

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

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A positive school climate and strong school community are critical to teaching and learning. Yet harsh disciplinary practices such as suspensions, police interventions and school-based arrests undermine positive relationships between students and adults, fail to prevent or reduce conflict, and lead to students missing critical class time. Students of color are more frequently targeted by punitive practices, increasing the likelihood that they will fall behind and be pushed out of school.

In a number of New York City schools, students, parents and educators are implementing positive approaches to discipline that hold students accountable for their behavior while keeping them in class. Positive discipline strategies such as restorative approaches, peer mediation and positive behavior supports reduce conflict and support student success by affirming the dignity and human rights of all members of the school community.

In the 2011-2012 school year, there were over 69,000 suspensions in New York City schools. The latest data for September-December 2012 show a 35% decrease from the previous year, demonstrating that discipline practices are moving away from a strictly punitive approach. However, in order for schools citywide to fully implement positive disciplinary strategies, they need the funding, training and staff support to transform their school climates and improve educational outcomes. Districts like Denver and Los Angeles have revised their discipline policies to mandate approaches like restorative practices and positive behavior supports, and have invested in the training and support necessary to make these programs sustainable. New York City should take similar steps to strengthen requirements for using positive discipline in schools and provide the funding and support to fully implement and sustain these strategies over time.

“Peer mediation has helped us to reduce the amount of fights, detention and suspension in our school. People come to us to talk about their problems because they feel more free to talk to us than with a teacher.”

- Miguel, a peer mediator at Bronx International High School on the Morris Campus



Student leaders at the Bushwick Campus give a workshop in conflict resolution to fellow students.

Improving School Climate on Four NYC School Campuses

This case study highlights successful and innovative models for positive approaches to school discipline at four New York City schools and campuses—Validus Preparatory Academy, the Bushwick Campus, the Morris Campus and Lyons Community School.

These models incorporate counseling, mentoring, peer mediation and school-wide restorative approaches that build supportive learning environments and promote dignity for all students. They demonstrate that collaboration across schools and among all members of the school community—students, parents, teachers, and security staff—can teach and convey a clear message of respect for all people and cultures.

These initiatives are supported by the Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York, Make the Road New York, the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI), Sistas and Brothas United and Teachers Unite.

Student Perspectives on School Discipline

At the four schools and campuses featured in this case study, the Dignity in Schools Campaign-NY (DSC-NY) surveyed 520 students and staff about how they experience and perceive discipline policies at their respective schools. The survey data show that students positively respond to counseling, mediation and restorative approaches to discipline, and do not find zero tolerance practices such as arrest and handcuffing to be an effective way to respond to conflict in schools. Students' voices and participation in the discipline process are crucial to building a positive school climate and culture.

DSC-NY asked students whether their schools' discipline policies are fair. Students' experiences and perceptions of discipline policies are key factors in building trust and relationships and reducing disruption and conflict.

- ◇ Across all schools, 72.8% of students agreed or strongly agreed that discipline policies at their schools are fair.
- ◇ At two of the schools—Validus Preparatory Academy and Lyons Community School—where staff and students use Fairness Committee models and restorative circles as disciplinary responses, 83.9% and 75.4% of students respectively found the school's discipline policies to be fair.



Respect for fellow students and staff is also a key component of building a positive school climate and practicing a restorative approach to conflict. DSC-NY asked students if their teachers, Deans and Assistant Principals, as well as their fellow students, treat students with respect in school.

- ◇ 92.9% agreed or strongly agreed that Deans and Assistant Principals treat students with respect.
- ◇ 90% agreed or strongly agreed that teachers treat students with respect.
- ◇ 87% agreed or strongly agreed that they get along with other students.

Finally, students' insights and experiences about which discipline practices are most effective for addressing conflict are also critical to building an inclusive and positive school community. In response to survey questions about how their school should respond to conflict, students overwhelmingly supported restorative approaches and community-building practices, such as meeting with a counselor, dean or other staff person, as appropriate responses to conflict in schools. Support for suspension was mixed. A clear majority of students do not support zero tolerance practices such as handcuffing and arrests in school.

When students get in trouble, what is a good way to respond?

