

# VUE

2015, NO. 42

ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM • *Voices in Urban Education*

## Creating Safe Passage

Collaborative Approaches to  
Equitable School Discipline Reform



**"For These Are All Our Children":  
Equity, Agency, and Action to  
Create Positive School Discipline**

*Alethea Frazier Raynor*

**Bringing Everyone to the  
Table to Eradicate School  
Discipline Disparities**

*Allison Brown and  
Kavitha Mediratta*

**Empathy, Equity, Empowerment:  
Using Restorative Practices  
to Build Character and Community  
While Reducing Suspensions**

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#MeetTheMoment?**

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**"Pushed Out of School for Being  
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*Kesi Foster*

**Lifting Up Our Kings:  
Developing Black Males in  
a Positive and Safe Space**

*Chris Chatmon and Richard Gray*

## ABOUT THE PASSAGE INITIATIVE

This issue of *VUE* is inspired by PASSAGE – an initiative funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, which are dedicated to bringing about lasting changes in the lives of those who are unfairly disadvantaged or vulnerable to life’s circumstances. At the heart of Atlantic’s work is the belief that all people have the right to opportunity, equity, and dignity. Atlantic is a limited-life foundation that makes grants through five program areas: Ageing; Children & Youth; Population Health; Reconciliation & Human Rights; and Founding Chairman Programs. Atlantic is active in Bermuda, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa, the U.S. and Viet Nam. Atlantic’s grantmaking to education is grounded in the belief that the freedoms and advances of humanity are nourished by education. Atlantic has made investments both within and outside educational institutions, as well as in efforts to create an informed citizenry. Atlantic’s investment in the PASSAGE initiative, aims to prevent, through school discipline reform, unreasonable expulsions and criminalization of U.S. youth.

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The Annenberg Institute for School Reform was established in 1993 at Brown University. Its mission is to develop, share, and act on knowledge that improves the conditions and outcomes of schooling in America, especially in urban communities and in schools attended by traditionally underserved children. For program information, contact:

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# VUE

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# “For These Are All Our Children”: Equity, Agency, and Action to Create Positive School Discipline

ALETHEA FRAZIER RAYNOR

*Ending identity-based discipline disparities will require transformative partnerships that focus on both school-level and systems-level change.*

**A**cross our nation, the lives of school-age youth, especially boys and young men of color, are affected every day by negative interactions with adults based solely on perceptions of their identity. Over the last twenty years, progressive school reform efforts have focused on equity, the belief that *all* American children – regardless of race, gender, class, or other identifier – should receive a high-quality education in a safe and supportive environment. But sadly, this ideal too often does not match the reality for far too many young people who cannot find “safe passage” from early childhood to young adulthood – even in their public schools, institutions designed to serve the public good and promote the health and prosperity of communal life.

In these young people’s communities, school is not a safe haven that nurtures their confidence, intellectual curiosity, or growth. More often, schools function for them like gatekeepers, limiting their possibilities and placing them at risk based on their race, class, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. This is the experience that plays out every day for some students, and school discipline is an area where we see some of the most troubling evidence of disparity.

Data from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) Data Collection Center has shown that Black males are suspended at a rate more than three times higher (20 percent) than White males (6 percent), and American Indian/Native Alaskan males are suspended at a rate more than two times (13 percent) that of White males. Black girls are suspended at a higher rate (12 percent) than females of any other race or ethnicity and at a rate that is six times higher than White females (2 percent) (U.S. Department of Education 2014). According to the data, Hispanic students had the highest rate of school-related arrests (37 percent) among all groups and were arrested at a

*Alethea Frazier Raynor is the co-director of district and systems transformation at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.*

significantly higher rate than White students (21 percent) (U.S. Department of Education 2012). To put this in perspective, Hispanic students make up only 24 percent of total school enrollment in the database, Black students make up only 16 percent, and American Indian/Native Alaskan students make up less than 1 percent, while White students make up 51 percent.

In addition to the widespread impact of racial disparities in school discipline, students with disabilities are more than twice as likely (13 percent) to receive an out-of-school suspension than students without disabilities (6 percent) (U.S. Department of Education 2014). And a 2010 independent study revealed that transgender and non-gender-conforming youth were three times more likely to experience harsh disciplinary treatment from school officials than their heterosexual counterparts (Hunt & Moodie 2012).

In some schools, the experience of suspension and expulsion begins as early as pre-kindergarten. The OCR Data Collection Center and several publicized cases brought national attention to the unimaginable truth that 4- and 5-year-olds have their earliest schooling experiences marred by the trauma of harsh and punitive disciplinary practices. Though Black children made up only 18 percent of the pre-school enrollment, they made up 48 percent of the preschool children suspended more than once in one school year (U.S. Department of Education 2014).

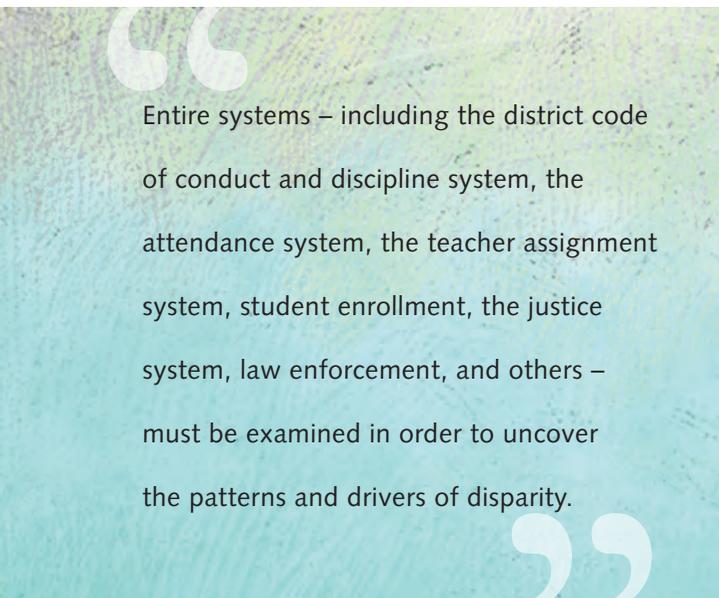
Beyond our debates about academic content or accountability standards, these data are part of the lived reality for students in our public schools, and they compel us to ask ourselves some tough questions: What kind of experiences *are* young people having in school? Why is it that certain students are targets for harsh and punitive discipline and others are not? What steps can we take to end harsh discipline that pushes students out of school? And what kind of discipline policies and practices in schools and districts work well to educate and support students instead of punishing them?

These are no quick fixes or easy answers to these questions, and we cannot get to them working in isolation. If our intention is to overhaul our institutions and address the harm they cause to students, then we have to be courageous enough to look deep within them to understand how we have constructed inequity in the very place we want to hold up as a beacon for opportunity. We must pay attention to the broader context and culture that inform school discipline, in particular the power of implicit and systemic bias, which informs individual action and causes adults to interpret the behavior of a Black male differently than that of a White male for the same or similar infraction. When the behavior is the same, other forces are clearly at work to make the outcome for each child depend so heavily on their racial or other identity. If it were simply a matter of changing student behavior, then we would see not only a steady decline in the rate of suspensions overall, we would also see shifts in the suspension of specific groups of students. But the data have consistently shown that even when the number of suspensions fall, certain students are still the targets of harsh discipline and are suspended or expelled from school at rates disproportionate to their enrollment. When a pattern of suspension starts as early as pre-school and continues over time, it is no wonder that low achievement, disengagement, and eventual school dropout are the outcomes; this, in turn, sets in motion the context and culture that have built a pipeline, particularly for young males of color, leading directly to prison. Interrupting these patterns ultimately transforms the lives and future for these young people and moves us further away from the unwelcome distinction of having the largest prison population in the world.

Efforts to address school discipline disparities throughout the country are being led by a broad range of stakeholders – including community organizers, nonprofits, advocates, district leaders, teachers’ unions, researchers, funders, legislators, and other groups. In particular, there are promising small-scale and large-scale initiatives to abandon zero-tolerance discipline policies that rely heavily on suspension and expulsion and replace them with progressive discipline and restorative justice practices, which emphasize communication, prevention, tolerance, respect and repair between students and teachers as well as between students and their peers.

In 2013, with support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) began to engage four urban cities – Chicago, Los Angeles, Nashville, and New York City – in a pilot process with a different approach than previous efforts. The PASSAGE initiative, which stands for Positive and Safe Schools Advancing Greater Equity, was designed to bring community organizers and district leaders together as stakeholders at the same table to examine identity-based disparities, exclusionary policies, and punitive practices and to work collaboratively toward designing interventions that would create a positive and healthy school climate.

By approaching the issue of school discipline collaboratively, multiple voices can be heard in one space to create greater awareness of not just the statistical consequences of harsh and punitive discipline, but the social, emotional, and personal impact it has, especially for the students and families most affected by disparate treatment. Bringing multiple perspectives to the same table has the potential to generate a wider range of interventions and strategies for how districts could use existing resources; by thinking about options collectively, resources are identified within communities to support the healthy development of young people and adults.



Entire systems – including the district code of conduct and discipline system, the attendance system, the teacher assignment system, student enrollment, the justice system, law enforcement, and others – must be examined in order to uncover the patterns and drivers of disparity.

PASSAGE is very much a work in progress; however, over the course of the last two years, one lesson we have learned is that while changing specific policies and practices are critical steps for districts and schools in eliminating discipline disparities, these changes alone are also insufficient. They must take place in the larger district and community context where policies, practice, and climate – both within and outside of schools – are still operating in ways that undermine the potential of any one reform. Entire systems – including the district code of conduct and discipline system, the attendance system, the teacher assignment system, student enrollment, the justice system, law enforcement, and others – must be examined in order to uncover the

patterns and drivers of disparity that work in concert with one another to push one child out of school while his peer receives only a small reprimand for the same offense.

A good example of this is the use of out-of-school and in-school suspension – both practices that are part of a larger system of discipline. Many districts have focused

solely on reducing out-of-school suspension rates and accomplish this by simply putting more students into in-house suspension for the same infraction. What is missed here is the opportunity to fundamentally change a flawed discipline system that relies heavily on removing students from the classroom environment. Compounding the ineffectiveness of this practice, students often return to the classroom after a suspension without any other intervention, and so the cycle of suspension just continues. What at first seemed like progress on out-of-school suspensions becomes a re-routing of the problem to in-school suspension, and the overall flaws in the larger system of discipline and school culture never get addressed.

By engaging in collaborative and transformative system-level work with equity at the center, district and community leaders are better able to deconstruct and then reconstruct the frameworks used at the core of these systems and to address the knowledge, skills, and resources that are needed in order to bring about real systems change. Working together, they can identify how bias and institutionalized racism work within and across systems to contribute to the grim data around identity-based discipline disparities. We believe that this approach will more effectively and permanently shift school culture and climate from one that is punitive to one that is positive.

In this issue of *VUE*, we explore the work in progress in each of the four PASSAGE sites and in other cities, through the lens of many stakeholder groups. We hear from parents, teachers, youth, community organizers, district administrators, principals, youth agency leaders, funders, judges, police officers, and researchers – all of whom are addressing school discipline issues from their vantage point and engaging in ways that will create a positive and equitable school climate for all students. They explore both the challenges and the opportunities they face in moving their work forward and the various steps they have taken to transform systems.

Kavitha Mediratta of The Atlantic Philanthropies and Allison Brown of Open Society Foundations share their stories about what brought them into this work and what roles foundations can play to leverage their resources as well as their voice to create a movement that ends the disparities that limit the promise of a quality education.

Christopher Martin shares his perspective as a Denver teacher who was at first skeptical about trying restorative practices in his classroom, but then realized that he might gain more than he would lose if he changed his approach.

Maisie Chin talks about the PASSAGE work in Los Angeles through her role as the leader of a parent organizing group that has focused on the issue of school discipline for many years. She shares the Appreciative Inquiry approach her organization has taken to lead courageous and collaborative conversations that reframe the road ahead and bring multiple stakeholders into a new process.

Tom Ward and Tony Majors, community and district lead partners in Nashville, talk about what PASSAGE has meant in their city. They share how and why their journey began by embedding the work to end discipline disparities across a broad, cross-sector table that includes a judge, a police commander, parents, principals, organizers, researchers, and civic and faith-based leaders.

Parent organizer Treyonda Towns, youth organizer Carlil Pittman, and Karen Van Ausdal, a district administrator, share the dynamics of the Chicago PASSAGE partnership that brought their three groups together. In this Q and A, they explore

the different entry points they take as organizations to bring about equity and change for students and parents and what they see as essential to making their partnership work.

In his opening story, Kesi Foster, a PASSAGE partner and coordinator with Urban Youth Collaborative, reminds us how students in New York City public schools are affected daily by punitive policies and practices, just by showing up for school. He goes on to share his view and the perspectives of young people from his organization about the promise and pitfalls of trying to make changes happen in the largest school district in our nation.

In his interview with AISR's Richard Gray, Chris Chatmon lays out why he believes the African American Male Achievement program that he leads in Oakland is essential to achieving success for young men of color and describes what he sees as the work ahead in which all educators should be engaged.

This collection of articles and the Perspective pieces that support them demonstrate that if we care deeply about equity and justice, then we have to take on the challenge of making our educational institutions reflect the values, beliefs, and norms of a fair and just society. The school experience we provide to our young people certainly shapes them personally, but it also reflects our future and the collective consciousness of the nation. In the words of the great writer and social critic James Baldwin: "For these are all our children. We will all profit by, or pay for, whatever they become."

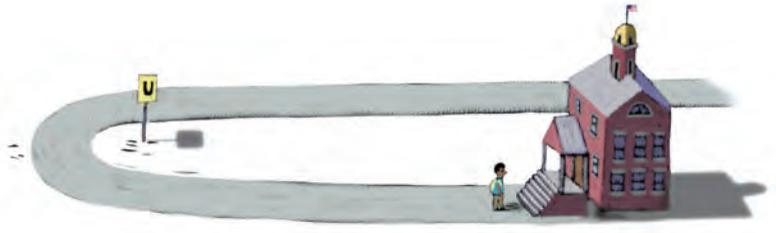
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## Bringing Everyone to the Table to Eradicate School Discipline Disparities

ALLISON BROWN AND KAVITHA MEDIRATTA

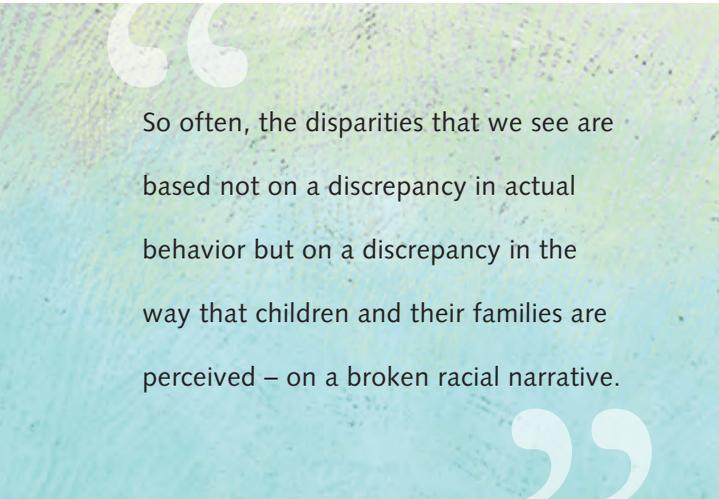
*Representatives from Open Society Foundations and The Atlantic Philanthropies discuss philanthropy's role in school discipline reform.*

**T**he Atlantic Philanthropies funded the work of the Positive and Safe Schools Advancing Greater Equity (PASSAGE) initiative, which is a unique approach to ending discipline disparities focused on partnerships between districts and community organizations (for more on the initiative, please see the preface of this issue). Open Society Foundations is considering funding similar work. *VUE* editors asked Allison Brown and Kavitha Mediratta to discuss what brought them – and their foundations – to tackle the issue of school discipline disparities and what they have learned about challenges to and opportunities for reform.

**Q** Atlantic and Open Society Foundations provided significant funding and leadership nationally to build awareness about the school-to-prison pipeline and its disproportionate impact on children of color. Thinking about your individual background and experiences, how did you come to this work?

