

Building Safe, Supportive and Restorative School Communities in New York City

Case Study Series

Summer 2011

Safe and supportive school climates are essential for ensuring the human right to a quality education in New York City schools. In order to create positive environments for learning, educators, students and parents must work together to build a sense of school community and develop approaches to discipline that address the causes of conflict and meet students' needs.

Punitive and exclusionary discipline practices, such as excessive suspensions and police tactics, fail to prevent or reduce conflict, have negative impacts on student engagement and academic outcomes, and push young people out of school.¹ The schools featured in this case study series use positive practices proven to reduce conflict and improve learning. School systems should adopt these practices to ensure students' human rights to:



Student Leaders in Conflict Resolution hold a workshop at the Brooklyn College East New York Youth Summit.

- *Full academic, social and emotional development* - The goal of discipline should be to help students learn positive behavior skills, resolve conflicts, and develop good social relationships.
- *Dignity* - Schools should create safe, respectful and welcoming environments and respond to misconduct with appropriate consequences that address students' needs and repair the harm done to individuals and the community.
- *Freedom from discrimination* - School systems should take active steps to eliminate the disproportionate impact of discipline policies on youth of color, students with disabilities, immigrant students, LGBTQ students and others by ensuring that adequate resources and training are provided for all schools to eliminate discrimination.
- *Participation* - Students, parents and teachers have a right to participate in developing and implementing discipline policies.

"This program taught me how to handle things differently.

I believe it has impacted the school, because I see a lot of people handling problems by talking it out with the other person, or talking about their personal issues with a close friend."

Angelina, Student Leader in Conflict Resolution, Bushwick Campus in Brooklyn

Improving School Climate on Two Brooklyn Campuses

This case study documents the innovative and participatory approaches developed on two high school campuses in Brooklyn through the leadership and collaboration of students, school staff, and supporting organizations through the School Conflict Management Project, coordinated by the NYU School of Law Advanced Mediation Clinic, the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI), Make the Road New York, Teachers Unite, Aikido in the Schools, and other partner groups.

- At the Bushwick campus, students in the Leaders in Conflict Resolution program are presenting workshops on conflict resolution to 9th grade classrooms and hosting afterschool programs in Aikido, a peaceful martial art.
- At the Graham Ave campus at the Lyons Community School, teachers are using restorative circles in classrooms and as a disciplinary response, and at the Green School students are trained in peer mediation.



Leaders in Conflict Resolution at Bushwick Campus

The Leaders in Conflict Resolution program is a student-led effort launched in 2009 to develop new, positive ways to talk about and manage conflict on the Bushwick Campus in Brooklyn. The primary goal is for students to take the lead in creating a sustainable long-term strategy for managing campus conflicts.

The students' efforts are supported through mentoring and training from Make the Road New York, Aikido in the Schools and other partners. The program is housed in the campus' Student Success Center and includes student leaders selected from three schools on campus—Bushwick School for Social Justice, Academy of Urban Planning and Academy for Environmental Leadership.

The program emerged because Bushwick students expressed interest in taking more responsibility for keeping peace and promoting unity on campus. They recognize how conflict impacts their day-to-day lives, including their relationships, learning, future paths, and their schools' reputation in the community. By developing unity and new skills across the campus' three separate school cultures—and among students and adults of diverse backgrounds—a conflict resolution program has the potential to encourage a positive learning environment and a sustainable culture of respect and non-violence.



Members of Leaders in Conflict Resolution and students on the Bushwick Campus participate in conflict resolution workshops.

Needs Assessment and Research

Student leaders began by designing research questions about conflict on their campus, holding interviews with staff, and gathering surveys from fellow students in classroom settings. Student leaders analyzed the results of 117 student surveys, including answers to these questions:

What types of conflict are you most concerned about?

- Gang-related conflict 49%
- He-said/she-said 39%
- Discrimination (racial/ethnic) 27%
- Discrimination (sexual orientation) 23%
- Bullying 18%
- Discrimination (religious) 9%
- Other 4%

If you are interested in learning how you can prevent or resolve conflict in your life, what skills or ideas would you like to learn?

- Self-defense 47%
- Anger management 46%
- How to prevent fights 42%
- Peacemaking 32%
- Addressing gangs 32%
- Safety tips 27%
- Peer mediation 27%
- Communication skills 23%
- Root causes of conflict 16%

What changes could make the biggest impact to reduce conflicts on campus?