- ◇ Meeting with a counselor or social worker: 85% agreed or strongly agreed
- ◇ Meeting with the Principal, Dean or Assistant Principal: 82% agreed or strongly agreed
- ◇ Peer Mediation: 73.4% agreed or strongly agreed
- ◇ Restorative circle or fairness committee: 72% agreed or strongly agreed
- ◇ Removal from the classroom: 70.6% agreed or strongly agreed
- ◇ Suspension: 49.3% agreed or strongly agreed, while 50.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed with suspension as a good way to respond
- ◇ Handcuffing in school: only 21.9% agreed or strongly agreed, while 78.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed with handcuffing as a good way to respond (10.4% did not answer)
- ◇ Arrest in school: only 20% agreed or strongly agreed, while 68.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed with arrests as a good way to respond (11.2% did not answer)

Fairness Committee at Validus Preparatory Academy

Validus Preparatory Academy, An Expeditionary Learning School, is a small high school located in the Bathgate Educational Campus in the Bronx. Since 2010, Validus has been implementing a Fairness Committee program at their school “as a way to get our community members talking to one another,” explains educator and member of the Fairness Committee Jamie Munkatchy.

How a Fairness Committee Works

Developed by educators at Humanities Preparatory High School in the 1990s, a Fairness Committee is a small group of students and adults, representative of the school community, who work to discuss violations of the school’s disciplinary policies and values with anyone who violates a policy or core value.



A town hall meeting at Validus Preparatory Academy.

At Validus, the Fairness Committee is one of a number of options available to youth and staff at the school when someone has violated one of the four character traits established for how students and staff should treat one another. Those traits are: Responsibility, Collaboration, Compassion, and Commitment. At Validus, the Fairness Committee brings together a student or staff person who has violated a school value with other students, teachers and members of the school community to talk through what happened and come to a resolution that is agreed upon by everyone.

WHAT ARE RESTORATIVE PRACTICES?

Restorative Justice is a theory that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by conflict—rather than punishment—by:

- ◇ Identifying what happened and attempting to repair the harm done,
- ◇ Including all people impacted by the conflict in the process of responding and finding solutions, and
- ◇ Creating a process that promotes healing, reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships.

Restorative Practices is a framework for a broad range of restorative justice approaches in schools that:

- ◇ Proactively build a school community based on cooperation, mutual understanding, trust and respect, and
- ◇ Respond to conflict by bringing all those involved in a conflict together to find solutions that will rebuild relationships, repair the harm done and reintegrate students back into the school community.

Examples of restorative approaches used in schools include: restorative conversations between teachers and students, restorative circles and Fairness Committees that bring several students and adults together to talk through a problem and find a solution, peer mediations to resolve conflicts, and more.

Source: A Model Code on Education and Dignity, www.dignityinschools.org

With logistics and facilitation handled by students themselves, “fairness forums” can be initiated by anyone in the community by writing a petition. Munkatchy explains: “The forum includes no fewer than three young people and two adults and follows a protocol by which the petitioner and the participant each get time to say their piece. The remaining members of the forum ask clarifying and then probing questions, and finally a resolution is agreed upon by all.” The process, which tends to take about thirty minutes, “in form and function helps us build a culture of compassion, collaboration and caring,” says Munkatchy.

In the implementation of this restorative practice, Jamie explains that all members of the school community—staff and students—who are brought to fairness are “challenged to do so by choice. ‘Challenge by choice’ is a phrase used in adventure education,” she explains. “We cajole, counsel, prod, and convince participants into the fairness process, but in the end it is their choice.” This is true for both youth and adults.

Building Restorative Practice at Validus Preparatory Academy

A group of students and staff first came together at the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year to plan the Fairness Committee structure and implementation. By the spring semester, the Fairness Committee program was up and running and four fairness forums were held to address student behavior. In the following school year Validus held a total of thirty-five fairness forums, and by the 2012-2013 school year there were one or two fairness forums happening a week.

To further expand the use of positive and restorative discipline practices at the school, nine students were trained in peer mediation by Mass Transit Safety with Dignity, a Bronx-based program that provides training in mediation and conflict resolution. Students mediated several conflicts in the spring 2013 semester, and in the coming school year, will continue to promote these positive approaches to get more students involved in handling conflict in a positive way.



In addition to the Fairness Committee and peer mediation, Validus is fostering youth leadership in the school and the broader community through student government and other opportunities for leadership, with support from the community-based organization Sistias and Brothas United. At the end of the 2013 school year, Validus held a Youth Summit with youth-led sessions on school safety, school uniforms, Stop and Frisk policies, and community violence.