**A** *Allison Brown:* I come to this work as a civil rights attorney. I worked for many years in the Educational Opportunities Section of the Civil Rights Division in the U.S. Department of Justice, where I litigated school desegregation cases. In many of those cases, it was clear that the vestiges of the racially segregated school

*At the time of this interview, Allison Brown was a program officer at Open Society Foundations. Kavitha Mediratta is chief strategy advisor for equity initiatives and human capital at The Atlantic Philanthropies.*



So often, the disparities that we see are based not on a discrepancy in actual behavior but on a discrepancy in the way that children and their families are perceived – on a broken racial narrative.

systems of old remained. Although the unanimous Supreme Court opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* had declared segregation in schools unconstitutional, we were monitoring school districts whose schools remained racially segregated. We also were investigating districts where students, primarily Black and Brown, were segregated out of the regular classroom environment as punishment for perceived or actual, and usually developmentally appropriate, misbehavior. We heard complaints from Black students who were suspended or expelled from school for things like school uniform violations, talking back to teachers, chewing gum in class, and, worst of all, being tardy to school or class. We heard stories of Black students being disciplined for the same behavior for which White students who engaged in the same behavior – talking on a cell phone, shirt untucked from their pants or skirt, wearing flip-flops to school – were not punished. School officials cited zero-tolerance school discipline policies as the impetus for their discipline decisions, although racial disparities in discipline often indicated that Black and Brown students were more likely to be suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement or arrested out of school for minor or perceived misbehavior.

At the Open Society Foundations, the school discipline portfolio is wedded to the racial narrative portfolio. So often, the disparities that we see are based not on a discrepancy in actual behavior but on a discrepancy in the way that children and their families are perceived. That broken racial narrative originates from a false racial hierarchy that has been the cornerstone of this nation's founding and existence. Under the country's broken racial narrative, Black boys – even the littlest ones – are to be feared, and Black girls are to be despised or ignored. It is no wonder, then, that children who talk during quiet time or engage in a schoolyard fight where no one is injured are perceived as malicious and in need of stern and punitive rebuke and intervention rather than loving and nurturing guidance and redirection.

I came to this work to ensure that all children are perceived only as children, not as criminals, and that they are permitted the privilege of their childhood, regardless of their race or ethnicity or national origin or any other thing that may be used against them.

*Kavitha Mediratta:* Similar to Allison, it was young people who introduced me to the school-to-prison pipeline. I was doing research on grassroots organizing in New York City and elsewhere around the country and also working closely with the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), a high school student-led coalition in New York City. Like a lot of people at the time, my first reaction to news stories about tougher discipline and safety measures was supportive. But as I listened to students, I realized that I did not have the full picture. Instead of creating a welcoming and supportive environment for learning, this “zero tolerance” approach was undermining students’ sense of connection, belonging, and investment in school in very deep and troubling ways.

At the time, there was a growing focus on improving rates of high school graduation and college access. And yet, in New York City and nationally, schools serving low-income neighborhoods and communities of color were increasingly reliant on disciplinary and safety strategies that were at odds with these goals. The racial undertones of this punitive approach were not lost on the UYC youth. They could see the vast difference in how students were treated and supported in their schools compared to those in schools serving more affluent, White communities.

From my days as a teacher, I know that most educators truly want to do right by children. The profound disconnect between those intentions and students' experiences of their schools was painful to see. As a society we tend not to listen to what young people have to say, especially when those young people are of color. As a result, we often do not fully understand what is needed to support them successfully. We also do not see the ways in which damaging racial narratives permeate the very fabric of our schools, undermining how we treat children and what we believe they are capable of achieving.

These experiences brought me to Atlantic. Our funding to end discipline disparities aims to build equity in opportunities for children and youth of color and to support their leadership and voice in their schools and communities. Both facets are vitally important because, as Allison notes so eloquently, discipline disparities are a function of our collective beliefs. We will not achieve the goals of equity and opportunity until we see all children for who they truly are, deserving of all the supports, caring, and second chances that all children need.

**Q** **PASSAGE was designed deliberately to focus on discipline disparities and to engage school district leaders and community members in developing reforms. Why this specific focus and approach?**

**A** *Kavitha Mediratta:* Atlantic's goal in funding PASSAGE was to create a learning lab of how to reduce disciplinary disparities. Early work by CADRE in Los Angeles, *Padres y Jóvenes Unidos* in Denver, and Allison's colleagues in Baltimore had demonstrated that it was possible to bring down rates of suspensions without creating chaos in schools. But the disparities were much harder to shift, and in some cases, got worse as the reforms progressed.

A key question was: What could districts do to reduce these disparities? We supported a variety of initiatives to build interventions, including Oakland Unified School District's piloting of full-service community schools, restorative justice, and academic and other supports for African American youth. We also supported the Research-to-Practice Collaborative on Discipline Disparities, convened by Russ Skiba at Indiana University to identify emerging strategies to reduce disparities, and the University of Virginia to develop tools to improve teacher cultural competency as part of its My Teaching Partner professional development program.

Very few districts were focused on discipline disparities, however, and there was no clear guidance on steps they could follow. So the idea in creating PASSAGE was to use the foundation's funding to open up a space to examine causes of and remedies to school discipline disparities from multiple perspectives. This involved helping community and district leaders to look at the data, assess what was working and not working, learn about alternative approaches, and work collaboratively on implementation. This kind of focused effort to address disparities hadn't happened before, and we hoped that

other districts would benefit from the experiences and lessons learned from the PASSAGE sites.

**Q** What are some of the lessons you've gleaned from the PASSAGE initiative?

**A** *Kavitha Mediratta:* We've learned so much from the tremendous work underway. First is the importance of educating district and school administrators about the role of punitive discipline in the school-to-prison pipeline. Most educators don't know about the research and data on suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and ticketing and are unaware of the long-term negative consequences of these strategies. Before they will invest seriously in addressing this issue, they need to understand why it is a concern and what they can do about it. A second lesson is the importance of high-level leadership. District staff need to know that shifting away from punitive discipline requires change at all levels and that they are being asked not simply to reduce suspensions but to transform the cultural norms of schools. For teachers and other school staff to take the risk to try out new strategies in their classrooms, they need to know that district and municipal leaders will have their backs and see these changes through.

Another lesson is that it takes time to build collaborative relationships among diverse stakeholders. There are not many opportunities for government and community members to come together to problem-solve an issue. Most of us are used to more adversarial ways of interacting, and establishing a truly collaborative and participatory process does not come naturally. But investing in this process can enable more informed, effective, and sustained reform by building understanding and trust among the parties involved.

Districts face many pressures and, in the absence of knowing about the harms of punitive discipline, can dismiss the concerns of students and parents. Working closely with community partners can build greater understanding of the motivations of students and parents advocating for change. This experience also can help to challenge educators' misconceptions about who their students are and what they need.

On the community side, there is also a big learning curve about the economic and political challenges the district may face in terms of collecting data, training staff, and so on. It is one thing to call for change from outside the system and a very different matter to make it happen on the inside. Working together can provide community members with a window into how public school systems operate and the constraints and pressures that system leaders need to resolve in order to move forward. Ultimately, the time spent in collectively defining the problem and reform priorities will bear fruit, but it's important to understand that the road can be a long one.

**Q** What opportunities do you see in funding this kind of work? What are some of the outcomes you're hoping to achieve?

**A** *Allison Brown:* I have seen PASSAGE firsthand in Nashville and had the great privilege to witness teachers and administrators, students and family members, community advocates and researchers, juvenile court judges and law enforcement officers, and local government officials coming together to occupy their respective roles but to do so in a shared space of understanding and compassion for one another and with a common goal of keeping children in school.

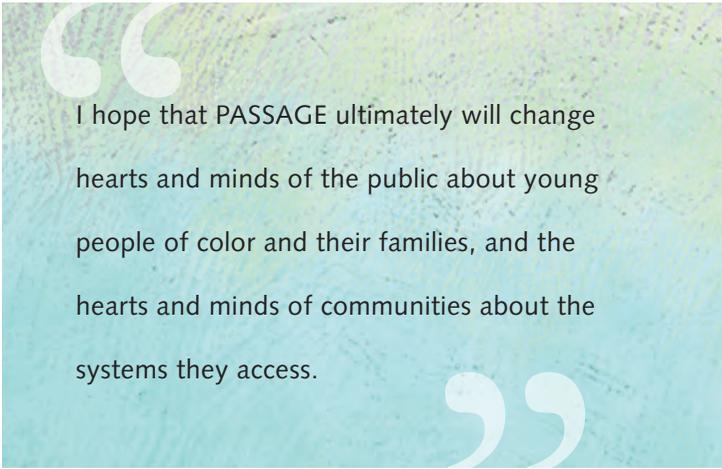
It has taken several years on the national stage for community organizers to hammer home to the public and to key stakeholders the need to revise school discipline policies and procedures to eradicate the school-to-prison pipeline. As their focus shifts to a more expansive frame and to keeping children in school, promoting best practices, and creating healthy school climates, it is imperative that philanthropy support collaboration efforts between key stakeholders so that, for example, organizers can work closely with school district administrators and personnel to develop the school environments we all want to see and where all of our children can flourish. PASSAGE is an opportunity to support that type of collaboration.

I am hoping that success in the mere process of collaboration that PASSAGE creates will serve as a model for other districts and localities. I also hope that the relationships that develop as a result of PASSAGE will last long-term, that PASSAGE will bring about systems change in schools and between the systems that must interact with one another in order to protect and serve young people. I hope that PASSAGE ultimately will change hearts and minds of the public about young people of color and their families, and the hearts and minds of communities about the systems they access and the human beings who operate those systems.

Thanks to Kavitha's leadership on this issue, foundations are primed to understand the need for multi-stakeholder advocacy, planning, and implementation, and it is my hope to facilitate sustained attention and resources to the evolution of this issue and of the field because, as Kavitha describes, this road will be long.

**Q** What can districts do to effectively shift environments in schools and communities from a punitive to a positive culture? What can community leaders do?

**A** *Kavitha Mediratta:* For starters, we need to understand that school climate and discipline are integral to effective teaching and learning. So often these are treated as unrelated issues when, in fact, they are deeply intertwined. The sad reality is that teachers and school staff often have so little support for developing strategies for building positive relationships with students. And they may know very little about the communities where their students live. School districts need to help principals, teachers, and other school personnel to develop a vision for a culturally inclusive school climate



I hope that PASSAGE ultimately will change hearts and minds of the public about young people of color and their families, and the hearts and minds of communities about the systems they access.

and an understanding of the role of implicit bias in shaping classroom interactions, including academic expectations as well as disciplinary actions, and how to build effective relationships with students.

Better use of data is also important. Collecting and tracking data can reduce the need for disciplinary actions by enhancing the ability of school administrators and teachers to respond

proactively to issues that may be going on for students. Many school systems collect data on suspensions, but other indicators they should look at include office referrals, arrests, and summonses, as well as attendance, grades, and students' perceptions of fairness and support in school climate and discipline.

In addition, and to underscore a point that Allison made: schools cannot do this alone. There is a need for much greater collaboration with other systems, such as health agencies, to better serve children. Just as importantly, as the work of PASSAGE suggests, youth, parent, and community leaders can be a tremendous resource to school districts by providing ideas, pinpointing challenges that need to be addressed, and building public and political support for reform. Young people are an enormous untapped resource, and need to be part of the process of improving their schools.

**Q What are some of the levers that must be used to enact policy change at the district, city, state, or federal level to end discipline disparities and create a healthy school climate for all students?**

**A** *Allison Brown:* As Kavitha indicated previously, student voice is the most important lever. I cannot overstate the need for meaningful inclusion of student voice in conveying what they experience in their school environments and what they want in their schools. At the Department of Justice, it was the voices of students that fueled our investigations and propelled us forward in our litigation and in the creation of viable remedies. We heard from students what it was like to be and feel policed in their communities and in their schools, to be placed in handcuffs for things that would not rise to the level of criminal activity if committed by

adults, to be under suspicion before ever uttering a word.

Parents also have a role to play. Meaningful parent engagement is inviting parents to participate, as PASSAGE does, in the creation of action plans and in partnering with educators for the healthy development of their children. State leaders – governors, legislatures, state boards of education – are critical levers as well. And, of course, the federal government is the biggest lever. As we have seen with the school discipline guidance and the release of the Civil Rights Data Collection, the federal government wields tremendous power to shape a public discourse and effect change at the national, state, and local level by mere mention of a term or concept. The federal government's stated priority of eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline continues to have ripple effects at the state and district level that has turned the wave of activism into a tidal wave of reform.

We all have roles to play, including philanthropy, and it is crucial that we understand our respective roles. The most difficult lever to operate is the one that is all of us. For instance, advocates and activists must continue to push government in the right direction, even when that government is friendly to the advocates' position. Government is not in the lead, but should follow its constituency in the direction that is right and that reflects our nation's fundamental values of freedom and equality.

**Q How does work around eliminating discipline disparities tie into current national issues of equity, police brutality, and the school-to-prison pipeline? Why is this work so important right now?**

**A** *Kavitha Mediratta:* As Allison's opening remarks make clear, the tendency to respond punitively to young people of color with suspensions

and other sanctions in school arises from the same underlying narrative of youth criminality that has fueled the tragic killings of unarmed Black men in communities across the country. Whether in school or in their communities, young people of color – particularly African American youth – are viewed as threats to order and safety. This is why young people and parents rose up to challenge the school-to-prison pipeline, beginning more than a decade ago, and why they are mobilizing to challenge police brutality today.

At Atlantic, we see the effort to reduce discipline disparities as striking at the very heart of those false racial beliefs in society and the biases – conscious and unconscious – that justify unconscionable treatment. The successes young people have had in putting school discipline and racial injustice on the national agenda give me great hope about what can be achieved in the coming years.

*Allison Brown:* “Black Lives Matter” has become a rallying cry. We all suffer when we lose souls whose talents are stifled and whose genius is isolated to wither and die on the vine instead of being cultivated and nurtured to the benefit of us all. Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, John Crawford, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, the Charleston 9 – the shock of their senseless and race-based killings have shaken the nation to its core. Justice and equity have yet to be fully realized by a large subset of people in this country.

When students, especially Black boys, are at best misunderstood and at worst feared, when there is no belief in their abilities and little incentive to keep them in school, when there are active attempts to remove them from the school environment, we all lose. Schools are a microcosm of society. Systemic failures of children by their schools reflect societal failures of

communities. By the same token, systemic successes for children in school reflect our potential as a society. Now is the time for us to focus on coordinated and cooperative efforts like PASSAGE to address the inequities that ail our schools and thus our nation, lest the lives we’ve lost be in vain.

As Charles Hamilton Houston said, “We beg you to save young America from the blight of race prejudice. Do not bind the children within the narrow circles of your own lives.” It is through the schools that America – young and old – will be saved, from itself. Although the issues we face as a nation are very big, there is hope if we focus on the schools and on ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities – and life opportunities – for all of our young people.

*For more on The Atlantic Philanthropies, see <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/>. For Open Society Foundations, see <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>.*

# Empathy, Equity, Empowerment: Using Restorative Practices to Build Character and Community While Reducing Suspensions

CHRISTOPHER MARTIN

*A middle school science teacher in Denver, Colorado, finds success using restorative approaches that focus on empathy rather than punitive zero-tolerance school discipline policies.*

I began my career as a science teacher at a public charter school. We were small in size, and the staff were all very new to the profession. The school was built around a model of behavior management that was punitive. Staff would enter merits and demerits in a computer system that tracked and communicated this information to administration, students, and families. Students performing within the expected performance band were celebrated and those dropping below a certain status were eventually suspended or expelled from the building. For some students this system was effective, but the students who struggled to meet expectations were rarely able to catch up, and most ended up being pushed out of the school.

As a new teacher, this system seemed logical and was very similar to what I experienced as a student in my own childhood. Many students willingly complied with the system, but those who did not were never really supported or helped to work through whatever was the underlying impediment to their success. Those who struggled with academics or behavior were viewed negatively and whisked away. The “problem” was the family’s – or the next school’s – to resolve.

Reflecting on my first school’s discipline policy, I realized that the school was actually operating out of fear and compliance rather than trust, positive relationships, or a sense of community. Luckily, my experience in this building was short. I don’t necessarily blame the staff or administration, as they may have simply been operating within a system that was familiar or that had functioned well in other contexts. Nevertheless, an opportunity to more equitably serve and support the students and greater community was missed.