- More respect for others on campus 62%
- New programs that talk about conflict through dance, art, theater, music, or martial arts 42%
- More school spirit and unity 40%
- More flexibility with school rules 33%
- If students were trained in conflict resolution or mediation 30%
- Learning about conflict resolution in classes or Advisory 29%
- If staff were trained in conflict resolution or mediation 28%
- Reduce security measures at school (e.g., remove metal detectors, fewer safety officers) 27%
- Resolving conflicts using circle processes 22%
- New programs for peer mediation 21%
- Increase security measures at school (e.g., random screening, more safety officers) 21%

What other ideas do you have about ways that students or staff can prevent or resolve conflict?

- 10 responses mentioned learning to talk things through
- 7 responses mentioned talking with a staff member or seeking staff assistance

Training and Practice in Conflict Resolution

After conducting research on conflict, student leaders began working with conflict resolution professionals to be trained in restorative practices, mediation and Aikido, a peaceful martial art. Students developed ideas for managing conflict on campus which they presented to their school principals, including designing workshops for 9th grade classrooms and holding afterschool programs that incorporate activities such as restorative circles and Aikido. Students are now using their new skills to help keep the peace among friends and family and to lead workshops for youth at their school and at forums like the Brooklyn College East New York Youth Summit. For example, each semester students lead workshops in 9th grade advisory classrooms at all three schools on the Bushwick Campus which include topics such as:

Introducing conflict and conflict resolution

- What is conflict?
- Seeing conflict as a normal—and potentially positive—part of life

Identifying opportunities to shape the outcome of conflict

- Understanding a person's positions, interests, and underlying needs
- Creating win-win solutions

Teaching how to handle an escalating conflict and to resolve conflict

- Identifying our “hulk” moments—the tipping point when you feel ready to lose control
- Understanding conflict styles—passive, aggressive, collaborative
- Communicating with I-statements—“I feel [emotion] when you [behavior of the other person] because [effect of behavior on me]”
- How to run restorative circles



Leaders in Conflict Resolution participate in an Aikido in the Schools session.

“The Alliance” at Bushwick School for Social Justice

At the Bushwick School for Social Justice, a student-initiated group, The Alliance, is also working toward peace by building bridges between Black and Latino students. A group of 20 diverse student leaders led workshops to help students realize they had more in common than they previously thought, and that their similarities and differences were not necessarily based on race or ethnicity. They are now working with Aikido in the Schools to organize workshops and learn conflict resolution, leadership, anger management, and communication strategies. They are in turn teaching these skills to students in their school and in middle schools in other parts of the city.

What is Aikido in the Schools?

Aikido in the Schools is a physical arts program that helps students develop communication skills, mental focus, and emotional intelligence all at the same time. Blending the peaceful martial art of Aikido together with cutting-edge pedagogical research, the training helps students build self-awareness, self-confidence, and healthy social skills. In practice, it combines fun activities with substantive physical, intellectual, and emotional growth. Central to the philosophy and practice of Aikido is a unique approach to conflict resolution, anger management, and positive social interaction. The approach builds the necessary skills and encourages students to change themselves in relation to conflict, to “be the change that they want to see in the world” and to develop the confidence and inner strength to “not fight” while still protecting themselves and each other.

Aikido in the Schools programs aim to help school communities reduce bullying, conflict, and the significant costs in time and resources associated with managing conflict. In collaboration with professional researchers, Aikido in the Schools is also studying the effects of its programs on the development of Emotional Intelligence. It has provided workshops and programs at a number of public and private schools and institutions including: Bushwick High School campus, Marymount School of New York, Brooklyn College Teen Summit, and more.

For more information visit www.aikidointheschools.com.



Restorative Practices at Lyons Community School

At Lyons Community School, administrators and teachers adopted restorative practices as an approach to school climate and discipline. The school was already invested in developing alternatives to traditional disciplinary approaches through peer mediation, and Principal Taeko Onishi was committed to love and teachers' creativity as driving forces in education. Restorative practices offered a way to make teachers' instinctive best practices more explicit, and to help the school create a more reflective, organized approach to reducing school suspensions and dealing with conflict on campus. In March 2010, the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) held a two-day training with school staff.

Restorative Practices Training: New Ways to Frame School Culture and Discipline

Restorative practices (sometimes called restorative justice in schools) is used to build a sense of school community and resolve conflict by repairing harm caused by conflict and restoring positive relationships. Trainings at Lyons provided by IIRP explored strategies for creating positive school culture and developed teachers' skills for using restorative techniques in classroom teaching and conflict resolution.