Impacts of Fairness at Validus

The Fairness Committee program has had a positive impact on how students and teachers on campus view their community. In a video students produced on the Fairness Committee program in fall of 2011, when asked the question “What do you think of when you hear the word fair?”, a student named Gina said “I think of justice, equality. I think of the responsibility that others should take for their actions.” A teacher added, “I think fair is when everyone involved in a problem or a process is getting at least part of what they want. Maybe each side is giving up a little bit, but everybody’s getting parts of what they want.”

By the 2012-2013 school year, the third year of implementing the Fairness Committee, there was only one long-term Superintendent’s Suspension at Validus. In the upcoming 2013-2014 school year, staff will go through an intensive restorative circles training from Mass Transit Safety with Dignity so that restorative approaches are infused more into everyday classroom culture. In addition, decision-making around restorative justice on campus has been fully integrated into weekly Discipline Team meetings. Watch the video at vimeo.com/31561264

About Mass Transit Safety with Dignity

Mass Transit Safety with Dignity is a program that trains high school and middle school students to assist their peers in resolving conflicts before they become violent. The interactive, experiential workshops make the eighteen hours of training needed to become nationally-certified mediators a fun and transformative personal experience. Then, knowing the skepticism and serious resistance to change they will encounter among their peers, Mass Transit assists staff and student mediators in their efforts to popularize “talking it out” and to establish an effective peer-mediation program. For example, Mass Transit can support students to build buy-in by nominating their peers to join the mediation team, supporting student run promotion campaigns and assemblies to familiarize the whole school with the “new way” of doing things, and if students want, assisting them in filming and recording their own peer-mediation promotional rap-videos. To initiate this program, Mass Transit requires an on-site staff coordinator at the school who attends trainings, is committed to mediation, and is assigned time to coordinate a sustainable mediation program.

For more information on Mass Transit Safety with Dignity visit www.mtstv.org.



A Campus Approach to School Climate at Bushwick

The Bushwick Campus in Brooklyn is made up of four small high schools: the Academy for Environmental Leadership, the Academy of Urban Planning, the Brooklyn School for Math and Research, and the Bushwick School for Social Justice. In July 2011, educators, guidance counselors, and administrators from all four high schools initiated one of the first cross-campus Restorative Justice committees in New York City. On a campus where metal detectors and security sweeps are an everyday experience for students, the Restorative Justice committees have provided a site for collaboration to research, re-imagine and plan new discipline strategies and practices to build a positive, supportive and safe campus climate. This case study describes how the Restorative Justice committees got started and some of the positive strategies for discipline that have emerged.

Getting Started with Leaders in Conflict Resolution

The foundation for forming the Restorative Justice committees at Bushwick began with the Leaders in Conflict Resolution program launched in 2009, with support from community-based organization Make the Road New York. Each year, upperclassmen leaders were selected and trained to teach ninth graders how to handle conflict. Students designed a five-week workshop series that they would facilitate for their fellow students during advisory classes. Students learned how to identify conflict, how to use different responses to conflict, how to negotiate win-win situations, and ways to clear their head when they have a “hulk” moment. The student leaders made the environment a safe place for students to share their experiences and feelings on conflict. They also made the learning fun through skits, ice-breaker activities, and spirited discussions.

At the end of the program, the ninth graders were interviewed about what impact the workshops had. Students shared that they learned about win-win situations and really enjoyed the interactive parts of the workshops, including performing skits.

One student said he learned “how to not be crazy” and learned how to control his anger. Others shared that they tried to use some of the skills they learned in their everyday lives. The student leaders who ran the workshops also benefited from the program. Besides learning about conflict, they improved their leadership and public speaking skills. The student leaders indicated that they hoped the students and teachers would share what they learned with others, which in turn would help the school.

Small Schools and Campuses in New York City

The campus-wide restorative justice initiatives at the Bushwick Campus and the Morris Campus are taking place within a context of recent changes in education policy in New York City. Over the past decade, the Bloomberg administration in New York City has closed a number of large high schools originally built for over one thousand students and replaced them with several smaller schools with up to five hundred students each, creating school campuses where three to four high schools share the same building.