*Christopher Martin has taught science at Skinner Middle School in Denver, Colorado, for eight years.*

Fast-forward a few years, and I found myself working for Denver Public Schools at Skinner Middle School. Located in North Denver, we are a traditional Title 1 middle school; about 70 percent of our children are a racial minority (primarily Hispanic). Our leadership and community have worked tirelessly to make Skinner a place our neighborhood is willing to send their kids. We pride ourselves in serving all of our students' needs by offering art, drama, music, sports, language, and student leadership opportunities, among a host of other ways to connect with the world.

For a number of years before I arrived, Skinner not only struggled to attract and keep a student body, but also was not able to engage our community or grow its students academically. As recently as the early 2000s, we had to plead with families to send their students to us. Instead, families bussed their students across town to schools with better records and reputations. All this has changed, and Skinner is on a continued upward trajectory to move from good to great.

We acknowledge that one of the greatest agents of change in our new positive perception and status in the community has been the caliber of citizen produced by Skinner Middle School. This is in no small way due to our use of restorative approaches, which focus on building, maintaining, and repairing relationships among all members of a school community. Data from 2007 to 2014 show that while enrollment nearly doubled from 300 to 600 students, incidents of out-of-school suspension were cut from just under 300 to approximately 50 per year.

During my first year in the district, I was honestly a bit overwhelmed with new content and found myself back in survival mode. While the school's policy was to use restorative approaches to discipline, I personally wasn't

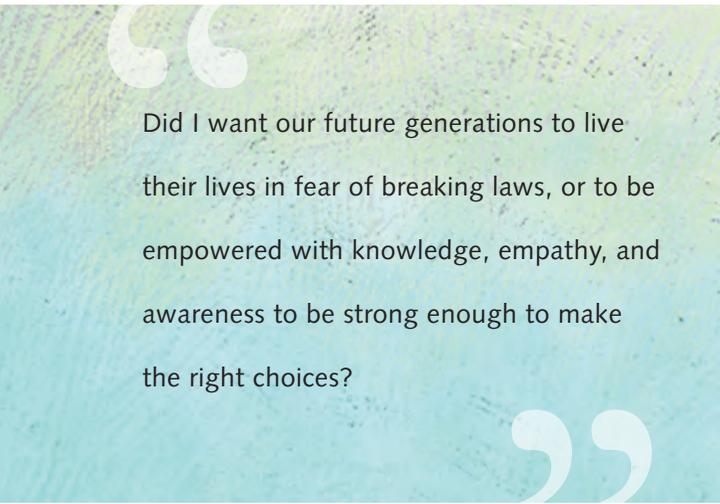
someone who was using the method with fidelity in my own teaching. Admittedly, I was barely aware of it. I thought of it as an isolated technique that the restorative practices coordinator used when students were sent to the discipline office. The times when I did attempt restorative approaches, I held on to my anger and frustration about what had happened in the situation, and this prevented me from sincerely facilitating or participating in a restorative conversation. Seeing students come back to class and make the same behavior choices after a restorative conversation did not help to convince me of the effectiveness of restorative approaches.

Throughout this first year at Skinner, I would send students to the discipline office and check in on them. Witnessing the deep processing through which our restorative practices coordinator guided students was impressive, but I still found myself asking why restorative approaches weren't working for me. Also, why did the process not seem to have an immediate effect on altering behavior for the positive? I was still skeptical of restorative approaches, but it would soon all come together and start to make sense.

The policy, systems, structures, rituals, and routines at Skinner Middle School are all very intentional and informed through data work, feedback from our community, and our school's annual needs assessment. At the end of each year, our staff complete a thorough and pointed questionnaire meant to inform everything we do around our systems and policy. Empowered with this data and feedback, each summer our prevention and intervention work-group meets for a potluck nearly every week to discuss which of our policies and systems work and which ones need to be refined.

In the summer before my second year at Skinner, I joined this work group,

and that's when I really began to understand how and why restorative approaches work and just how much it has helped us turn the school around. By having an opportunity to pause over the summer and think about my practice and the restorative approaches philosophy, I began to understand what I was hoping to get out of students. It was clear that I wanted students' behavior to fall within a continuum of appropriate behavior, but did I want them to perform out of fear or because they truly care about each other? Did I want our future generations to live their lives in fear of



Did I want our future generations to live their lives in fear of breaking laws, or to be empowered with knowledge, empathy, and awareness to be strong enough to make the right choices?

breaking laws, or to be empowered with the knowledge, empathy, and awareness that are necessary to be strong enough to make the right choices, no matter who is watching? Restorative approaches were the means to achieving this empathy and empowerment, and I became fully invested in using them for the following school year.

Before launching into how restorative approaches function in our building, it is best to provide some context. The restorative approach isn't just a thing that we do; instead, it is a whole mindset and systematic way of ap-

proaching conflict resolution. Empathy is the basis of how we interact with each other; and it seeps into everything we do at Skinner Middle School.

Skinner is proud to share that we have gained positive attention for our implementation of restorative approaches. Families take notice and comment on the new abilities their students have to act with empathy. Beyond our community, we have also received accolades at the district level for our use of restorative approaches. We were identified by Denver Public Schools as a model for other schools to reference for best practices. Padres y Jóvenes Unidos and the National Education Association are even using us as a case study to further understand our effectiveness.

All of our staff have been trained to use restorative approaches independently in our classrooms and throughout the building. The fidelity of this process is reinforced through role-play activities and the use of our prevention and intervention manual, which is the product of our summer meeting sessions used to refine and then define everything we do at Skinner. It covers everything from how students enter the building and dress code questions to how teachers will approach a restorative conversation.

When we encounter incidents of behavior in need of redirection, we first seek to warmly redirect. If behaviors continue or are at the point of needing a pause or removal from the classroom, students are asked to take a break and complete a refocus form. We use a buddy teacher's classroom as a place to provide a temporary break from the environment and invite an opportunity to reflect. The form consists of a series of five questions designed to help students use empathy, think about what happened, and take responsibility for making things right:

*What happened?*

*Who was affected?*

*What are you able to take responsibility for?*

*What could you have done differently in this situation?*

*What are you willing to do to make things right?*

Before returning to class, the buddy teacher or original teacher has a quick processing conversation to assess the student's readiness to return to class. If the quality of their thinking demonstrates a thorough, empathetic reflection, they are ready to rejoin the learning environment. Start to finish the refocus should take less than ten minutes and reinforces Skinner's mission of accountability to empathy.

What the refocus process does not guarantee is that mistakes in behavior choices will never happen again. Research shows that adolescent brains are easily susceptible to peer influence, and they may also be battling years of conditioned behavior or be triggered by traumatic life experiences. What the refocus can guarantee is that the student has kept their dignity, he or she has been held accountable for their actions, and that both the student and the teacher now have an understanding of how this behavior can be avoided in the future by different action steps. Since the student has kept his or her dignity throughout, the incident is no longer a power struggle between teacher and student. It is about equity for everyone. Each refocus offers an opportunity for the student and teacher to, at minimum, maintain their relationship and oftentimes enhance it by coming together in sharing perspective.

At first glance, the refocus might not seem impactful. However, when you understand that its strength comes from the consistency of school-wide

implementation, it starts to make sense. Layer the refocus with additional support and reinforcement from our restorative practices coordinator, dean of students, and dean of culture, and you begin to understand that this is a multi-tiered system of support. These staff support students through empathetic thinking when they experience escalated conflict. Peer-to-peer conflict, peer-to-staff conflict, student-to-family conflict – all of these situations are addressed with restorative practices. Even the most severe behavior incidents require a restorative conversation, and this shows our students that empathy and understanding the impact of one's actions is something that defines Skinner Middle School.

In addition, as part of our intentionality we embed events and activities throughout our year that require students to grow their skill levels in awareness and empathy. Examples include our Skinner Cares Day and the RESPECT program. Skinner Cares Day pauses academic instruction for an entire day in order to focus ourselves inward. Differentiated at the grade level, staff facilitate activities and scaffolded conversations on topics like bullying, race, and sexuality with the goal of developing deeper empathy and respect for one another. RESPECT also pauses instruction as a small-group, week-long class that heightens awareness in social situations and provides skills for students to safely and expertly navigate future challenging interpersonal situations.

Most recently, our staff had the pleasure of continuing to learn how to better serve our students by participating in a Trauma Informed Systems of Care session. Hosted in our own building, a regional expert helped staff understand that much of what we identify as undesirable student behavior is actually a triggered response caused by trauma in their lives. Trauma can include food or housing insecurity,

language or cultural barriers, abuse, neglect, and bullying. Knowing what might trigger a response from any one person is impossible. But what we learned from this training was that the triggered responses can be mediated using strong interpersonal relationships. Strong interpersonal relationships are created and maintained through empathy, which reinforces just how important our intentional culture of restorative approaches is to our successes at Skinner Middle School.

I am unendingly grateful for a fresh start, a new perspective, and a new approach to developing student conduct. My current building leaders and peers have been instrumental in helping me make a transformation from someone who uses fear and compliance as a management strategy to someone who uses compassion and empathy to mold and model citizenship in our student body.

As the age of zero-tolerance school discipline policies comes to an end, punitive punishment and suspension have been deemed ineffective. Behaviors don't change without support. Removing students from opportunities to learn without taking time to repair the hurt promotes isolation. This can lead to the withdrawal and disenfranchisement in our school system of those we are supposed to serve: students and families. Worse still, as students get caught in the punitive discipline cycle, negative perceptions of education are developed. As students spend time out of class, we further the achievement gap between the haves and have-nots.

At Skinner, we are continuing to grow in how we learn to use restorative approaches, which are not designed to be a quick fix. Undesired behaviors in the school setting are conditioned and reinforced over years from students' previous experiences at school and interactions with family and peers or from values in our society. To build trust and relationships and to learn new behaviors takes time and practice. My school's success with restorative approaches stems from investment and support from staff in the process and the fidelity of our implementation. This approach can be highly effective in supporting and empowering students, and staff, to act with intention and empathy, and our school is a model of what this can look like.

*For more on Skinner Middle School's restorative approaches, see <http://skinner.dpsk12.org/restorative-approaches/>.*



## Are We Ready to #MeetTheMoment?

MAISIE CHIN

*A community-based organization frames its collaboration with multiple stakeholders around changing from a “culture of discipline” to a “culture of dignity” within the Los Angeles district.*

**M**ichael (all real names have been changed) is an African American eighth-grader in South Los Angeles. His mother Diane is a widow, and he has a twin sister and three older brothers. Last year, one of Michael’s brothers was shot and killed by the Los Angeles Police Department. His other brother is paralyzed from the neck down as a result of a drive-by shooting nine years ago, when he was on the way to a family party. His third brother is in the detention center Sylmar Juvenile Hall.

Michael likes school, especially science class. But like lots of middle school boys, he doesn’t shy away from a fight

if one is started. Although several of his friends are “affiliated,” Michael is not. He has been in a few fights with other students, but has no continuing beef with any other kids. In the fall of 2014, during PE class, Michael’s teacher asked him to put away a bag of chips he was eating. Michael said that he had just bought the chips and wanted to finish eating them. The PE teacher came over to Michael, took the chips, and threw them away himself. In frustration, Michael told the PE teacher, “My brother is going to get you.” The teacher took the matter to administration and asked that Michael be removed from the school because the teacher feared for his safety.

*Maisie Chin is the executive director and co-founder of CADRE (Community Asset Development Re-defining Education) in Los Angeles, California.*

Michael was given an opportunity transfer (OT) from his home school in South Los Angeles to a middle school in Watts. An OT is when the district or school initiates a student transfer to another district school for remedial or corrective reasons, as an alternative means to address “problem behavior.” All OTs are recorded in a student’s file but are not recorded in school disciplinary data as a suspension or an expulsion – two common indicators of how well schools are managing discipline and which students are being pushed out.

When Diane was called to the school to sign the OT paperwork, school staff gave her little information about the chips incident. She thought Michael had been suspended because he had been in a few fights and was now being transferred. When school site staff explained the transfer to Diane, they did not tell her she could appeal the decision.

On Michael’s first day at the school in Watts, three other students jumped him. On his fifth day, he got into a verbal altercation with the principal and cursed at her. His OT was immediately canceled. Under Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) policy, that meant he could no longer attend the school in Watts and had to return to his home school “for immediate enrollment with no instructional days lost in the process.” Diane returned to Michael’s home school to reenroll him. The home school principal explained that Diane had signed “withdrawal” paperwork, that Michael was no longer her student, and that she didn’t have to accept him back into school. After a few weeks the pupil services and attendance counselor called Diane and explained that she could work on enrolling Michael in a continuation school that serves students at risk of dropping out. Michael explained to his mom that he didn’t feel safe going to any other school besides his home school because he was worried about getting jumped again.

Michael has now missed over two months of school. He has not been recommended for expulsion but his home school will not reenroll him. This now jeopardizes Michael’s education – just one suspension, which in LAUSD is often 1.5 days, doubles a student’s likelihood of dropout, and triples the likelihood of entry into the juvenile justice system. Two months of missed school is equivalent to more than thirteen suspensions.

It was hearing stories like this from parents year after year that prompted CADRE, the organization I lead, to begin our Human Right to Education Campaign.

## DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES IN LOS ANGELES

Between 2005 and 2013, CADRE played a lead role in using grassroots organizing and leadership development to create a seismic shift in public policy, debate, and narrative around school discipline, racial disparities, parents’ roles, school climate, and closing the achievement gap for low-income students of color. Through our parent organizing and coalition and movement building, we ushered in major new educational policies locally, statewide, and nationally that have fundamentally changed the landscape and raised the expectations and standards by which we assess our responses to student behavior, their root causes, and the inherent biases that accompanies them. By 2013, an LAUSD high school in East Los Angeles achieved the unheard of standard of *zero* suspensions. A South Los Angeles high school that CADRE focused on brought suspensions down from 100 to 7 in one year.

In 2013, in coalition with youth organizing groups and advocates, CADRE ushered in LAUSD’s adoption of the School Climate Bill of Rights,

making it the first district in California to ban suspensions for “willful defiance.” This victory was just after the state of California passed six major pieces of legislation that Governor Brown then signed into law, changing the state’s school discipline landscape fundamentally by, among other things, making suspensions the last resort. In 2014, California also legislatively put a three-and-a-half-year moratorium on suspending students out of school for willful defiance in grades K–3 and on expulsions for the same reason for all grades.

But despite these victories, Michael’s story was still all too common. The hard truth was that despite these dramatic declines in the number of suspensions overall, CADRE and our allies continued to see that African American students were still the ones most frequently being expelled and suspended in LAUSD. Of the seven suspensions logged by the South Los Angeles high school in 2014, three of them, or nearly 43 percent, were of African American students, who only made up 9.5 percent of the students at the school that year. This pattern held true for school after school, regardless of the number of suspensions. And CADRE’s African American parents still had stories of their children being pushed out in multiple ways, including OTs and having the police called on their children. These practices kept suspension off the rolls, but it still removed a child from school, perhaps permanently.

Organizing parents and youth to take on the school-to-prison pipeline had seemed like a winning strategy for policy change. But improving conditions for African American students *in actual practice*, so that they truly benefited from each policy victory, proved to be elusive. We saw the need to fundamentally transform school climate.

We then found ourselves with the opportunity to co-anchor the PASSAGE project in Los Angeles through the Annenberg Institute of School Reform at Brown University. We would bring together district and school representatives and community partners and stakeholders to participate in a year-long collaboration that would highlight the success of LAUSD discipline interventions and identify additional opportunities to continue to reduce and eliminate disparities. (For more on the PASSAGE initiative, please see the preface of this issue.)

This was a complex opportunity for CADRE, as a community-based organizing institution, particularly as one that organizes parents. Would we have to roll back our focus on race, and specifically on the persistent disparities experienced by African American children? Our work over fourteen years had already shown us the extreme political discomfort and recalcitrance within LAUSD in matters affecting African American students. Would parents – African American parents in particular – be respected at the table as equal partners, when they are often the first to be blamed, and often demonized, for the community’s challenges at large? Would our organizing allies join us at the table? Many of them were demanding additional reforms, and many might not have the capacity or have made the political choice to monitor implementation of our shared policy victories. Would LAUSD refuse to work with us because of our track record of persistent monitoring and holding its feet to the fire? Would our community organizing values be compromised in working with the district, school sites, teachers, and even service nonprofits that provide valuable student supports yet depend on service contracts from school administrators? Would the truths that we learned make everyone too uncomfortable?

## THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

We realized in the planning stages of PASSAGE that we would need a sophisticated new capacity – to convene multiple stakeholder groups and generate the conditions for courageous collaboration to end racial discipline disparities. This meant trying to replicate how we built bold, shared interests among our South Los Angeles parent leaders over many years, adapting our model to build shared interests between a much broader range of stakeholders and power holders. It also meant that we had to let go of a few things and identify new ideas and strategies for addressing a persistent problem.

We also understood that we had to build a movement grounded in the School Climate Bill of Rights and other previous campaigns that would go beyond compliance and numbers to create new experiences, new stories, and new possibilities for students. Demanding change would have to be nimble enough to both hold ground and model the courageous reflection and dialogue from CADRE staff and parent leaders, which we now expected from educators and administrators. We framed this project and our role in it as an opportunity to “meet the moment” – to confront persistent racial disparities, inspiring the project name #MeetTheMoment.

An approach to taking collaborative action known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provided a framework for moving forward.<sup>1</sup> AI uses data, stories, case studies, and different levels of participant dialogue to prompt questions that bring out analysis of root causes, diverse perspectives, and self-reflection in order to uncover biases, assumptions, beliefs we may be holding onto, and responsibility we may not be taking. Most importantly, this inquiry is intended to create opportunity to

re-frame how we see situations and our response to them, often leading to recognition of strengths and humanity versus deficits and judgment. AI has been used to train educators to shift classroom culture and set and teach to high expectations. Exploring the complex and provocative topics that lie at the heart of discipline disparities clearly needs this kind of rigor and persistent practice.

In five sessions from February to May 2015, we convened nearly forty community- and school-based stakeholders, including parents, students, organizers, advocates, educators, school operators, and a district administrator in a dynamic, groundbreaking process of self-exploration, discovery, and dreaming to ensure more racially just, culturally respectful, and healthy schools for all students. We sought to identify bold and courageous actions and strategies for fundamentally transforming school climate in South Los Angeles.

The first session offered a data-based orientation to the historical roots of discipline disparities and an introduction to AI. The second addressed the inescapable but difficult-to-discuss role of implicit bias, which led to a deepened inquiry of the root causes and community impact of race- and gender-based discipline disparities.

The third session focused on storytelling – a vital part of the AI process that illuminates what participants experience when the system is not working well and when it is working at its best. We heard from a student who had been

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1 Appreciative Inquiry “is a method for studying and changing social systems (groups, organizations, communities) that advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus, does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur” (Bushe 2013).

pushed out of school and miraculously found an alternative, supportive learning environment; a Latina mother who had taken a stand and requested that a school *not* suspend an African American boy who allegedly had gotten into an altercation with her son; and two teachers at schools committed to restorative practices who shared the highs and lows of modeling that commitment in the face of peer resistance, isolation, and lack of resources. We also used stories to document the revelations, lessons learned, and appreciation for when the system of discipline is working at its best.

Perhaps the most revealing moment in our process was in the fourth convening, when we practiced applying these new lenses and considered the real-life story of Michael. It was an example of the human experience behind the data – what the numbers do not tell – and of how the way we frame a situation alters a life, often irreparably.

We were in small groups organized by stakeholder – parents, educators, and administrators. All three groups quickly realized that re-framing any number of details could have meant all the difference in a school’s disciplinary decision and its huge impact on a student’s life. Each group considered powerful questions:

*Where are there pivotal opportunities to reframe the actions taken by this stakeholder?*

*What actions could this stakeholder take to exhibit a shift from a “culture of discipline” to a “culture of dignity”?*

*What values and beliefs would be present in this school climate if there were a culture of dignity versus a culture of discipline?*

*In shifting towards a culture of dignity and striving towards the most ideal outcome, what decisions*

*can this stakeholder make that would serve as a best practice moving forward?*

The most pivotal question, the one that led to the most pause and introspection, was:

*What would this stakeholder need to let go of in order to embody those values and beliefs?*

It seemed difficult for everyone to answer, and the subtle habits of questioning the story’s details and blaming or defending another stakeholder still happened. Despite the three previous sessions of inquiry and re-framing, a high-stakes situation or example still tested the best of our intentions. Students in the process identified with Michael’s story and realized that they had similar experiences with different outcomes. Parents struggled with each other about whether or not the parent was to blame and Michael was wrong. Educators and administrators felt they needed more information and did not want to make presumptions about the PE teacher’s access to support or training.

But this is exactly why AI is valuable. It presents an opportunity, especially for parent- and student-led organizing groups, to level a playing field that often does not even let us in. We are often resigned to collecting story after story like that of Michael and his mother from our parent and youth members, when it is too late to ask questions or re-frame or see the root cause of Michael’s reaction to his teacher. We often have little recourse but a legal one, which does not guarantee resolution or reparation in the least bit, given the power differential between school staff and students and parents.

AI builds our capacity to link these stories to data and aggregate them to a collective problem that requires a collective solution. It equips parents and

students, especially, with the practice of asking questions in order to identify beliefs and assumptions that cause the reactions and decisions which might decide a child's life. It gives parents ways to enter into difficult conversations with other adults on campus and position themselves as change agents and leaders, where everyone's perspective can add rigor to the analysis of the problem and the solution.

Our fifth and final session featured the personal story of a high school dean-turned-principal who transformed from a die-hard believer in punitive school discipline to an inspired champion of positive behavior support and restorative practices, an administrator who now does whatever it takes to prevent a student from going into the juvenile justice system, even in situations that lead most to overreact. He described how he had to let go of his guilt over the instances in which his punitive approach did not work, because this guilt often manifests itself as justification to continue doing the same thing regardless of the results. In fact, a key part of his transformation was no longer seeing school-wide positive behavior support as a central office mandate that he had to implement, but rather as part of his core practice as an assistant principal and then a first-time principal. The result? In his first year as a first-time principal at a racially diverse school of 1,400 students, suspensions plummeted from 89 to 3.

For many of us, this principal's personal transformation story was AI in practice, whether he called it AI or not. And while his suspension numbers are certainly impressive, what are more so are the practices that generate those low numbers. His story demonstrated how discipline disparities are best addressed in schools through intrinsic motivation, recognition that relationships matter, paying attention to student connectedness and belonging, and interrupting cycles of negative

feedback towards students of color.

In bringing #MeetTheMoment to a close, we focused on fostering that intrinsic motivation that sometimes only rigorous self-inquiry can generate. As we reflected on what we had learned or believe to be true about discipline disparities, we asked ourselves the following questions:

*What contribution can you make towards the elimination of discipline disparities in South Los Angeles schools?*

*Where do you have the discretion and freedom to act without more resources or authority, and what can you do?*

*What do you need to let go of in order to face the obstacles and act anyway?*

## NOW WHAT?

In truth, there is no real end to #MeetTheMoment. No matter what the suspension numbers say, discipline disparities run deep, especially those based on race and gender. Faithful, respectful, courageous implementation of the policies we have won, along with a culture of dignity in our schools, will only be possible if we find yet another new north star – the elimination of race-based discipline disparities and the biased practices that drive them.

Appreciative Inquiry and the habits of self-reflection and collective spirit help us liberate our minds and hearts from thinking in the status quo, translate personal stories into systemic change possibilities, and take responsibility for creating transformative alternatives. AI has provided a broader framework that encompasses and embraces the practices that CADRE has always used to carve out a groundbreaking political role for grassroots parents in this struggle: storytelling, truth seeking, and using our values to discern what

is strategic, possible, and purposeful in the long term. The struggle remains open-ended and generated by those who participate in it.

We leave you with our key takeaways as we move forward:

**Unearth the deeper barriers to eradicating discipline disparities.**

Pressing social conditions coincide with and impact spikes in school discipline. Mental representations of stigmatized groups often contribute to contemporary racial bias, inequality, and disparities in discipline practices. Race-based biases impact increased levels of irritation and resulting punishments. Authority and power dynamics impede relationship-building with students.

**Surface imperatives and look for new opportunities to reduce discipline disparities.**

Disparities in suspension rates by race, English learner status, and disability start as early as pre-school and increase exponentially in secondary school. Across all educational levels, African American boys and girls experience the highest rates of discipline disparities – the rates of disciplinary actions against African American girls are higher than the rates for boys in all other ethnic groups, excluding African American boys. Embracing a culture of dignity, instead of a culture of discipline, can help to foster positive and healthy school climates for all students.

**Build the political will for a sustained movement to achieve a long-term vision.**

The AI approach is a strategy to foster relationship-building between systems leaders and community advocacy groups. Continuing to deepen relationships among teachers, administrators, students, and parents will build critical mass to ensure a more fortified movement behind implementation of new school discipline policies. Intersections with other social issues

are opportunities to develop new movement allies.

To quote our colleagues in the Research to Practice Collaborative, “you can’t fix what you don’t look at” (Carter et al. 2014). We can compel compliance and forced implementation of positive behavior support, restorative practices, school police training, or diversion programs at schools. We can even celebrate major changes in the data. But unless we dig deep and look underneath the surface, our myriad policies, trainings, and public declarations of ending the school-to-prison pipeline will be, in the words of Angela Davis, “the difference that makes no difference, the change that makes no change” (Younge 2015).

*For more on CADRE’s work in South Los Angeles, see <http://www.cadre-la.org/>.*

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## Breaking the Cycle of Inequitable School Discipline through Community and Civic Collaboration in Nashville

TONY MAJORS AND TOM WARD

*In Nashville, the school district has partnered with law enforcement, juvenile justice, community organizations, parents, and students in efforts to tackle inequitable disciplinary practices.*

**E**ven now, Sarah, an African American parent, finds it hard to be in the school without it causing her significant angst. There are few recollections of school that make her smile. When she receives an invitation to see her child perform in a school concert, she freezes at the very thought of being back in the school building.

*Tom Ward is the president and CEO of the Oasis Center in Nashville, Tennessee. Tony Majors is the chief support services officer for Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools.*

On the day the phone call from the school came, Sarah was reluctant to even answer. The caller ID told her who was on the other end. Resisting the urge to be unavailable, Sarah grabbed the receiver and in her shy voice said hello.

“Ms. Jones, this is Mrs. Richardson, the assistant principal. I am calling to tell you what happened at school today.” Sarah was not surprised at what came next. She had gotten these calls before. Mrs. Richardson went on to say that she would need to come pick up her son, and he would need to stay home for ten days.

When Sarah arrived at school, she learned that there had been a fight between her son and another child. The other boy had been given a reprimand and sent back to class. His mother had been there for the investigation. Since her son was considered the aggressor, he was to go home. The other child was only defending himself, the assistant principal said. He was merely guilty of not exercising restraint.

When Sarah asked questions as to the details of the altercation, most of the answers were short and absent of significant detail. What was apparent was that the decision had been made and she was not going to play a role in the resolution of the situation. Her son was once again the villain, and she would not know how to help him feel any sense of fairness with regard to how he was treated. Any chance she had of helping him take responsibility for his actions was lost. The fact that the other child was White and had his mother present for the interrogation confirmed for her what she experienced over her years of schooling.

Sarah’s story is all too familiar. Her kind of experience represents a trauma that has etched itself into her memory and made her unable to see school as a viable partner. In her own education,

she viewed school as a place that made demands and created expectations that required nothing more than compliance. In short, the school did things to her and not with her. And in her eyes, this narrative had simply continued with her own son.

In the last ten years, Nashville has grown as fast as any city in America. We are no longer a “small,” sleepy, Southern town known solely for its country music, hospitality, and Southern cooking. We have become a thriving urban center, home to nearly 150 language groups and residents from 120 different countries. Data from the 2014 U.S. census show that 78 percent of Nashville residents identify themselves as White, 15 percent Black, 4 percent other, and 2 percent Asian. In contrast, the school system’s demographics do not align with the city’s census data: 43 percent of students are Black, 31 percent White, 21 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent Asian. Nashville is one of the few urban school systems that is still seeing annual student enrollment growth. The complexion and complexity of our community has changed significantly, revealing that our community issues – right down to our school discipline data – now compare with those of larger cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. In the 2014-2015 school year, African American students represented only 43 percent of enrolled students but accounted for 63 percent of all discipline incidents, 70 percent of out of school suspensions, and 77 percent of all expulsions. As the school system continues to improve the academic performance of schools, it has become clear that disproportionate disciplinary practices negatively impact student and school performance.

When the school system was asked by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University to take part in its Positive and Safe Schools

Advancing Greater Equity (PASSAGE) initiative (for more on the initiative, please see the preface of this issue), it wasn't easy for us to acknowledge that our Southern heritage coupled with our city's recent growth has compounded long fostered racial inequities. However, we recognized that we were being given the incredible opportunity to honestly dig into our data and truly challenge the dominant paradigms on racial disparities and their long-term effects in our schools and the community. While the Metro Nashville Public School system (MNPS) had previously invested in and developed many initiatives designed to address the conditions of learning for all students, the issue of disproportionate disciplinary practices present in our district had yet to be formally addressed.

Through PASSAGE, we convened a variety of public school stakeholders who sought to address this problem through a collaborative approach. The group includes representatives from the district (Tony Majors, a co-author of this piece), community organizations (Tom Ward, the other co-author of this piece), law enforcement, and juvenile justice, as well as principals, teachers, and students.

Together our goal is to create a learner-centered environment in which careful attention is paid to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs of all stakeholders in our schools. This approach explicitly acknowledges that all the voices of the affected parties are essential to (1) understand and embrace the complexity of the issue of discipline disparity, and (2) create corresponding interventions that address the experiences of each stakeholder. This requires that no issue be defined and no approach designed without intensive conversation or investigation. To be "learner-centered" is to acknowledge and then build on the concepts and cultural knowledge that each participant's unique perspec-

tive brings to the environment. We believe that true synergy occurs when value and attention are collectively given to the power derived from having all voices involved. It is only through this collective, inclusive approach that we can ensure that stories like Sarah's and her son's disappear and that each child's school experience is positive and enriching.

## HOW PASSAGE WORKS IN NASHVILLE: A MULTI- STAKEHOLDER EFFORT

From the beginning, it was determined that the PASSAGE work in Nashville would not portray the school system and school administrators as villains, and we would not allow our work to be viewed as validation of racist practices in our city. Instead, we would engage a broader network to bring awareness and strategic approach to address the issue of disciplinary practices. As we developed our approach, we agreed on a few core values and principles:

*We would have open and honest conversation.*

*We would not sacrifice the safety and security of our students and schools.*

*We would not hide the truth; our data was ours and we had to own it.*

*PASSAGE was not just about disciplinary practices but about how we view and treat all youth.*

*There would be no self-serving members of our committee that sought to advance their own agenda.*

With our core values and leadership in place, we crafted a two-tiered system of partners to guide the work of PASSAGE Nashville:

**Tier 1:** We developed a steering committee to serve as the leadership team. To support the belief that our work was both a school and commu-

nity responsibility, we (Tom Ward and Tony Majors) served as co-chairs. The steering committee consisted of representatives from nonprofits, the state Department of Education, law enforcement, the Department of Children’s Services, and the school system, as well as principals, elected officials, and the Juvenile Court judge. These people were not only representing their organizations; they were people with community leverage who were not just there because of their titles. In addition to the members of the steering committee, we added an assistant’s position to document and record our efforts and a data analyst currently working for the school system to compile all data reports and monitor the impact of our work.

**Tier 2:** The steering committee members were then tasked with co-chairing and developing subcommittees that addressed the issues we faced. Each subcommittee was comprised of ten to fifteen members meeting similar criteria as the steering committee. Diverse and inclusive voice was essential.

The subcommittees and their perspectives were:

#### **Student/parent voice and efficacy**

Engaging students and parents in the work of PASSAGE is essential. Listening to their voice and then positioning them to participate in their schools in an authentic and sustained way are at the heart of this subcommittee’s work.

#### **District policy and procedures (re-writing the student handbook)**

Policy is the overarching tool that, when crafted correctly, can set the tone for a school system of youth development that holds students responsible in a restorative and productive manner. It can provide the assurance that the safety of all participants is the highest priority. Setting an inclusive and developmental tone is imperative.