Developing Positive School Culture - Staff explored how to:

- Create an explicit philosophy for their school that is articulated and taught to all stakeholders – when teachers are all on the same page about the culture of the school and what their expectations are, the students rise to meet those expectations.
- Shift the approach to discipline towards working “WITH” students to make sure they reach their full potential with both control and support, rather than doing things “TO” students (highly punitive and controlling) or “FOR” students (making excuses for poor behavior and not holding them accountable).

Using Restorative Techniques - Staff learned about:

- Restorative questioning - training teachers and staff to increase communication and work with students to reflect on how their actions impact others.
- Restorative circles as a teaching technique – using circles regularly in the classroom to teach subject matter or other aspects of student development and to work together with students to develop core values for the classroom community.
- Restorative circles for resolving conflict and restoring relationships – using circles to address disruption, conflict, and tensions with the whole classroom or with smaller groups of students facing a conflict. Circles are used to talk with students involved about the causes of the disruption or conflict and identify positive solutions to repair the harm done to the community through responses such as mediation, community service and conflict resolution.
- Restorative problem solving – helping people come up with creative solutions to difficult problems, including problems experienced among staff as well as with students.
- Benefits of using circles regularly – building community, helping kids feel safe, supporting independent learning, and promoting an explicit school climate.



Students and staff from Lyons Community School meet in a restorative circle at their retreat.

Implementing Restorative Practices at Lyons

Following trainings, staff at Lyons Community School began implementing restorative practices in a variety of ways:

- Advisory Circles:** In grades 6-9, students begin each day with an hour-long advisory that includes a 20-30 minute circle, allowing students to begin their day positively with a greeting, check-in, activity, and time for announcements. The school's deans and teaching teams design circle activities around certain themes and skills, such as transitioning to and from the school environment and selecting books for independent reading.
- Teaching Life Skills:** In grades 10-12, circles are used at the end of study hall periods to help students prepare for Regents exams, college, work, and the responsibilities of adult life. For example, students have prepared for job interviews by using fishbowl circles to observe each other as they practice a mock interview.
- Academics:** Some teachers promote academic skills in classroom circles by having students incorporate literature, dialogue, and writing into their circle discussions.
- Conflict Management:** Staff use circles to intervene in conflicts before students face suspension or other traditional disciplinary actions, holding impromptu circles with deans and students involved in conflicts. In some instances, an advisory class has used restorative circles to determine an alternative way to restore a student back to their classroom.
- Justice Panel:** Twelve students (two each from grades 7-12) are selected to serve on a Justice Panel to discuss and recommend solutions for disciplinary incidents that happen at school, as well as other school community issues. Students or staff can request that matters be brought to the Justice Panel and the dean and leadership team will then select up to four cases per week.
- Restoring Students:** When students do leave school or the classroom for suspensions, they now meet in a "Dean Circle" when they return to school. These circles might consist of a conversation between students and staff about how a student can change her behavior, or the circle might function like a mediation session between the students whose fight or conflict led to the suspension.

The long-term goal of using restorative practices at Lyons is to have a disciplinary system in place that does not rely on suspensions to correct student behavior, except in extreme cases, and that depends heavily on democratic student ownership and decision-making.

About the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP)

Since 1999, the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) has worked to help even the most challenging schools improve their teaching and learning environment through restorative practices. A graduate school based in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, IIRP offers graduate level courses, on and off-site trainings and workshops for school staff and students, and webinars about restorative practices and specific strategies for implementing those practices in schools. IIRP also offers the more comprehensive two-year SaferSanerSchools™ program, which works with schools to create a customized plan for whole-school cultural change. The goals are to build relationships between students, staff, and parents; improve student behavior; reduce violence and bullying; and create a sense of community.

For more information on IIRP and restorative practices visit www.iirp.org.



Peer Mediation and Youth Court at the Green School

At the Green School, whose theme is sustainability, leaders wanted to use disciplinary strategies that would help students and staff recognize their impact and role in the school and community. The school's deans and administrators were already active in mediating student conflicts, and the school had a Student Responsibility Center where students who disrupted class could go to reflect on their choices, create a plan for better behavior, and then negotiate their return to class with their teacher.

To increase student ownership in these approaches, the school's co-directors, Ben Doren and Karali Pitzele, were eager to develop a peer mediation program, and worked with Jeanette Cevin, a paraprofessional, to launch the program.