- ◇ The Bushwick Campus in Brooklyn, the former site of Bushwick High School (closed in 2006), houses four high schools with an average enrollment of three hundred students each.
- ◇ The Morris Campus in the South Bronx, the former site of Morris High School (closed in 2002), now houses four high schools as well, which all share the same building and each have an enrollment of over three hundred students.

While the individual high schools within each campus operate with relative autonomy in terms of curriculum and discipline practices, students, educators and school partnership organizations have found that the close proximity among the schools creates both challenges and opportunities. Rivalries among students from different schools in the same campus can sometimes create conflict and lead to violence. Conversely, sharing a space can also create opportunities for collaboration.

The initiatives at the Bushwick and Morris Campuses highlighted in this case study seek to promote campus unity and collaboration among the small schools that share a building in order to reduce conflict and improve the learning environment. They aim to serve as models for other small schools in New York City that share spaces.

Introducing Restorative Justice and Peer Mediation

After the Student Leaders in Conflict Resolution program had built greater awareness and support for positive ways of responding to conflict on campus, the Restorative Justice Committees formed and began exploring different positive approaches to school discipline. Over the past two years, these committees have supported the four small schools on campus in establishing restorative school norms, justice circles and peer mediation, with each school taking its own particular approach to implementing positive school discipline.



Student leaders at the Bushwick Campus give a workshop in conflict resolution to fellow students.

In the Spring of 2013, the Restorative Justice Committees collaborated on a new campus-wide initiative to develop common practices across all four schools. The New York City Commission on Human Rights trained a group of fifteen students from all four schools in peer mediation. One teacher or dean from each school was also trained alongside their students, and this group of staff will help to coordinate the program on campus with students in the fall. Students will make presentations in their advisories, encouraging use of the program. The schools are excited and hopeful that this program will further unify the campus and promote collaboration and a more positive school climate for all.

Other new campus-wide initiatives being developed include forming a campus-wide Fairness Committee to create shared values and norms for how students and staff should interact with each other across the entire campus community.

School Spotlight: Restorative School Norms at the Academy for Environmental Leadership

At the Academy for Environmental Leadership (AEL), one of the four small schools at Bushwick, educators and administrators recognized that the discipline practice of suspension was not significantly reducing conflict in the school. Teachers and guidance counselors at AEL, with support from Make the Road New York, initiated a series of discussions in Spring 2011 with fellow staff and administrators about alternatives to punitive discipline, including restorative practices. Students, teachers and guidance counselors began by developing a set of school “norms and values” for how students, teachers, administrators and all members of the school community would treat one another. During morning advisory classes, students and teachers shared their opinions on the most common sources of conflict in the school and identified shared values to promote more positive interactions. The school norms developed were:

- ◇ Respect for the personal space, property, privacy, feelings and body of others
- ◇ Respect for freedom and voice
- ◇ Respect for individuality, identity and culture
- ◇ Respect for the learning environment
- ◇ Respect for the physical environment

During the 2011-2012 school year, students and staff facilitated workshops in advisory classes to educate other students on the school norms and positive ways to prevent and respond to conflict. AEL also hosted a number of Justice Circles, based on the Fairness Committee model, for students and staff to collectively address the conflict that arises when a student breaks one of those school norms. In 2013, students and a Dean from AEL were trained as part of the new campus-wide peer mediation program and will begin implementing peer mediation in the next school year.

“Working with Leaders in Conflict Resolution and participating in the Justice Committee at Bushwick Campus has changed my attitude and the way I look at conflict. Even if we do initiate a conflict there are positive ways to resolve and learn from it.”

The Justice Circle opened my eyes and made me realize the extensive amount [of students that] get suspended everyday due to little things [such] as misunderstandings. The Justice Circle is an alternative.”

- Jazmin, Bushwick Campus



Morris Campus Restorative Justice Project

The Morris Campus in the South Bronx houses four small high schools: Bronx International High School, the High School for Violin and Dance, the Morris Academy for Collaborative Studies (MACS) and the School for Excellence.

During the 2009-2010 school year, an average of twelve School Safety Agents patrolled the building each day. Approximately two hundred suspensions were reported campus-wide, some of which included police involvement. The vast majority of suspensions were for one to five days. Staff and concerned community members saw a need to shift the campus culture away from punitive methods towards a positive approach to school discipline.