#### **Law enforcement and criminal justice**

The legal systems must understand and partner with the schools to create a seamless philosophy based on a developmental and restorative approach. The series of actions and consequences that occur when students interact with law enforcement officers and court officials can reinforce either positive or negative attitudes about authority figures. They can also determine the trajectory of a child’s life as evidenced in the school-to-prison pipeline. Designing and training all legal representatives, particularly school resource officers, provides a strong opportunity to shape a better relationship for future encounters.

#### **Community engagement**

Engaging the voices of all constituencies in our community will create the range of support and expertise necessary for true reform in our system, reform that is truly focused on the development potential found in our young people. By aligning agency resources to provide wraparound services to families, we can reinvigorate our most underserved communities. After all, getting our children prepared to start school and ready to compete at a high academic level is the responsibility of our community at large.

#### **Social-emotional learning**

School cannot only be about intellectual development. It must be about the development of social and emotional attributes that prepare an individual to live and function in the mainstream of our society. Isolation from resources and opportunity denies students the ability to understand how the larger community works. Attention to these developmental aspects of the whole child during formal education can remove barriers that limit growth and positive opportunities.

The steering committee worked collaboratively to identify key community and school stakeholders to serve

on each subcommittee, but each subcommittee co-chair was given the autonomy to develop the strategies that would be the most beneficial for their group's work. From there, a distinctive feature of our approach in Nashville emerged in that we didn't restrict participation in PASSAGE to steering committee and subcommittee members. Instead, a series of community forums were held over the course of the school year. Parents, students, community members, and school personnel were able to participate together in order to view the district's discipline data, learn more about PASSAGE and the approach being taken in Nashville, and provide meaningful feedback to help inform our efforts.

At each community forum a set of prompts was used to engage parents, students, and other participants in conversation:

*Please share your immediate thoughts on the data you've seen tonight.*

*What would you like to be different regarding the schools' discipline process?*

*How can parents and the community assist schools as part of the solution?*

Parents were disappointed by the data, but generally not surprised. They knew anecdotally that equity was an issue, particularly for children of color. They supported their opinion with stories that reflected uneven punishment, with numerous accounts of suspension for one child and verbal reprimand for the other. Parents with influence were notified, while disadvantaged parents got no call – just a note and sometimes not even that. It was left to the child to inform the parent.

Respect was a common theme. Most parents felt that a place to begin would be better notification about what the rules and punishments were before

misbehavior occurred. Having a process in place that was applied equitably to all situations no matter who was involved, and being included in the investigation and the resolution, would treat parents as partners rather than adversaries. Inclusion and voice in determination and resolution were common reoccurring themes.

Each subcommittee identified what they felt needed to occur around their section of our work. For example, the district policy subcommittee discussed our district's discipline handbook, investigated handbooks from other cities, and eventually created a new student and parent handbook.

The law enforcement subcommittee discussed their treatment of youth in and outside of schools. Their intent was to create a more holistic model for legal intervention. A new model of selection for school resource officers (SROs) was discussed and a retraining of all selected officers was designed. Court intervention teams were created for first-time offenders, and social services were aligned for deployment.

The social-emotional learning subcommittee led the charge to determine how to bring the tenets of social-emotional learning and restorative practices deeper into our schools and community. They engaged the voices of students enrolled in MNPS's Alternative Learning Centers, which provide educational services for students who have been expelled, and participated in a site assessment to determine the culture and feel of various schools. These "school climate walk-throughs" served to document evidence of (1) serious gaps in the effectiveness of current practices; and (2) best practices occurring in some schools, which can become systemic in developing the whole student and supporting teachers who need new skills to deal with challenging situations.

At the three public forums held by the student-parent voice subcommittee and community engagement subcommittee, special groups were formed to capture youth voice. These sessions were a part of a carefully structured Youth Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR) project.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these groups, there were focused sessions at the middle schools and high schools that were most affected by the district's disciplinary policies. Overall, these voices provided multiple perspectives on current conditions in our schools and community. What they had to say greatly impacted our future course of action.

## TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES

It is important to acknowledge here that the journey has not been completely smooth or even without significant pushback. Getting people to the table in the beginning and keeping them there throughout the process was a challenge. Principals and community leaders alike identified lack of time as a hurdle to meeting or implementing the new products created by those subcommittee members who were willing and able to meet. Our decisions to proceed even when subcommittee member engagement was inconsistent or non-existent created a predictable response when implementation in the schools occurred: "I did not have input!" "You did not give me an opportunity to be involved!" These were phrases we heard particularly when the time came for the rollout of the new student and parent handbook. In the face of such comments, those of us who stayed the course moved forward believing that having a new .....

1 Participatory Action Research is a method of research in which participants impacted by the problem under study are involved in all stages of the research process, collaborating with one another and with researchers to develop the skills and knowledge essential for understanding and taking action on an issue.

model to refine was better – much better – than the status quo.

At times, public criticism and our tough student data made those of us at the table representing the district feel very defensive and ready to adopt a mantra of self-preservation. Many were resistant when pushed to provide training for mixed cohorts (parents, teachers, police, and school administrators) on restorative practice and social and emotional development. The difficulty in scheduling, the fear of what would be said, and, most of all, leaving the outcome to chance, were all at the root of why such training was deemed "not possible." The school system continued to schedule trainings without community participation, arguing that it was better than having no training at all. The impact of this lost opportunity to engage all stakeholders in training simultaneously is not completely known. In our conversations about such training, we never fully fleshed out what it meant to create the genuine synergy many of us felt was necessary in order to make our work a lasting effort rather than another quick fix. Our practical concerns of time and scheduling have thus far kept us from truly exploring deep-seated fears such as losing power or losing control of outcomes, which are often the first responses to the suggestion of a new paradigm.

## NEXT STEPS: RESPECT AND OPENNESS AS THE NEW NORM

Moving forward is the greatest challenge of the whole project. Exactly where do we go? How do we create and sustain authentic parent and community partnerships? Thus far, our work has succeeded because, even with pushback and occasional disengagement of involved members, many have participated in an open and nonjudgmental manner. People have respected and listened to those who see things

differently, especially those who have been ignored for so long. How do we make this the norm? What does our agenda look like moving ahead?

An initial framework with several key themes has emerged. We must let the data drive the journey, reviewing what experts have identified as successful, relying on the voices of those most effected to guide the design of desired outcomes and hold everyone responsible and accountable.

First, we will identify the cluster of schools that presents the greatest opportunity for improvement as reflected in the data on discipline, court activity, crime, and economic status. This cluster will establish the launch area for authentic parent/community involvement and will be used as a prototype for systematically rolling out the process to other clusters. The model will solicit very specific participation from parents most affected by disciplinary policies. The key to success here will be building genuine, sustained partnerships.

A system of restorative justice training including parents, teachers, high school students, and community leaders together will be designed and instituted for all school communities. The system will be a part of an ongoing structure that expects all stakeholders to participate and contribute to the continuous development of a culture that values all children. These trainings will be presented as an orientation to school life for first-time parents and parents new to the community. Schools and communities will be encouraged to work together to build consensus around what the educational and developmental journey should look like for each and every child.

Impatience, fear, and expediency are the enemies of this kind of work. What happens when we acknowledge that we have much to learn and that we must change? Perhaps the solution is “too hard” or “costs too much”? What happens if we determine that this is really a “values and beliefs” conversation?

It is our hope that we will go forward, with all stakeholders together continuing to listen, learn, train, and work in the collaborative, learner-centered spirit in which PASSAGE Nashville began. We will continue to push ourselves out of our comfort zones and create lasting, positive changes in our community and school system. We believe that only when we all acknowledge and participate in this effort will we find new and more successful ways to guide and develop all our children.

As we reflect on Sarah’s story, we realize she is all too typical of many parents who remember their own education as a traumatic journey, and now are facing the same issues with their children’s education. What will it take to erase the effects of these experiences so that she can advocate and participate fully as a partner in creating a different story for her child?

*For more on the Oasis Center’s work in Nashville, see <https://www.oasiscenter.org/>. For more on Metro Nashville Public Schools, see <http://www.mnps.org/>.*



## RESTORING HOPE: THE JUVENILE COURT AS A PARTNER IN REFORM

**Sheila Calloway**

*Sheila Calloway is Nashville-Davidson County's Juvenile Court judge.*

Working in the juvenile justice system for many years, I have seen a number of minority children coming in and out of the system. As a public defender in Juvenile Court, I represented a large number of Black children, boys especially, who were coming from the school system. Later, as a Juvenile Court magistrate, the trend did not change. In fact, there seemed to be more and more cases involving Black youth generated from schools.

Many times, as an advocate, I felt there was nothing I could do. As a public defender, I was stuck just trying to defend against a system of injustice the best way that I could. As a magistrate, I was stuck making decisions about guilt and innocence in cases that I felt had no reason to be in court. For many years, there was a feeling of hopelessness. That hopelessness was shared with the children who I defended and/or adjudicated. That hopelessness was felt in the families of the children who came to court. That hopelessness was felt from school authorities. There was a general sense of hopelessness about the fairness of the Juvenile Court system as a whole.

When I was elected as the Juvenile Court judge in September 2014, I was on a mission to bring a sense of fairness and hope back into the system. It sounded like an overwhelming task. Fortunately, the timing was perfect. Finally, the Metropolitan Nashville Public School system was ready to face reality. They were willing to be open and honest about the disparity in discipline practices throughout the district. They were willing to sit at the table with all those involved in the system to figure out a better way to educate students and maintain safe schools while not unfairly punishing a class of students. They were willing to work to bring back that hope in the school system and the justice system.

Together, we are working on making the necessary changes to the system. Together, we are working on changing the disciplinary rules. Together, we are training the school resource officers and the principals and teachers to understand the role of each entity. Together, we are training school resource officers and principals and court staff about which cases are inappropriate to bring to the juvenile justice system. Together, we are defining the role of the court system versus the role of the school system.

As we continue to work together on these efforts, I am confident that the discipline disparities in the school system will be eliminated. I am confident that the Juvenile Court system will only be used when there is a true compromise of safety within the school system. I am confident that the number of cases referred to the Juvenile Court system by the school system will be drastically decreased. I am confident that students will have an opportunity to continue learning within the walls of the school, and not in the juvenile detention center. I am confident that we together will restore hope in both the school system and the juvenile justice system.



## ACKNOWLEDGING THE GAP

**Tracy Bruno**

*Tracy Bruno is the principal at Isaac Litton Middle Prep in Nashville, Tennessee.*

Like many urban districts, Metro Nashville Public Schools has been fighting an uphill battle in regard to race and discipline. We have a very diverse population of students in our district, but not a very diverse set of data when it comes to discipline records. We put minority students out of class on a much larger scale than their counterparts. At Isaac Litton Middle Prep, our student population is about 48 percent African American, 43 percent Caucasian, 6 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian. A few years ago, I started to really think about the office referrals that came past my desk. Were there an inordinate number of African American students referred to the office? Were African American males making trips to the office at a greater clip than anyone else? The answer, as I feared, was yes.

As much as I like to think that our discipline plan takes out much of the human bias factor, at the end of the day teachers still make judgment calls about discipline. When a teacher is isolated in their classroom and refers a student to the office, they are doing so in a silo. It was my job to paint a broader picture of our discipline profile. I started to look at the longitudinal discipline data at our school. Yes, discipline incidents had decreased. Yes, there was more structure in the classrooms and during transition times. Yes, you could feel a calmer atmosphere when you walked into our building, but were we decreasing our discipline gap? No. I started to study the monthly in-school suspension (ISS) reports. While African American students made up 48 percent of our population, they were accountable for about 85 percent of the ISS instances.

I asked our ISS monitor and a teacher to present this information to the staff and to try and come up with some measures we could put in place to address the discipline gap. We started to institute morning meetings; we started to bring students together who had non-violent conflicts so they could talk out their differences and come to a peaceful solution; and we started to listen more in the office. The administrators started to pull back on the urge to just send a child, regardless of race, to ISS or suspend them from school for an office referral. When students knew that a simple apology, conversation, or service to the school could replace massive amounts of lost class time, things started to change a bit. We still have a long way to go, but I feel like acknowledging the gap in discipline is the first step toward closing it.



## SEPARATING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE FROM CRIME IN PARTNERING WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

### J. Marlene Pardue

*J. Marlene Pardue is the commander of the West Police Precinct in the Metro Nashville Police Department in Tennessee.*

In the Nashville PASSAGE Law Enforcement Committee, we specifically addressed what changes were needed within the school resource officer (SRO) program. Over the course of our meetings, it became overwhelmingly clear that communication between the officers and the administrative staff of the school where they were assigned was going to be the key issue.

Surprisingly, while addressing disproportionate discipline was the guiding issue for our group, the topic rarely came up in our committee. This was not because we were afraid to address it, or because anyone was uncomfortable talking about the issue, but because there were other issues that seemed more compelling and in need of resolution. The majority of our discussions centered on the principal's expectations of the SRO as opposed to the requirements from the police department for the position. We realized that identifying discipline as something different than a criminal issue is essential for our schools and SROs to have a successful relationship. Understanding the responsibilities of both school staff and law enforcement will help to create a strong support system within our schools.

Listening to one of the experienced SROs on our committee talk about how engaged he is with his school, and the many occasions he receives calls from parents for help, even after a child is no longer in his school, was surprising to many committee members. As we talked about his role in his school, it became apparent that others on the committee did not have similar experiences with the officers in their schools. Officers, like principals, are a diverse group with different personalities, interests, and backgrounds. We realized how important it is to find a way to select officers who are the best fit for work in a daily school environment. Training these officers on how to be successful will be essential as we move forward in our process.



## Coming Together: Building Relationships and Navigating Conflict to Reduce Discipline Disparities

KAREN VAN AUSDAL, CARLIL PITTMAN, AND TREYONDA TOWNS

*Partners from Chicago Public Schools and local education organizing groups share their experiences with the PASSAGE initiative.*

**T**he PASSAGE (Positive and Safe Schools Advancing Greater Equity) initiative in Chicago brought together representatives from Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the parent organizing group COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues), and the youth education organizing group VOYCE (Voices of Youth in Chicago Education), facilitated by the

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. (For more on the initiative, please see the preface in this issue.) Over a two-year period, these three groups collaborated around the shared goal of identifying and eliminating identity-based discipline disparities in their city's schools. In this Q and A, we asked partners from each stakeholder group to reflect on the

*Karen Van Ausdal is the executive director of Chicago Public Schools' Office of Social and Emotional Learning. Carlil Pittman is a youth organizer with VOYCE (Voices of Youth in Chicago Education). Treyonda Towns is a parent leader with Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI).*

opportunities, challenges, and lessons learned from their participation in this initiative.

**Q Can you briefly share a bit about your organization? What are your major roles and responsibilities in your position at your organization?**

**A** *Treyonda Towns:* I am a parent leader with COFI's POWER-PAC group (Parents Organized to Win Educate and Renew-Policy Action Council), and a member of City Wide Leadership Council, the decision-making body of POWER-PAC. I am co-chair of POWER-PAC's Elementary Justice Campaign Committee as well as a co-facilitator and peacemaker at Wells High School. COFI's mission is to strengthen the power and voice of families by organizing primarily low-income parents of color.

*Karen Van Ausdal:* CPS is the third-largest school district in the United States, with more than 600 schools serving more than 400,000 children. CPS is committed to preparing students for college, career, and life, and as part of that mission we know that we must prepare students not only with the academic skills for success but also the social and emotional competencies. My role as executive director of social and emotional learning is to lead a team that supports schools in creating multi-layered supports for students' social and emotional growth. This work includes training and coaching in school and classroom climate development, social and emotional skills instruction, and behavioral health interventions.

*Carlil Pittman:* VOYCE is a multi-racial alliance convened by Communities United that is made up of youth from all over the city of Chicago. We build the leadership and power of young people from across the city to create change around issues of education and racial justice. VOYCE was founded in 2007, and we have

engaged more than 1,500 youth. VOYCE's core belief is that youth organizing and youth leadership development not only bring long-term change but also greatly impact individual youths' lives, transforming them into lifelong learners and effective agents of change. In the summer of 2013, VOYCE joined the Chicago Teacher's Union Quest Center and Alternatives, Inc., to form the Safe Schools Consortium (SSC). The SSC is an initiative that is working with four Chicago high schools to advance their leadership skills around restorative justice to create safe and supportive school climates.