In order to train the first cohort of peer mediators, the Green School approached the New York City Commission on Human Rights. The Commission interviewed and chose 17 students who represented grades 9-12 to participate in a ten-week training program. At the end of ten weeks, the students were certified as peer mediators and the following semester began implementing the mediation program. The students learned about what it takes to be a mediator and how to facilitate the mediation process, including:

- Learning to understand conflict, avoid bias, and exercise cultural sensitivity.
- Developing mediation techniques for preparation, delivering opening statements, gathering information, identifying the issues at stake, exploring options for resolution, and finalizing an agreement between the parties.

The Green School also began referring some disciplinary matters to the Greenpoint Youth Court. The Court is a restorative justice initiative that allows students who commit disciplinary violations or minor crimes to present their case to a judge and jury of their peers, who then help the students identify strategies to hold the student accountable and restore their relationship to the community. The restorative purpose of the Court fit well with Green's mission.

Peer Mediation with the New York City Commission on Human Rights

The Commission's Peer Mediation Training Program prepares middle and high school students to assist their peers in resolving differences before they escalate into violence. Their approach is grounded in the principles that underlie the City's Human Rights Law—tolerance, human dignity, and respect. The 8-10 week after-school voluntary program also teaches valuable life skills such as patience, persistence, active listening, and problem solving, while presenting alternatives to threats and violence. The Commission has published, *Talk it Over: A Peer Mediator's Guide*, to assist the student mediators with the mediation process.

The Commission requires a coordinator at the school who can attend the training and run the program the following year, and commitment from the school to make peer mediation a sustainable practice on campus.

For more information visit
<http://nyc.gov/html/cchr/home.html>.

Restorative Justice at the Greenpoint Youth Court

The Greenpoint Youth Court is part of the Center for Court Innovation's youth courts project. The court is a program for young people aged 10-18 referred by local schools, community organizations, and police for offenses such as assault, vandalism, and truancy. The young people appear before a judge and jury of their peers, who then deliver a fair and appropriate response. Students in the court are trained to be judges, jury members, and advocates for both the community and the student who has committed a disciplinary infraction. After both the community and students present their case to the youth jury, the jury deliberates and returns a verdict that allows the students to take responsibility for their actions and restore the harm to their community. The court also links the young people and their families with any needed social services.

For more information visit www.courtinnovation.org.

What the Data Show Nationally About Positive Approaches to Discipline

Growing numbers of schools and districts around the country are implementing positive school-wide approaches to discipline, like restorative practices and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Research has shown that these positive approaches to discipline can reduce violence, decrease disciplinary incidents, improve the school environment and improve academic outcomes for students.

Restorative Practices

Restorative practices (or restorative justice) is a school-wide approach to discipline used to build a sense of school community and resolve conflict by repairing harm and restoring positive relationships.

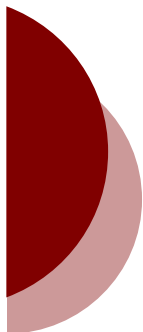
- Denver Public Schools adopted new discipline policies in 2008-2009 that use restorative practices, resulting in a 68% reduction in police tickets in schools and a 40% reduction in out-of-school suspensions.²
- West Philadelphia High School was on the state's "Persistently Dangerous Schools" list for six years. But after one year of implementing restorative practices, the climate improved dramatically:³
 - ◊ Suspensions were down by 50% in the 2007-2008 school year.
 - ◊ Violent acts and serious incidents dropped 52% in 2007-2008, and another 40% by Dec 2008.
- Chicago Public Schools adopted a new student code of conduct in 2006 incorporating restorative practices. Over 50 high schools in Chicago now have restorative peer jury programs. As a result:
 - ◊ Over 1,000 days of suspension were avoided in 2007-2008 by referring students to peer jury programs for violating school rules, keeping them in the learning environment.⁴
 - ◊ At Dyett High School, student arrest rates decreased by 83% one year after implementing a restorative peer jury program.⁵

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

PBIS is a school-wide system for creating positive school climates by training staff in classroom management techniques to recognize and reward positive student behavior, implementing positive interventions when disciplinary issues occur, and using data to monitor and improve discipline policies.

- In Illinois, there are over 600 schools implementing PBIS with positive results, including reduced disciplinary referrals and improved academic outcomes for students:⁶
 - ◊ At Carpentersville Middle School, after implementing PBIS, office disciplinary referrals fell by 64% from 2005 to 2007. During the same period, the number of students that met or exceeded standards for 8th grade increased by 12.3% in Reading and 44% in Math.
 - ◊ In 12 Chicago public schools, the number of students who received six or more disciplinary referrals fell by more than 50% over three years after implementing PBIS.
- In Florida, a study of 102 schools using PBIS found that after one year of implementation:⁷
 - ◊ Office disciplinary referrals fell by an average of 25%,
 - ◊ Out of school suspensions fell by an average of 10%.
- The Los Angeles Unified School District passed a district-wide policy in 2007 to implement school-wide positive behavior support in every school in the district.
 - ◊ During the first 2 years of implementation, suspensions dropped by 20%.⁸ The district is working to continue reducing suspension rates and to reduce the disproportionate suspension of Black students.