Laying the Groundwork for Restorative Justice at Morris

In the Spring of 2010, one of the schools on campus, Bronx International High School, was already implementing a variety of restorative practices as part of their approach to discipline, including Fairness Committees, class meetings and staff training in Collaborative Problem Solving. But staff knew that involving all four schools on campus in a critical discussion about approaches to discipline, safety and community would be necessary to address increasing concerns about conflict within and between the four small schools, as well as growing tension at the metal detectors students have to pass through each morning. Staff from the schools on campus held meetings to brainstorm ways to collaborate and invited community organizations Mass Transit Safety with Dignity, Sistas and Brothas United and the Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York to join them.

At the start of the following school year, school staff and community-based partners launched the Morris Campus Restorative Justice Project, which took on peer mediation training for students and restorative practices training for staff as their first initiatives to bring all four schools together. The peer mediation program began with weekly after-school trainings by The Leadership Program for roughly thirty students from the four schools on campus, which marked the first non-athletic collaboration between students from the different schools. The students who were trained as mediators formed the Morris Student Leadership Council with support from Sistas and Brothas United and Mass Transit Safety with Dignity. The goal of the Student Leadership Council was to plan out the implementation and promotion of the peer mediation programs in the respective schools and engage in broader discussions about school safety and restorative justice.



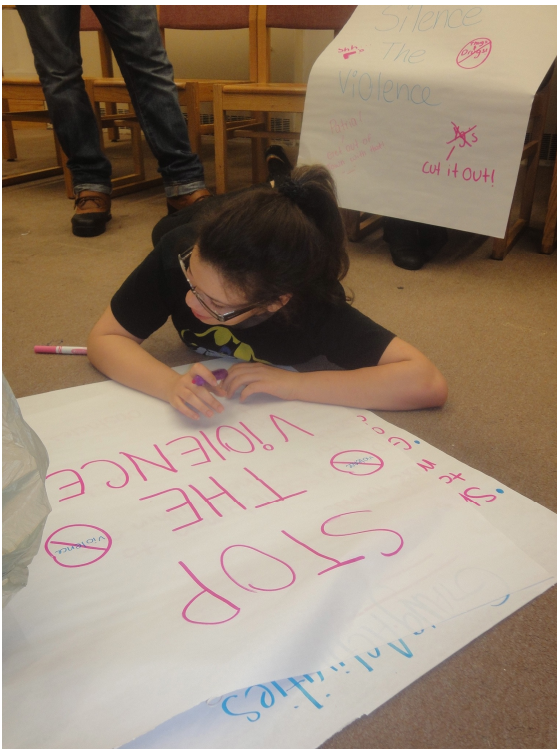
Students at Morris Campus complete their peer mediation training.

Yelixza, a senior at the High School for Violin and Dance, one of the four schools at Morris, describes the Student Leadership Council as being “a symbol of unity in the school. It’s for us students to have a voice in our schools so we can be leaders to other students and show them that we can be friends, and that we can stick together, and we can make decisions for ourselves.” Through continued political education and leadership development, the Morris Student Leadership Council has created a unique restorative justice model for student leadership that can be replicated on other campuses.

The Morris Campus Restorative Justice Project also began building restorative skills and leadership among staff. Trainers from the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) facilitated two professional development sessions for all Morris Campus teachers, administrators, and support staff to provide an introduction to restorative practices. Roughly twenty-five self-selected staff members from all four schools also participated in an additional one-day training in restorative circles. These trainings laid the groundwork for the use of circles as a classroom practice and as a consistent response to conflict used on campus.

Building Community to Address Conflict: Morris Responds to Inter-school Violence

Despite the emergence of youth leadership and staff training in positive approaches, schools continued to face challenges, including violence. On one school day in February 2012, a misunderstanding between students at the different small schools led to an eruption of violence between students across the campus. Twelve students were arrested, and many more faced suspension. Following the fighting, the campus saw an increase in police presence and tension between the schools remained. Students continued to feel antagonized and students and staff alike had a deep-felt sadness about what had happened. Relationships and trust were damaged and the Morris Student Leadership Council felt the need to respond as a unified body.



Students on the Morris Student Leadership Council planning their Talk it Out Campaign.