I initially became involved in VOYCE as a youth leader, and my current position is youth organizer. VOYCE prides itself on creating a leadership pipeline, and I am now responsible for developing the next generation of young leaders.

**Q How did you and your organization get involved in work to reduce school discipline disparities? What perspective do you and your organization bring to this work?**

**A** *Treyonda Towns:* I got involved as a parent who was experiencing adverse treatment and challenges trying to register my daughters for one of Chicago's top-rated high schools. This was the final straw for me after experiencing several disturbing situations within CPS, including unjust suspensions and profiling of my oldest daughter. As a parent new to the CPS system, we were totally unaware of the discipline disparity there. Unbeknownst to me, there were many other parents experiencing the same type of systemic violations toward their children, who were tired of these foul and unjust discipline practices.

Many of those parents had come together at COFI to create the Elementary Justice Campaign. Parents had shared stories and had successfully

sought solutions. I joined the group, and through that work and that conversation, we were brought to the table with CPS's former CEO Michael Scott. He grabbed hold of our vision of alternative discipline practices within his schools.

This work is so important given that these personal experiences are backed up by data revealing that students of color are more likely to be recipients of exclusionary discipline. This shows us that our stories tie in to a larger problem, but it also shows us that we have allies. Having good data really helps us make our points and guide our work, but it is often incomplete, or the data available isn't the information we need. We hope that in the future the data will be broken down to include special needs/disability and gender identity.

Exclusionary discipline has also influenced the levels of violence perpetrated and experienced by young African Americans and Latinos. When a young person has been dehumanized and pushed out from the one place they should feel safe and productive, it incubates seeds of hopelessness, making the student very susceptible to more violence.

Our organization has a unique perspective on the work of discipline disparities because it comes from the parents. We have created parent-led Peace Centers as a solution to exclusionary discipline practices, and we have found allies within CPS to support this strategy. These safe spaces within the very environments that were once havens for negative and insensitive practices are now available for youth to practice conflict resolution, life, and relationship-building skills. The Peace Centers are also spaces available for the practice of restorative justice philosophies to be carried out. Because the Peace Centers are run by known parents from the community,

it allows a level of trust among youth and adults to develop more quickly than if they were run by an outside "professional" unfamiliar with the true personal dynamics of those communities. The parent peacemaker is more intimately familiar with the struggles and needs of the student than an outsider would be.

*Karen Van Ausdal:* CPS began the Suspensions and Expulsions Reduction Project (SERP) in February 2014 after a careful analysis of our discipline data revealed an overuse of out-of-school suspensions for low-level misbehaviors and a disproportionate use of suspensions for our African American students. This SERP built upon several years of work to move toward a restorative model of discipline and formalized these efforts into five workstreams: a revision of our Student Code of Conduct, community engagement around discipline reform, data transparency, professional development, and resource development. In my role as executive director of social and emotional learning, I see discipline as a means of teaching social and emotional competencies, both through the creation of systems and structures to foster a welcoming school climate as well as more explicit instruction in social and emotional skills through curricula and strategies such as talking or peace circles. We know that students cannot be successful if they are not present in our classrooms and that our classroom teaching cannot be successful if we don't build our students' social and emotional skills in tandem with their academic ones.

*Carlil Pittman:* When VOYCE was founded eight years ago, we chose to focus on creating safe and supportive school climates because that was the issue we felt had the highest need and importance for young people in Chicago. We found that many students in Chicago were being pushed out because of an overuse of exclusionary

discipline for minor discipline issues. Our findings would later be supported when the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights released data that pointed to huge racial disparities in Chicago and Illinois.<sup>1</sup>

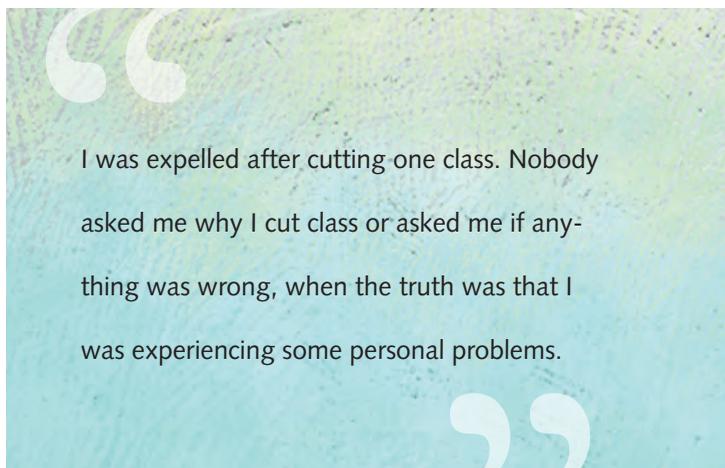
The issue was something I experienced firsthand. When I was a high school sophomore, I was expelled after cutting one class. Nobody asked me why I cut class or asked me if anything was wrong, when the truth was that I was experiencing some personal problems that led to me cutting class. My mother and I then had to search for a school that would take me in during the middle of the school year. By the time I found a new school, I had missed more than a semester of school. I beat the odds and graduated, but I had to attend evening, summer, and Saturday school for the rest of my high school career.

**Q** Many times, school districts and community organizers are, or are perceived to be, in conflict around issues of education reform and systems change. Can you give an example of when this has happened in your work? Why did the conflict exist? How did this look and feel from your and your organization's perspective?

**A** *Treyonda Towns:* Even though we have worked well in many ways with CPS administration, sometimes our work does engender conflict. At the beginning of our campaign, we were focusing on changing CPS's Student Code of Conduct (then called the Uniform Discipline Code), especially its written philosophy of "zero tolerance."

The administration paid lip service to many of our concerns at first. They changed the name of the manual because some parents found it confusing, thinking it was related to school .....

<sup>1</sup> For more details on CPS's data, see the report generated at the Civil Rights Data Collection website: <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&ceid=32906&csyk=6&cpid=736#>.



I was expelled after cutting one class. Nobody asked me why I cut class or asked me if anything was wrong, when the truth was that I was experiencing some personal problems.

uniforms. They struck the "zero tolerance" language from the Code's philosophy statement and replaced it with a philosophy of restorative justice. But there were not significant changes within schools on discipline practices. The administration did not fully understand that the number of suspensions and expulsions was the problem and that it was connected to the fact that drop-out/push-out rates were at an all-time high.

Another area of conflict with CPS administration was around the lack of communication between various agencies that influence schools in Chicago. As a solution to this, we began to call together town hall community meetings, which included aldermen, the state's Department of Children and Family Services, the city's Department of Families and Support Services, CPS and its Student Special Services, the Chicago Police Department, community agencies, and others. To our amazement, we discovered that none of these departments talked with each other or shared information. This finding was disappointing but exciting because now we had an opportunity for cross-pollination and collaboration within the system responsible for the education of our children.

*Karen Van Ausdal:* In early efforts for changes to our discipline policy within

the district, community organizers initially approached the district from an adversarial perspective. We have moved from a notion that community organizers must fight against us for change to a shared belief that we must partner together to see that change. I think that SERP has allowed us to come together in a manner that embraces a shared philosophical approach to discipline policy but also acknowledges a shared awareness of where continued change and growth is needed in our policy and practice. As we build this trust and partnership, we can bring our varied perspectives to bear for the benefit of our students. Now, rather than using examples of ineffective school discipline practices as a means of rallying against the district, we can come together to discuss, analyze, and, most importantly, put action plans into place to increase the supports for restorative discipline practices.

*Carlil Pittman:* In 2012, VOYCE also launched a campaign to have CPS revise their Student Code of Conduct (SCC). While CPS ultimately revised the SCC that year, they did not match the comprehensive recommendations VOYCE and youth leaders had proposed, despite our recommendations being backed by data and best practices from other districts. We then kept organizing with a focus on the issue. Two years later, CPS would once again revise the SCC, and with the most recent revisions CPS has come much further.

**Q** In the PASSAGE initiative, CPS is in an explicit partnership with COFI and VOYCE to reduce exclusionary discipline practices and race-based discipline disparities and create more restorative cultures in schools. What are some of the benefits of this partnership? What have been some of the major challenges?

**A** *Treyonda Towns:* One of the really important benefits from

partnering with CPS is that we have been able to bring together community groups, CPS, and parents and then to bring in the data, the recommendations, and so many examples of the horrible incidences families had been suffering throughout the city for years. To be here today after working collaboratively and on a vision born over ten years ago by parents from across the city is absolutely wonderful.

Many partnering organizations had concerns and recommendations on school discipline, but we knew there were not easy direct answers for the “hows” and “whys” about what was happening. The constant communication and phone calls were not getting results; however, the group being respectful and hearing each other out has been very fruitful.

We did not really experience tension with CPS as a part of the PASSAGE work – though at times it does feel as if CPS likes to adopt our recommendations without giving us the credit for supplying the blueprint. Still, we are happy they are headed in the right direction.

*Karen Van Ausdal:* I think one of the biggest benefits of the PASSAGE project has been simply allowing us the time to get to know one another as people and build relationships with one another within a structured environment. PASSAGE has also allowed us to recognize some shared goals and to analyze discipline data both district-wide and specific to the schools with whom COFI and VOYCE are working more closely. I think that because we have allowed this partnership to evolve over time it helped prevent conflict even if there is a continued tension between the ideal vision of our community partners and the pace of change within a large school district. However, I think we all recognize that tension and celebrate growth where it has taken place while

continuing to push together for continued progress.

*Carlil Pittman:* The most important benefits in having VOYCE work with CPS has been the exchanges of information, data, ideas, and lessons learned. Through PASSAGE, CPS has also worked with VOYCE to share data that was previously unavailable to the public. This has allowed VOYCE to better measure racial disparities in all of the schools we work in and further identify best practices as we push for even greater public reporting data.

While VOYCE and CPS have begun to identify and work on new initiatives to reduce racial disparities, challenges do exist. One of these challenges has been the turnover in leadership in CPS; there have been six CEOs since Arne Duncan left in 2008. However, by partnering with the Office of Social and Emotional Learning, we are better able to form a long-term sustainable relationship with CPS.

Another challenge is that many solutions that have been created in partnership with CPS are focused on creating interventions or practices for schools to adopt to reduce racial disparities. For VOYCE, however, in order to best address the issue of disparities, resource equity also needs to be addressed by CPS as a whole. Resource equity is important to us, as many of our CPS schools, especially those in poor communities of color, have very limited resources.

**Q** How has a racial equity lens influenced the partnership?

**A** *Treyonda Towns:* Racial equality is primary for us, as the parents we work with are mostly parents of color and Latino, and the youth most adversely affected by unhealthy discipline practices are children of color and Latino.

*Carlil Pittman:* The focus on racial disparities has allowed VOYCE to

build an additional partnership to expand a racial justice equity lens. The use of a racial equity lens has allowed both VOYCE and CPS to better form long-term and short-term goals. For example, CPS has shared more detailed data that includes measurements for racial disparities to better understand what schools have high rates of disparities. Long-term goals include partnering to create interventions to reduce the racial disparities that are informed by the data that is collected and analyzed.

*Karen Van Ausdal:* A racial equity lens has provided the backdrop for this partnership. As a group we have analyzed data around the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline both nationally and within CPS. We have begun to plan ways to provide targeted supports to schools to support this racial equity work in partnership with one another.

**Q** Moving forward, what do you see as one or two key things for school districts and community organizations to pay attention to when engaging in an inside/outside partnership with a racial equity focus?

**A** *Treyonda Towns:* School districts and organizations need to remember to include the voices of the parents. We have deep insight into what is working and what is not, and we understand our children better than anyone. We also need to understand that racial equity, which is at the root of this issue, takes all of us working together to resolve. All parties and stakeholders must be willing to admit our role in the problem and be willing to take action to resolve it together as one voice breaking the silence surrounding the issue of race.

*Karen Van Ausdal:* As districts and community organizations move forward with partnerships around racial equity, I think it is key that they begin with building personal relation-

ships across boundaries and then, from that solid base, develop some shared goals for a given partnership. From a place of trust, it is then possible to move forward on the substantive work of shifting policy and practice. Further, it is critical that multiple layers of both organizations are aware of and in support of the partnership so that any action plans that are developed have the support to be put into action by those partners. I think that the ability for districts and partners to practice the type of courageous conversations that they would hope to see within school buildings creates an important model for change.

*Carlil Pittman:* The inclusion of student voice is key. The partnerships that VOYCE has formed with CPS through PASSAGE and outside of PASSAGE have been informed by lessons learned and solutions crafted with young people's leadership and input.

The other key thing is creating a model or template for exchanging data and ideas. The district has rich data that can point to what is working and not working in reducing racial disparities in schools. Through this data exchange, districts and community-based groups can better engage in strategy and planning sessions to better create interventions with a strong racial equity focus.

Lastly, by creating a partnership with a racial equity focus one cannot divorce issues from one another. For example, for VOYCE, the disparities in resources are large. Resource equity is a racial equity issue.

*For more on VOYCE, see <http://voyceproject.org/>. For more on COFI, see <http://www.cofionline.org/>. For more on Chicago Public Schools, see <http://cps.edu>.*

## STATE-LEVEL VICTORIES IN ILLINOIS

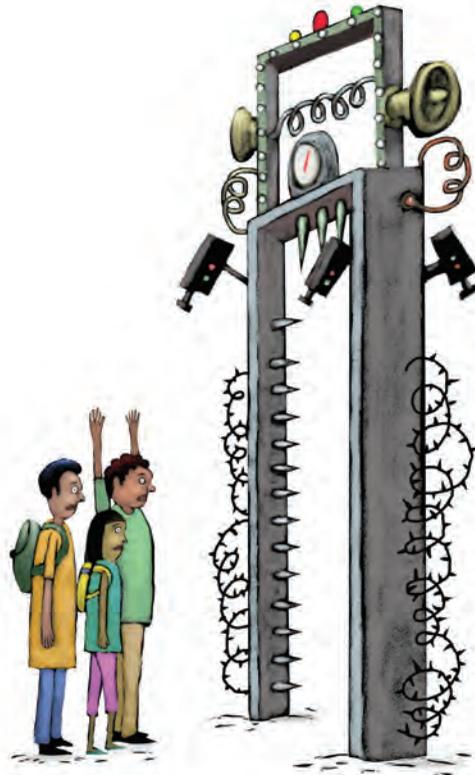
Over the past year, as a result of the ongoing efforts of youth and community advocates, Senate Bill 2793 was passed in the summer of 2014 and Senate Bill 100 was passed in May 2015.

SB 2793 will: 1) improve public understanding of school discipline issues by requiring the public recording of data across all publicly funded schools in Illinois on the use of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, removals to alternative settings, and student retention; and 2) require districts in the top 20 percent of use of exclusionary discipline and/or racial disparities to submit and report on improvement plans.

This is the first statewide policy change in the country that requires data transparency across all publicly funded schools, including traditional neighborhood schools, contract, and charter schools.

In August 2015, SB 100 was signed by Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner and will go into effect in September 2016. SB 100 will: 1) eliminate "zero tolerance" policies; 2) put tighter restrictions on the use of harsh disciplinary consequences; 3) ensure out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary referrals to alternative schools are only used for legitimate educational purposes; and 4) eliminate disciplinary fines and fees in any publicly funded school.

SB 100 is the strongest and most comprehensive effort ever made by a state to address the causes and consequences of the "school-to-prison pipeline." While schools in Illinois will continue to have broad discretion to maintain school safety, they will no longer be able to automatically require suspension or expulsion in response to particular student behaviors.



## “Pushed Out of School for Being Me”: New York City’s Struggle to Include Youth and Community Voices in School Discipline Reform

KESI FOSTER

*An education organizer in New York City argues that the lived experiences of students must be placed at the center of strategies aimed at ending systems of inequitable discipline policies.*

Every day in New York City, between 90,000 and 100,000 young people, almost all of them Black and Latina/o, must show up to school thirty to forty-five minutes before their first class begins. They are not showing up for a free breakfast program, and they are not showing up for extracurricular activities being held before first period. They show up early

because they attend schools with metal detectors and scanners. The process of getting through these controls can take thirty minutes on a good day – and on other days, well over an hour.

