. I believe that we Texas mediators could learn much from this program.