Youth leaders expressed a strong feeling of frustration and disappointment that despite the success of their efforts, they had not been able to deter the violence on campus. The students drafted an open letter to their peers, expressing the sadness that many in the campus community felt and calling upon the student body to come together and learn from the experience. The letter was blown up and hung in all the school's hallways. The Morris Student Leadership Council also held assemblies in each school to promote campus unity and peer mediation. Miguel, a peer mediator and senior at Bronx International, remembers the period just after the violence occurred: "After the fight, but before the meeting, some people didn't feel secure in the school. They thought people from another school might do something to them because they're part of that school—they felt afraid."

"It was a breaking point," Frank, a senior at Morris Academy for Collaborative Studies explains. "We put our foot down. We had to try something different. It doesn't make sense to sit here and not know who your peers are. These are people that you are gonna see every day, so it doesn't make any sense to have hostility."

Because of the relationships already established on campus, it was possible to bring together administrators and guidance staff from all four schools to develop a plan to repair the damage done by the fighting, rather than just to punish those directly involved. The school

hired a mediator from the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility to facilitate a series of mediations that included more and more of the students involved in the fighting.

Bonnie Massey recalls, "Some of the students that had been trained as peer mediators and who were on the Leadership Council came in to participate in those meetings, bringing in this voice of other students who wanted unity and who didn't want fighting and who wanted to help the students. They were tremendous in that process. With one of the students who didn't want to participate, a Leadership Council member was able to convince that student to participate when a teacher couldn't."

In the mediations, students came to understand the root of the issue that had led to their fighting in the first place. A language barrier between students at Bronx International and the High School for Violin and Dance had caused a series of miscommunications that eventually exploded in violence. "When you talk it out you get to actually know people, know the perspectives of why they do certain things," explains Alize an eleventh grader from the High School for Violin and Dance who had been involved in the fighting. "So you get to understand them a lot more."

"As we did the meeting with the people who fought, everything calmed down, and now we feel more safe in the school and we have more connection with the other school that we had the problem with."

- Miguel, a peer mediator and student at Bronx International High School

Moving Forward with Lessons Learned from Conflict

After the February 2012 fight and the series of mediations that followed, students and staff at the Morris Campus continued to build relationships between students across the schools and to give both students and staff the skills to prevent, reduce and respond to conflict in positive ways.

With the support of Mass Transit Safety with Dignity, students produced a music video to encourage positive alternatives to violence and punitive disciplinary practices. Sistas and Brothas United led mediations and facilitated positive dialogues between all the school principals, guidance counselors, deans, and assistant principals. At the end of the school year, students led sessions for the school principals to advocate for the preservation of their leadership program, expansion of peer mediation, and the beginning of school-wide conversations about positive alternatives to suspensions.

In the 2012-2013 school year, the work continued. Students on the Leadership Council began meeting with the School Safety Agents on campus to share perspectives on safety issues and build a working relationship. Peer mediation has also continued at all four schools on campus.

In January, staff were trained in mediation, conflict resolution and in how to use conversation circles to build community and understanding in classroom spaces. As a way to engage students who were getting in trouble a lot, the schools decided to hold “interschool circles” with over thirty students from all four schools to talk about conflict resolution and unity. In Spring 2013, Morris Campus held a training for over fifty parents on what restorative justice is, discussing parents’ safety concerns, sharing the work being done at Morris and talking about how to use restorative practices at home to deal with conflict.

“My hope is that kids walk in here and they immediately feel like they’re in a safe place. And that when there’s conflict—because there will always be conflict—that they’ll know that they have alternatives and they can address the issues without becoming violent.

Before there are huge incidents, there’s one person who knows that something’s gonna happen. And if they’re aware that something’s in place to prevent it, it could work. We could prevent getting those kids arrested. They have a lot of other issues that they’re dealing with. And throwing them in jail is not the answer.”

Lillian Hernandez, a guidance counselor at the High School for Violin and Dance

About Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility educates young people for hopeful and intelligent engagement with their world. Morningside Center got its start in 1982, then called Educators for Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area, and quickly got its feet wet in the New York City public schools. In collaboration with the schools, Morningside Center developed a new program called the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), a practical, field-tested curriculum that aimed to “increase the peace.” Since then, Morningside Center has developed an array of programs to build students’ social and emotional intelligence. Among them: The 4Rs (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution), which integrates social and emotional learning into the language arts. A national leader in the field of social and emotional learning (SEL), Morningside Center has developed a range of research-based programs that improve students’ social and emotional intelligence—and their academic performance.