Pass a New York City public high school on a winter morning, and it’s not unusual to see a line that snakes outside of the doors and onto the sidewalks with young students shaking

*Kesi Foster is the coordinator at the Urban Youth Collaborative in New York City.*

in winter parkas, hats, scarves, and winter boots. Once inside, they are forced to remove their hats, belts, and boots, creating a puddle of mud and slush on the floor that they have to dodge on their way through the metal detectors.



Metal detectors, scanners, school safety agents – we feel criminalized just for going to school.

– Matthew Evans, UYC youth leader

Young Black girls are forced to remove the pins from their hair; some students have had umbrellas with points at the end confiscated; Snapple bottles must be tossed out like they're trying to smuggle liquids through TSA. Forget something in your pockets or book bag and you are brought to the side to get wanded down, or you could be sent to the back of the line and forced to do it all over again. In a recent Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) meeting, Future of Tomorrow youth leader Onyx Walker said, "We go through less security when we go testify at City Hall!"

School administrators and policymakers have accepted this scenario as part of Black and Latina/o youth's educational experiences. They refuse to acknowledge that this approach to school discipline is an extension of the criminalization of Black and Brown bodies perpetuated by a multitude of systems that young people must interact with every day. In 1998, responsibility for school "safety" was transferred from the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to the

New York Police Department (NYPD). During the Bloomberg administration, school discipline adopted a "broken windows" approach that brought the oppressive over-policing of Black and Latina/o youth in their communities into their schools.

At one point during the Bloomberg administration, suspensions had climbed to more than 70,000, and more than 1,000 students were arrested by school safety agents. These data were lifted up by district officials as proof that our schools were improving and becoming "safer." But students, parents, community members, educators, and administrators – realizing that our schools were pushing out Black, Latina/o, LGBTQ, non-gender-conforming students, and those with disabilities – fought for school policies that treated all children with dignity.

In the 2013-2014 school year, the data on suspensions and arrests helped to paint a picture of the depth of disparities between different populations of students in New York City. Black students represented 26 percent of the student population, but accounted for 53 percent of all students who were suspended and 61 percent of all students who were arrested in school. The lived experiences of the students that continue to be pushed out complete that picture. Black, Latina/o, LGBT, non-gender-conforming students, and students with disabilities are having a vastly different experience with school discipline than their cis-gendered White peers. One conversation I had with a student about how frightened he was to be in his Bronx high school's hallways without a pass sounded like he viewed school safety as an occupying force. NYPD officers circle his school, and seeing a police officer walking the halls in a bullet-proof vest is as normal as seeing a gym teacher in sweatpants.

## NEW SCHOOL DISCIPLINE INITIATIVE, NEW ADMINISTRATION: PROMISING BEGINNINGS AND ROADBLOCKS

It was against this backdrop that the Positive and Safe Schools Advancing Equity (PASSAGE) initiative in New York City was created (for more on PASSAGE, see the preface in this issue). Community organizers, advocates, and the DOE came together as part of this initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) to develop reforms that would transform our public education systems' approach to school discipline. All of the stakeholders at the table – those representing community organizations and those representing the district – felt a deep urgency to begin to shift New York City's approach to school discipline. But no one had more at stake than the youth at the table. As UYC youth leader Matthew Evans remarked at a City Council hearing, "Metal detectors, scanners, school safety agents – we feel criminalized just for going to school." Then he posed a challenge to the City Council: "You can either support the school-to-prison pipeline, or you can end it. The choice is yours." This challenge should have guided every step that all the partners in the PASSAGE collaboration took.

Youth leaders in UYC (my organization) and other youth leaders throughout the city have been involved in a struggle to end the criminalization of Black and Latina/o youth in schools for years, and they had begun to shift policies and policymakers. In 2013, through a relentless campaign led by students and parents from Black and Latina/o communities, Bill de Blasio

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1 For more on this campaign in the 2013 mayoral campaign, see VUE no. 39, *The Education Election: Community Organizing to Envision and Advance a Progressive Education Agenda*, available at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/39>.

ran for mayor on an education platform that identified reforming school discipline as a priority.<sup>1</sup> As the public advocate, a non-voting member of the City Council who acts as ombudsman between the mayor and the public, he co-authored a letter with UYC, calling on then-mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott to reconsider the use of suspensions for minor infractions and to expand schools' capacity to use positive interventions and restorative justice and to provide social, emotional, and mental health supports for students.

When de Blasio won the election, this letter served as an edict from the highest level of government that school discipline had to change. The broad goals were clear, and support seemed to be in place. But as PASSAGE developed and evolved, it became less and less clear how the partners were going to collaboratively reach our goals.

When the PASSAGE initiative began, I was the coordinator for community organizing and engagement at AISR (I took my position at UYC midway through the project). My role was to help provide technical assistance to the district and community partners. Coming into this project, AISR was aware that they were not setting up the first conversations or formal partnerships on this issue among stakeholders. There was already a strong coalition of community partners, anchored by the Dignity in Schools Campaign of New York (DSC-NY), which includes community organizations led by students, parents, educators, legal organizations, and civil rights organizations.

The DOE's Office of School Safety and Youth Development had been engaging with many of these partners for years, but that engagement had been fraught with tension and distrust. Under former mayor Bloomberg's administration, community engagement was not a

priority, and major policy changes were imposed on communities with little input or collaboration. The Bloomberg administration often seemed to expect the community to silently acquiesce to any changes – when community members were defiant and loudly protested and challenged reforms that negatively impacted their lives, their concerns often fell on deaf ears. Despite the obstacles to playing an active role in shaping their school communities, students, parents, and educators were piloting positive discipline initiatives in schools from the Bronx to Brooklyn. At times, initiatives were supported by the DOE, both logistically and financially, and other times, school communities implemented positive discipline programs without support and resources. Advocates were hopeful that the new de Blasio administration would be more open to incorporating input from youth and community members.

Our first PASSAGE meetings held much promise. Partners discussed intentionally connecting the city’s major Community Schools initiative to restorative practice training and resources to support positive school discipline in their transformation process. We shared strategies to facilitate the sharing of best practices among schools, educators, and administrators. Communications tools were created to help foster a clear understanding of restorative practices, and we zeroed in on a pilot initiative that would bring funding and support for a whole-school culture transformation approach for twenty schools.

As the initiative progressed, however, the questions that the DOE was not willing to address – questions around funding and the major policy changes that youth and other advocates were pushing for – became more and more integral to the work the initiative was set up to accomplish. Instead of creating a unified approach to engaging

with stakeholders not at the table, particularly the unions representing teachers and principals, the community partners and the district individually engaged with the unions. Without a shared approach to address the concerns about policy changes posed by the unions, and with no transparency surrounding conversations that were happening outside of PASSAGE, historical roadblocks remained in place. Youth organizers were fighting to change the system on multiple fronts, and the collaboration had failed to create an alliance that they could trust. PASSAGE was trying to build a roadmap for schools to use positive alternatives to exclusionary discipline, alternatives that were grounded in deep communication, repairing relationships, addressing the needs of all community members, collectively holding each other responsible for creating a safe and supportive environment, and using discipline as a means to learn, not to punish.

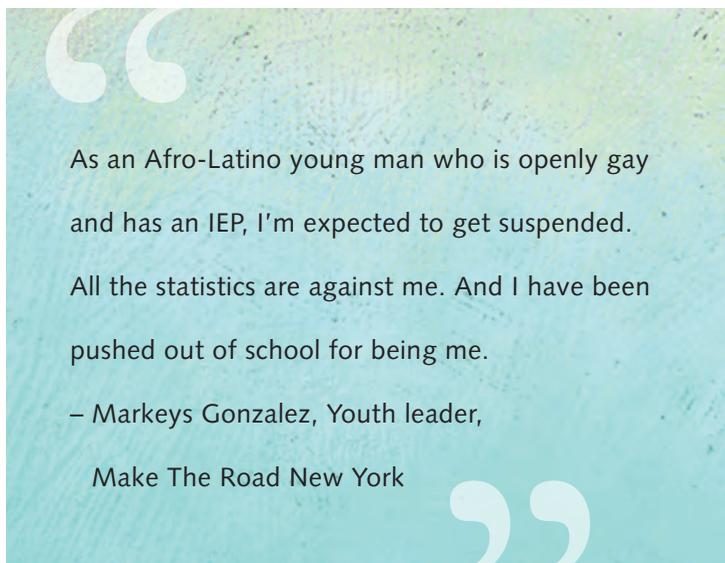
Internally, the collaboration never reflected these principles. It felt like district partners struggled to prioritize the experiences that young Black and Latina/o students brought to the table that showed how they were being oppressed by our approach to school discipline. Youth leaders identified the use of suspensions for minor infractions as creating an environment that made them feel discriminated against and targeted. The DOE had previously reclassified certain behavior, such as wearing a hat in school or talking back to a teacher, so students could no longer be suspended for such minor infractions. But students observed that school-based staff continued to suspend for these incidents – they were just reclassified under Infraction B21, “defying authority,” which was still a suspendable offense. To have a fair school discipline system, students identified eliminating suspensions for B21 as a key policy reform.

Make The Road New York youth leader Markeys Gonzalez, who was active in the PASSAGE collaboration, once described his experience with school discipline policies:

As an Afro-Latino young man who is openly gay and has an IEP, I'm expected to get suspended. All the statistics are against me. And I have been pushed out of school for being me.

Markeys's experiences, knowledge, and expertise should have driven our solutions. But to view Markeys as a change agent, those in positions of power would have to confront the bureaucratic forces that still view him as a statistic, and they never engaged in that struggle to see and embrace him for who he is as a young man. Markeys knew he wasn't alone in his struggle. He knew that there were thousands of other students who also felt targeted. In a district with 1.1-million students and more than 1,700 schools, it would take a willingness to change major policies, significant investments in resources, and a comprehensive long-term strategy for replacing the trauma described by our youth with positive discipline practices.

The change in the administration had so far not substantially altered the DOE's fundamentally transactional approach to community engagement, creating barriers in our collaboration that proved impossible to knock down. Efforts to get the DOE to open up, provide access to data around school discipline issues, and engage outside stakeholders were not successful. Initiative partners were able to identify shared goals, but we could not collectively build a shared vision, shared language, or consensus regarding best solutions, and community organizations felt that the DOE did not always appreciate the expertise and knowledge that everyone brought to the table.



### LIMITED RESOURCES, COMPETING PRIORITIES

In 2013-2014, the DOE allocated approximately \$600,000 to support restorative practice training for school-based teams. But to change how school discipline was playing out, there had to be a more comprehensive approach than a few trainings – an approach that would make school-based staff feel supported and that would value students and parents as change agents. Community partners like the UYC had been advocating for a whole-school approach to transforming school climate, an approach that built a school's capacity for embedding restorative practices in their school culture by training staff, providing ongoing support, and utilizing the expertise of youth and parents.

Before the 2014-2015 school year, there had been about 100 schools that had received some form of training in restorative practices, either through the DOE or by using their school funding to bring in external partners to provide training. However, schools that were committed to bringing on restorative justice coordinators were often taking from one successful program to support their own school climate efforts. Other schools had a hard time

identifying staff, often already stretched thin, to help lead their efforts. And schools that were sending school-based teams to receive Tier I training in restorative practices were finding it difficult to apply what they learned in training without ongoing support. Experience told all the partners at the table – students, parents, educators, and administrators – that schools needed sustained funding and resources for changes to take hold, but it was unclear if the DOE would provide the funding that was needed to make a more comprehensive vision a reality.

Another challenge was that our initiative emerged just as the de Blasio administration began to build out their plans for improving schools. Their framework and plans were a drastic shift from the ideological approach of the previous administration. Universal pre-K was the signature initiative of our new mayor’s education platform, and the DOE was responsible for creating 50,000 new seats for pre-K in a matter of months. The Community Schools initiative grew from 42 schools to more than 140 schools and was given a three-year deadline to improve schools that had struggled to provide high-quality educational opportunities for decades.

To launch these ambitious initiatives – the public priorities of our new mayor – it was going to take a massive effort from the staff at the DOE, and it would mean prioritizing funding to help these efforts get off the ground. Though universal pre-K and Community Schools have great potential to provide better educational opportunities for Black and Latina/o students, these initiatives had begun to completely overshadow the need to eliminate the racial inequities in school discipline. As the internal infrastructure was being built to support the administration’s signature initiatives, the conversations happening in PASSAGE about discipline disparities seemed to

be siloed from what was happening in other places. We still had no clear answers about funding, a revised school discipline code had been delayed for months, and community partners continued to hear from the DOE that some did not agree with UYC’s position on the reforms that were needed.

### STEPS FORWARD: AN “INSIDE/ OUTSIDE” APPROACH TO COMMUNITY VOICE IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES

In February 2015, the mayor, with a strong and steady push by advocates, named a Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline that included many of the community partners in the PASSAGE initiative, including youth, parents, educators, and legal advocates, as well as the DOE, the NYPD, the unions, and a cross-section of city agency partners, additional advocates, and community organizations. Solutions that emerged in the PASSAGE initiative, many of which community partners had been advocating for years, were now being discussed at a larger table. For community partners this brought up a new set of questions and challenges. Particularly, what did this mean for the work that we were hoping to complete during the PASSAGE initiative? Despite all the challenges, the PASSAGE work had led us to identifying a pilot initiative that felt essential to building out a comprehensive long-term strategy.

Once the Leadership Team meetings began, many of the community partners and the district leadership partners were joined in the same working subgroup. The pilot initiative that we developed in PASSAGE was introduced in the subgroup and evolved to include more mental health services. How this would all be funded became one of the main questions for the Leadership Team. As the budget negotiations for the city’s fiscal year

began to wind down, there was still no commitment for restorative practices in the DOE's budget. The Leadership Team did not guarantee that funding for restorative practices would be prioritized.

Outside of the Leadership Team, UYC and DSC-NY continued their organizing and advocacy to ensure that the city understood school discipline as a systemic racial inequity issue. In May 2015, the City Council allocated \$2.4 million for fifteen schools to use a whole-schools approach to school culture and climate transformation. PASSAGE and the Leadership Team have made engagement a priority. We were able to secure the funding we needed because organizing and advocacy outside of formal structures remained a priority for community partners.

Prior to the Leadership Team coming together, the DOE finalized revisions to the discipline code that shortened the length of suspensions for horseplay to 1 to 5 days (from 6 to 180 days). The new discipline code also required principals to get authorization from the DOE before they could suspend a student for Infraction B21 (defying authority). Our youth leaders had been fighting for the elimination of the use of suspensions for B21, because it is impossible to significantly reduce racial disparities without ending ambiguous policies that lend themselves to individual and structural biases playing out.

The creation of PASSAGE and the Leadership Team has not guaranteed a shared consensus of the transformational policy changes we need, but it has opened up the space to have those conversations and move in that direction. In its next phase, the Leadership Team is committed to continuing to revise the discipline code and will also address the Memorandum of Understanding, the legal agreement defining the role of police in schools – an agreement that expired more

than ten years ago and has never been renewed.

## TOWARD A SAFE, HEALTHY, AND SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

We understand that policy changes do not mark the end of our struggle. Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline means taking apart the system, brick by brick, to abolish the structural inequities that have produced racially unjust policies and practices. It means addressing funding, standardized testing, curriculum, school control, and much more. Policy changes are a mechanism for forcing a slow, bureaucratic machine to move with more haste and urgency.

When students say that their schools feel like prisons, all stakeholders need to listen to them and figure out what it will take to shift the paradigm. We must listen to students like Onyx Walker, Matthew Evans, and Markeys Gonzalez when they describe the impact that the heavily policed climate and biased application of suspensions in their schools have on them. Removing metal detectors, scanners, and police may not be able to happen overnight. But stakeholders committed to a healthy and supportive learning environment must accept that this will never happen in Black and Latina/o schools if we don't remove all elements of a police state inside and around our schools. If we choose to end this unhealthy and unproductive approach to school discipline, the lessons we learned from PASSAGE will help build a stronger community and district partnership to provide our students with an environment conducive to learning where they are treated with dignity and respect.

*For more on the Urban Youth Collaborative, see <http://www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org/>.*



## Lifting Up Our Kings: Developing Black Males in a Positive and Safe Space

CHRIS CHATMON AND RICHARD GRAY

*An innovative program in California's Oakland School District focuses on changing the narrative about young African American males in order to radically change the outcome of their lives.*

**P**ositive, as opposed to punitive, discipline in public schools requires an environment that supports student and school staff capacity to restore, repair, and support relationships; build trust; hold individuals and groups accountable; and build the skills of students and school staff to make effective behavior and actions choices.