Learn more about some of the organizations that contributed to the School Conflict Management Project:



NYU School of Law Advanced Mediation Clinic is a year-long clinical program where law students learn alternative dispute resolution techniques and provide conflict management assessment and dispute system design services to the community. The clinic's focus turned to the NYC public schools in Spring 2009 when the law students began speaking with students, educators, and advocates to learn more about the nature of school conflicts, and how those conflicts affect opportunities for learning, shared community, and positive relationships on campus. As neutral facilitators specializing in dispute system design, they began working with City schools to develop new approaches for managing campus conflict. During the 2009-10 school year, the clinic provided support to the public school campuses featured in this case study series. Visit www.law.nyu.edu/academics/clinics/semester/mediation-advanced or email burns@juris.law.nyu.edu.

The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) works in partnership with communities to build a broad movement for economic & social rights, including health, housing, education and work with dignity. The Human Right to Education Program works with education advocates and organizers to promote policy change in public education using human rights standards and strategies. NESRI believes that human rights offer a framework for how to transform our public schools based on internationally recognized standards of equality, accountability, dignity and community participation. The program works in collaboration with community partners to generate human rights documentation, analysis, advocacy, public education materials and training resources. Visit www.nesri.org.

NESRI

NATIONAL ECONOMIC &
SOCIAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE

90 JOHN STREET, #308
NEW YORK, NY 10038
212-253-1710 EXT. 314
INFO@NESRI.ORG



Make the Road New York promotes economic justice, equity and opportunity for all New Yorkers through community and electoral organizing, strategic policy advocacy, leadership development, youth and adult education, and high quality legal and support services. The Youth Power Project supports youth ages 14 to 21 in leading community change efforts on issues of concern to them. Our work includes school-based programming that supports young people in accessing college and job opportunities; partnerships with two new innovative high schools that we helped to design and launch; and an array of after school programs that support young people in developing leadership, literacy, group work, and community organizing skills. Visit www.maketheroad.org.

Teachers Unite is an educator-led member organization working on bringing restorative justice to NYC public schools as well as building democratic school communities by strengthening school union chapters. TU organizes teachers around human rights issues that impact public school communities, and supports teachers to build strong chapters that put social justice first. We believe that a strong organization of activist teachers, working in coalition with parents and students, will transform our city, and its schools, to best serve all New Yorkers. Visit www.teachersunite.net.



Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York (DSC-NY) is a citywide coalition of students, parents, advocates, educators and lawyers calling for positive, school-wide approaches to discipline that improve the school environment, reduce conflict, and increase learning. We work to reduce suspensions and other harsh policies that violate students' human rights to education and dignity, and to ensure that students, parents and educators have a right to participate in decision-making related to discipline policies in schools. Visit www.dignityinschools.org

Endnotes

- ¹ Russell Skiba, et al, Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? A report by the American Psychological Association Task Force, 2006.
- ² Advancement Project, Stop the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track website. <http://www.stopschoolstojails.org/padres-jovenes-unidos-denver.html>
- ³ Caralee Adams, "The Talk It Out Solution: How can you promote safety?," Scholastic Administrator, Nov/Dec 2008. Sharon Lewis, Ed., Improving School Climate, International Institute for Restorative Practices, May 19, 2009. <http://www.iirp.org/pdf/IIRP-Improving-School-Climate.pdf>
- ⁴ Bradley Olson and Judah Viola, Chicago Public Schools High School Peer Jury Program Evaluation Report, DePaul University, September 2007.
- ⁵ Chloe Wiley, "Peer juries reduce suspensions, increase attendance at Chicago public schools," Windy Citizen, May 23, 2008.
- ⁶ Illinois Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports Network, 2006-07 and 2005-2006 Progress Reports. <http://www.pbisillinois.org/>
- ⁷ Florida's Positive Behavior Support Project, Annual Report 2007-2008. <http://flpbs.fmhi.usf.edu/index.asp>
- ⁸ CADRE, Redefining Dignity in Our Schools: A Shadow Report on School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Implementation in South Los Angeles, 2010.