For over a decade, Morningside Center has collaborated with researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of its programs. Researchers first conducted a major study of the RCCP, and then conducted an even more rigorous study of The 4Rs. Both programs were found to have a powerful positive effect on children’s behavior, their social competency, and the classroom climate. Morningside Center works with CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning) and other organizations across the country to make social and emotional learning a part of every child’s education. Morningside Center also helps build the SEL movement through its annual Courageous Schools conference.

For more information on Morningside Center visit www.morningsidecenter.org.



Lyons Community School: Bringing Restorative Justice to Scale

Since it first opened its doors in 2007, Lyons Community School in Brooklyn has worked to create a restorative, democratic culture for the whole community of staff and students at this sixth through twelfth grade school. In 2010, staff attended a weekend long Restorative Practices workshop run by the International Institute for Restorative Practices. This training helped the group formalize systems for utilizing circles consistently in daily advisory classes and pedagogical contexts, as well as in managing conflict and restoring relationships. Principal Taeko Onishi explains that one challenge the school community faced was “getting everyone on the same page as the school moves from being brand new to trying to sustain its mission and school culture as it grows.” The danger, Onishi explains, is that “this just becomes a bunch of random programs that don’t fit together and are typically unsuccessful. It’s about overall coherence.”

Strategies for Sustaining Restorative Justice

Creating a sustainable restorative school culture requires the presence of processes at the school-wide, classroom and individual levels that build relationships, foster teacher and student leadership, and equip members of the school community with the skills and support needed to prevent and address conflict. Administrators, teachers and students at Lyons are implementing several strategies to create and sustain this restorative culture.

Talking about values - Part of the process of creating a sustainable restorative school culture is working to be more explicit about the values that define the mission of the school. Onishi has taken to writing two letters at the end of each week—one to staff and another to students—exploring the schools’ shared values to be read and discussed in advisory. “We’ve been talking a lot about the word care,” the principal gives as an example. “What does it mean to care for something? To put care into your work, your school? To care for someone else?”

Interventions before removals - “I-Dean,” a new formal structure put in place over the past school year, requires teachers to let school deans know what kind of interventions they have tried *before* a student can be removed from the classroom. “We’re asking teachers to think, ‘What are things I can do in my classroom?’” Onishi explains, “And because teachers are being supported in developing these skills, and we understand there is a learning curve, it’s not cold turkey.”

Students as mentors - In another practice developed at the school, upperclassmen are recruited as “Dean Interns” to serve as mentors to younger students facing disciplinary problems. The program is built so that if a student—usually a middle school student—“is really struggling to be in class, they’ll be assigned to be with a dean or with another student, typically a senior, sometimes for a couple of days, sometimes until a parent or guardian comes in—it depends on the situation,” explains Onishi. “The interns go with them to class (and their teachers will give them work to do) and the students will sit next to each other. You’ll see these relationships build. You’ll see the older kid see the younger kid in the hallway and say, ‘J---, what are you doing? Get back to class!’” This further prioritizes relationship building and a philosophy of discipline that keeps students in school instead of pushing them out.

Justice Panel - Now entering its third year, the Justice Panel is based on the Fairness Committee model and is comprised of approximately twelve students that discuss and recommend solutions for disciplinary incidents in the school. Sometimes results are shared so that the school community can grapple with the outcomes as well as the values behind the decisions that are made. Explains Onishi, “We wanted to make it more public so that students are thinking, ‘How are these things panning out? Would I agree with that as a consequence? Does that seem fair?’ We have lots of advisory activities around those kinds of things.” Further documenting the results of the panel in order to ensure consistency of consequences is one goal the group hopes to see through in the coming year. Student mentors in the “Dean Interns” program also help oversee consequences for behavior decided through the justice panel process.

A Look at the Data

The Lyons Community School suspension data confirms its commitment to sustaining a restorative school culture. Numbers of suspensions for Level 4 and 5 infractions for more serious behavior have gone down consistently each year, meaning fewer and fewer students suspended.

Since the 2008-2009 school year, Principal’s Suspensions of one to five days decreased by 25% and longer-term Superintendent’s Suspensions decreased by 21%.