This shift in mindset can only take place when there is a change in school culture – the attitudes, customs, and beliefs in schools that often shape, impact, and even trump school codes,

rules, and policies. African American males are three times more likely than their White male counterparts to be suspended or expelled in public schools. Changing these odds requires not only addressing disparities in discipline practices, but also lifting up a new narrative of hope, possibility, and brilliance so that young Black men can see and realize their potential.

In 2010, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) Superintendent Tony Smith, Oakland's Board of Education, the Urban Strategies Council, and the East Bay Community Foundation

*Chris Chatmon is the director of Oakland Unified School District's Office of African American Male Achievement. Richard Gray is the director of Community Organizing & Engagement at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.*

concluded that past efforts to improve the educational experiences and supports of African American male students in OUSD had changed little for this student population. They determined that real change would require a culture-shifting commitment by the school system. To institutionalize this commitment, OUSD launched the Office of African American Male Achievement (OAAMA), a bold project created to fundamentally improve academic and life outcomes for African American male students in Oakland, making OUSD the first district in the United States to create a department specifically to address the needs of African American male students.

Grounded in principles of reconciliation, love, healing, and identity, OAAMA Director Chris Chatmon and his colleagues have courageously and creatively cultivated new forms of interactions, relationships, rituals, and practices between young Black men, educators, parents, unions, district staff, community members, and organizations. Although deeply committed to the specific needs of African American males, OAAMA uses a theory of action called Targeted Universalism, which asserts that a system can be changed by embracing the concept of difference, identifying a problem (particularly one suffered by marginalized people), proposing a solution, and then broadening the scope of that solution to cover as many people as possible.<sup>1</sup> OAAMA believes transforming the system to support successful outcomes for OUSD's lowest performing subgroup will create a district that improves academic and social-emotional outcomes for all of its students.

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1 For more on Targeted Universalism, see "The Importance of Targeted Universalism," by John A. Powell, Stephen Menendian, and Jason Reece at [http://www.prrac.org/full\\_text.php?text\\_id=1223&item\\_id=11577&newsletter\\_id=104](http://www.prrac.org/full_text.php?text_id=1223&item_id=11577&newsletter_id=104).

I (Richard Gray) sat down with Chris to discuss the path and steps he has taken to create and sustain his program. We approached this conversation as two Black men who know these students' journeys firsthand, focusing on how Chris's program reaches, uplifts, and educates Black males. OAAMA's approach to changing the outcomes for young Black men in OUSD is centered on the belief that every interaction, no matter how small, impacts the culture and the lives of young people. In fact, it's these many, many small interactions that often matter the most.

*Richard Gray:* We often approach a lot of the issues that affect African American males and other vulnerable student populations from a deficit model. Is it important to start with the frame of success as a model as opposed to this deficit?

*Chris Chatmon:* The degree to which you see that the glass is half full or half empty pretty much determines your fate. At the Office of African American Male Achievement, we tend to enter into conversations about African American male students in this ecosystem around building off their innate greatness. So there's a fundamental assumption that all of these students, who we refer to as kings, are extraordinary, are brilliant beyond measure. It's up to me as the facilitator to help them be in a space where that can get lifted up, can be made manifest. In our work, there is a fundamental understanding that *they* are not the issue in the system; it's the system that sets up the structures and the culture and the principles and the practices that see the glass as half empty. And more times than not, these young men reciprocate that very deficit doom-and-gloom state of mind that the adult culture has manifested.

*Richard Gray:* Yes, exactly. So that sets the expectation, it sets a tone that the adults in this structure see me a certain

way, see me in terms of possibilities. And what is the kind of leadership capacity that's needed from educators to create that kind of learning environment? Do you find there are people who come by that naturally? Is it developed? Is it a combination of both?

*Chris Chatmon:* It's definitely a combination of both. I think it depends upon your point of entry into the system. Where it's teacher-led, it's actually identifying, recruiting, and training teachers that have a like mind, like spirit, who have that passion and purpose, who now want to align that with their profession. So that's not something that we have to develop per se, that kind of attitude. But then in the broader ecosystem it really is about bringing educators back to why they came into this work and understanding that this work is really around engaging our kids in relationship and understanding that they are extraordinary and brilliant. And that does take time. That takes unpacking. This is something that doesn't happen in one professional development; it doesn't happen in a year. But it's understanding that as educators, we're necessary, yet insufficient; that when we look at the data, we still are not where we need to be.

## CULTIVATING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

*Richard Gray:* Let's talk about that relationship because that's a key component, clearly, of education. Very often people see discipline in schools as an action, not an interaction – that it's, “This kid does something and I do something about that kid.” I've found that where there is trouble with discipline, there's also trouble around relationships between young people and adults. Has that been your experience as well?

*Chris Chatmon:* Our theory of action in terms of engaging adults is: engage, encourage, and empower. Engage is about the value of relationships; our kids don't

care what you know until they know that you care. When you're in a relationship with your students, you'll know how to differentiate the instruction to teach a child who may be more tactile or maybe more auditory or maybe more kinesthetic in learning. But it all comes with the understanding, appreciation, and value for relationships. As adults and students, the more I understand and know who you are and the more you know about me, the farther we can go regarding the content.

It makes such a difference when you have people with a true passion for teaching and youth development, who know that they are learning as much as they are teaching, and who are humble enough to know that when you reach conflict or disagreement, it's actually an opportunity for both people to learn. That's a way of thinking that we're trying to facilitate with regard to adult learning, but also regarding teaching our kids to understand who they are, how they show up, and how to articulate that in a way where they don't get triggered and react to someone who reacted to them – and because they're the student, they got kicked out.

*Richard Gray:* And so, if you start with this idea that relationship building is key, how would the process that you all use be different from a traditional structure with more punitive interventions?

*Chris Chatmon:* There are a variety of different strategies that we use, but really it starts with allowing our kids to speak the truth, to own their own stuff in such a way that whatever that student is feeling, that's not for us to debate. It's for us to understand so we can help coach, encourage, nudge, or redirect. And so a child comes to you based on how they deal with conflict, however real or raw they are. And it may be filled with cuss words and very animated. Now, we're going to step it down a notch, you know? “So now, how can you share that in a way, minus the cussing or tipping over a desk? What's another way that we could express or write or draw or share?” It's

all in the spirit of trying to understand why they're angry, but not letting that define them – they are not their behavior. How do I understand the behavior so that I can teach them another strategy or coach them through another way?

Some of that could be restorative practice, or through a writing exercise, or meditation and breathing techniques. Each of our instructors have many different ways of approaching that. But the thing that we try not to do is just react to the students and let their behavior become our behavior. But all of this goes back to the fact that we can activate these different strategies when we have a relationship. It goes back to the importance of using every opportunity that you have to interface with the king, even calling him a king, greeting him with a smile.

### INSTILLING A POWERFUL COUNTER-NARRATIVE

*Richard Gray:* Tell me a little bit about the genesis of calling the young men “kings.” You’ve used that term and it seems like it’s a central part of an image you’re trying to present to them. So tell me why you use the term king as a part of the process?

*Chris Chatmon:* The first year, when we started in 2010-2011, we interviewed over 800 kings from elementary to high school. Overwhelmingly, our students were saying that they were being experienced by adults as if they had done something wrong – this was just within the first month of school. Yet they did not have a voice, so they were going through the school day, the school week, never having an opportunity to talk to the adults on the campus about how they were feeling, how they were doing, what their goals or values were, who they wanted to be. What we realized is that our kings did not feel valued.

And so using a word that was an endearment – it was powerful. What they had been hearing, was just the opposite of king. Like, “You ain’t gonna be nobody; put your head up, pull your pants up.” There was all this charge and emotion and hate and anger, and after a while, these kids end up mirroring and manifesting the same. So the king piece was saying, “Nah, king, hold your head up.” Elevate their minds, and we know our kings will elevate their pants.

Additionally, there’s one thing with the adult-to-student culture, but then you have the student-to-student culture. Sometimes we say street culture is more prevalent and more real than school culture, but we’re like, “No, no, no, we’ve got to break all that down.”

And one of the ways to break it down was referring to everyone using the word love, using the word king. Using these words means that we as brothers support each other. We don’t break each other down; we build each other up. And then students are able to support each other through those highs and lows, through those real time things that happen in the community, practicing the principles of brotherhood. So the word king is a power word, an endearing word that allows our students to see themselves as royalty, someone with power and presence.

### TARGETED UNIVERSALISM

*Richard Gray:* There clearly is an acknowledgement that there’s a racial disparity in how African American males are disciplined in the public education system. But I have found that there is either a resistance or at least an aversion sometimes to taking a race-specific solution to this. People say, yes, it’s a problem for African American males, but you can’t create a program that’s just for them because it’s exclusionary. And so how do you

navigate that? I know you've talked about this concept of targeted universalism, so I'm curious about how you balance the focus just on the kings?

*Chris Chatmon:* I try to make sure that folks have an understanding of the theory of action behind targeted universalism. And that's acknowledging that we're all located very differently in systems. We've used the data as a way to show why we focus on the needs of Black boys. But if we're able to identify best practices for those students who've been furthest away from opportunity, those best practices can impact everybody in the system. And so it doesn't stop us from supporting Latino, Chicano, or African American girls or any other subgroups.

But if we just continue to do the universal and not go to those folks who are on the margin and/or who are not getting their needs met, then you end up perpetuating the same outcome. In particular in settings that are not with people of color, I don't think it's a good strategy to lead with disparities. Instead, I'm always trying to lead with story and leave people with hope, with aspiration, and to lift up solutions that support African American male students.

*Richard Gray:* Is there a particular time when you had a targeted strategy for African American males, and then it was applied to a broader context?

*Chris Chatmon:* When we do our Man Up conference, we have Latino-Chicano and indigenous brothers and European Americans who attend some of our conferences. One recent conference was targeted and focused on and grounded in African history. There was an initial apprehension with folks who didn't identify as Black in the beginning. But by the end of the day, there was this extraordinary feeling of brotherhood, of community, through this shared experience of creating a drum and then for an hour drumming

– and then the process of the dialogue and having food together. I think it was through the shared experience that we ended up seeing ourselves in each other. But the whole focus and content and context was grounded in the Black experience.

Another example is something we did at a school around addressing disproportionate suspension rates. Our kings were telling us that the adults on campus were afraid of them and didn't talk to them. And when they did engage them, they engaged them as if they'd done something wrong. So we asked teachers to go out into the hallway and to greet every brother they saw, to call them by their name, and give them a compliment. And we found this had implications not just on the student receiving the compliment, but even on that adult in being much more aware of putting out into the universe a light of positivity and engagement. And anecdotally, the feedback we've heard from teachers in the school is that tardies were actually going down. I can't say it was just that factor alone, but folks around the school were feeling it was more positive. And initially, it was intentionally around engaging, encouraging, empowering Black boys. But it was a school of only about 33 percent Black students, and that targeted practice actually was modeled and mirrored throughout the school.

## EMBRACING STUDENTS' IDENTITY IN CONTENT AND PRACTICE

*Richard Gray:* I think we're sort of expanding the notion of what Black is now. I'm curious about this notion of what it even means to be an African American male. What's the level of diversity in your work, and how does that play out in your own school and your own context?

*Chris Chatmon:* You have Latino-Chicano brothers that are dark in skin

color but identify as Latino-Chicano and vice versa. Within the Oakland Unified School District, 600 is the code for Black or African American. But how students identify with it may be Black, it may be Creole, it may be Dominican, Puerto Rican, it may be indigenous. One of our goals was making sure that kids identified as 600 no longer showed up as the lowest in graduation rates, disproportionately represented suspensions, chronically absent – all of these negative factors. When you looked at the code and then the data, we saw that we needed to focus on African American male achievement.

Content-wise, it's much bigger than that though. The reason we have a lot of disparate educational outcomes is because the predominant narrative in public schools across the nation is a White narrative, and it perpetuates this internalized depression because you never really see yourself in any of the content with the exception of very specific points in time, and usually from a deficit or from a superior/not superior standpoint. And for us, we're trying to shift the system by lifting up the narrative from pre-K all the way through twelfth grade so that our history collectively shows up in all the four subjects and across all the other content areas.

And that is a heavy push. We have actually been writing curriculum. In California, the focus is the A-G entrance requirements for public universities, so we now have three history courses, we have two English language arts courses, and we have one elective course written. And we're partnering with Stanford University to submit a math and science course written from the African perspective. We're creating our career pathways grounded in the African perspective.

## DEVELOPING CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY COMPETENCE

*Richard Gray:* A lot of educators may not have the culture competence and are not trained to do this kind of work. Is that something that you have to do within your own structure? Is there a process to help them know how to build those relationships in ways that are going to be effective?

*Chris Chatmon:* I would say that our teacher prep programs, our college prep programs, have to do a better job at developing the next generation of teacher leaders to understand the social context that they're teaching in. And the way that you do that isn't just landing on a quality lesson plan; you should actually spend time in your students' communities on a weekend or in the evening. Here in Oakland, if a teacher took the time to go to Greenman Field to watch Little League, they would gain extraordinary knowledge and insight into the families and the community. You would see multiple students. You would see fathers and grandfathers and uncles and aunties. You just see a whole other layer of the community. We find that the teachers who have reached the highest academic goals and objectives with students actually take the time to understand who their young people are.

In doing that, you're asset mapping. Every community has value, has assets, and we're at our best when we're aware of that and we're connecting that. For example, principals should know all of the assets in and around their physical school, so when things come up, they can lean on those assets to support a child, to support a family, to support a teacher, to support their school community. And if a teacher doesn't have that capacity, then you can elevate a parent to be that broker, that liaison. You can identify your attendance clerk or a school security officer to play that role as well. But it is something that is of value to classroom teachers and the entire school.

## MOVING FROM POCKETS OF EXCELLENCE TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

*Richard Gray:* So what are the kinds of supports that are needed if we want to take this to scale? We want an educator to have a positive relationship with this African American male student, a classroom that supports that relationship, a school that supports that classroom, and we want a system that supports all of that. What are the things that are necessary and the right kind of support structure that will allow for that to be the norm rather than the exception?

*Chris Chatmon:* Great question. When you roll out the strategy, you need to make sure you're doing that with students, parents, teachers, principals, central office – and through policy. It takes leadership at every level. It takes somebody having the audacity to say, "We're necessary, yet insufficient," and having the courage to envision: "What would a great school, a great district, a great classroom, look like, smell like, sound like?"

We have to give people permission to see that what we have isn't good enough. And if we're going to get there, we have to look to each other. There's not going to be some massive amount of resources all of a sudden. But what we do collectively is far greater than what we can do individually.

The other piece we did is spotlight where good things are happening. You know, great instruction is happening every day for Black boys, and it's happening with White teachers, Latino teachers, male, female, Black teachers. A lot of times, though, our narrative doesn't lift that up. There's some good teaching. Shine the light on that. And then we activate that agency and those influencers.

You know, when I started five years ago, again I was a staff of one. No one handed me a blueprint. Now I have a

team. We've got some policy. We've increased graduation rates for Black male cohorts by 17 percent. And we've reduced suspension rates by 43 percent as a system – not as a school, but as a system. And that was a heavy push around culture and around relationship. I mean, policy means nothing if you don't have the people that value why that policy is even there.

## YOUNG MEN OF COLOR AND AMERICA'S FUTURE

*Richard Gray:* You just mentioned the context in which you started, and I think I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about the uniqueness of what's been happening culturally and socially in this country, particularly as it pertains to Black males. We've had what I think is an increased recognition around Black men's interactions with police. And we've got this heightened awareness now of the impact of cultural elements like the confederate flag.

So I'm wondering if you see this as the unique time for us to be able to have a cultural shift about issues like institutional racism and its impact on African American males?

*Chris Chatmon:* Oh, for sure. We're at an extraordinary moment in time where having conversations around the needs of Black boys, it's not just something that's happening here, it's happening across the nation. And so I think from multiple standpoints, we have the momentum to move into a different narrative that doesn't problematize or demonize Black and Brown, but actually celebrates and elevates the contributions of those who historically have been marginalized. So I think it is a good time. It's a blessing to be in this position at this point of time, as a father and as an educator.

*For more on OUSD's Office of African American Male Achievement, see <http://www.ousd.org/aama>.*





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