Peer mediation - Lyons's peer mediation program, which has been in place since 2007 when the school first opened its doors, continues to thrive, with mediations happening several times throughout the week. Tenth grader Javier Lopez, a mediator, explains why the program is such an important practice to have in place instead of just suspensions for students who get into a fight: "I think everyone deserves a second chance. It's better for the students and also for the teachers because they are going to see a change in their students. Students learn how to solve problems themselves that they might have later on." With suspension being the only answer, Lopez has seen cycles of fighting. But in a peer mediation, he explains, "They can talk it out, say whatever they have to say, and that's it."

Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York: A Platform for Positive Discipline in NYC Schools

Stakeholders in schools across New York City are looking for sustainable, whole-school approaches to discipline that rely less on punitive responses and more on positive, restorative practices that hold students accountable for their behavior while keeping them in class. The Dignity in Schools Campaign-NY (DSC-NY), a coalition of 20 youth, parent, educator and advocacy organizations, seeks to transform the climate of New York City public schools through these positive whole-school approaches.



Based on the best practices developed at schools featured in this case study, DSC-NY is calling on the NYC Department of Education to fully fund and support implementation of the following five key elements of school-wide restorative practices at ten pilot schools:

1. **A Full-time Position of Restorative Coordinator**, with the sole focus of coordinating a positive, restorative climate and approach to discipline at the school, including overseeing implementation of the other four key elements below (in the case of campus schools where multiple small schools share the same building, the budget should allow for one coordinator per school, not one per campus).
2. **A School-wide Strategic Plan** with participation of all school stakeholders that integrates pre-existing behavior-related strategies, such as Fairness Committees, conflict resolution, peer mediation and peer mentoring, into a restorative framework and set of values, and integrates that framework into existing school structures, such as advisory periods, town hall meetings, after school programs, and School Leadership Teams.
3. **Ongoing Training for All Stakeholders**, including faculty, counselors and other school employees, School Safety Agents, and a core group of student and parent leaders who can develop the skills to train their peers.
4. **Youth and Parent Leadership** in the process of planning and implementing restorative practices in school, such as forming Student Leadership Councils, engaging students and parents to be a part of trainings for school staff, and engaging students in producing videos, skits, posters and other materials to promote restorative approaches among their peers.
5. **Systematic Collection and Monitoring of Data** in collaboration with administrators, faculty, students and parents to develop a common set of indicators and protocols for collecting data to help understand the implementation and results of restorative practices in the pilot schools.

DSC-NY is also calling for changes to the citywide Discipline Code to mandate the use of positive Guidance Interventions before suspension and to eliminate suspensions for minor behavior infractions like B21, "Defying or disobeying authority," which leads to large numbers of suspensions for students of color.

Learn about some of the organizations that supported the schools featured in this case study.



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 discipline practices 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/dsc-ny

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.



NESRI

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The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) works in partnership with communities to build a broad movement for economic and 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 transforming our public schools based on standards of equity, 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.

Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) was founded in 1998 as the youth organizing arm of the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC). Neighborhood youth saw the need for young people to take ownership of their schools and communities to change the social-economic gap that exists between low-income black and brown communities and wealthier white communities. Focusing on educational justice as their bread and butter issue, SBU leaders began organizing their local community schools, building a solid base of students who fought for student safety, equitable resource allocation, and for a college prep curriculum for all students as well as the fight against school closings. SBU also does food justice work by educating youth about healthy food choices and gardening at local high schools. SBU holds “know your rights” trainings around interacting with the police and students’ rights in schools. Over a decade later, SBU leaders continue to fight for a quality education for all students Bronx-wide, city-wide, and nation-wide. Visit www.northwestbronx.org.



Teachers Unite is an independent membership organization of public school educators supporting collaboration between parents, youth and educators fighting for social justice. Teachers Unite organizes teachers around human rights issues that impact New York City public school communities, and offers collaborative leadership training for educators, parents and youth. We believe that schools can only be transformed when educators work with and learn from parents and youth to achieve social and economic justice. Visit www.teachersunite.net.

For more information about this Case Study Series email info@dignityinschools.org or call 212-253-1710 ext. 314.

Endnote

¹ Humanities Preparatory High School educators cite the Scarsdale Alternative School as an important influence on the development of the Fairness Committee.