

The Story of a Model Restorative School: Creative Response to Conflict at MS 217 in Queens, NY

Abstract

This article will explore how Creative Response to Conflict (CRC) supported the transformation of Middle School 217, in Queens, NY, from a school with one of the highest suspension rates in New York City, to a model restorative school. Beginning with a brief overview of CRC's history and our Quaker roots, we will show how the fifty-year evolution of our work equipped us with the tools and strategies to help MS 217 succeed.

CRC's model, which incorporates the themes of cooperation, communication, affirmation, conflict resolution, mediation, problem-solving, bias awareness, bullying prevention and intervention, social-emotional learning, and restorative practices, provided the framework to shift the perspective and practice of the entire school community from punitive to restorative measures. By working with administrators, school safety officers, teachers, support staff, students, and parents, we were able to help MS 217 implement an advisory program that uses restorative circles for all of the school's meetings and classes. The school also developed a *100% Respect* program, which involved the whole school committing to treating each other with dignity and fairness, irrespective of hierarchy.

Key to MS 217's success was the collaboration of multiple non-profit organizations. We co-trained students in peer mediation with another organization, which then included after-school follow-up from a third. The organizations work together to provide staff coaching to develop teachers' skills as circle-keepers. In our fifth year at the school, we added additional partners to develop the ground-breaking *Social Media-tors!* program, which trains students to intervene in cyber-bullying, while promoting pro-social behavior.

This article will also discuss the challenges we experienced and solutions we developed while working to implement these programs online during COVID. Finally, we will share next steps for MS 217 and insights about other schools striving to follow MS 217's example of commitment, creativity, and community-building to become a model restorative school.

CRC's History is the History of an Evolving Field

Creative Response to Conflict (CRC) has educated teachers, young people, and communities to constructively address conflict and prevent and repair harm for nearly 50 years. Our trainings have helped break the cycle of violence and punitive

discipline, encouraged student growth, and strengthened and transformed hundreds of schools in large, racially and economically diverse, and urban school districts in NY, NJ, CT, and beyond.

Founded in New York City in 1972, funded by the Quaker Project on Community Conflict, and a program of the Peace and Social Action Program of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), our initial focus was providing nonviolent conflict resolution skills to children at the youngest possible age. Starting in Manhattan elementary schools, we went on to work with over 50 schools of all grades in NYC. For many years we were known as Children's Creative Response to Conflict, until we expanded our work to include people of all ages and changed our name to Creative Response to Conflict (CRC).

In the early days, we worked closely with Philadelphia Quaker groups including Movement for a New Society and Nonviolence and Children, with which we shared an emphasis on the theme of affirmation in conflict resolution work. Our first book, *The Friendly Classroom for a Small Planet*, a seminal text in the field, was released in 1978. Our other original themes were cooperation and communication. Within a few years, we became involved in the development of the Alternatives to Violence Project and expanded to work with people in prison. *The Friendly Classroom* included an AVP training outline showing our methods could be applied not just to schools but also to prisons and community groups.

In the early 80's, with the goal to professionalize the field, the Hewlett Foundation funded conflict resolution and mediation projects like ours, hoping to make these skills widespread and turn new vocabulary into household words. Early on, mediation was frequently misread and mistyped as meditation! Known for being at the forefront of conflict resolution work with young children, a great deal of *The Friendly Classroom* material was used by San Francisco Community Boards to create the first elementary peer mediation materials and workshops. Mid to late 80's was the heyday for peer mediation, with programs in hundreds of schools, and we were providing peer mediation training all over the country.

The standards movement, with a focus on test scores, brought support for mediation to a screeching halt. Like the arts, mediation was no longer deemed important enough to teach and fund. So, we pivoted and developed problem-solving resources and curriculum, and focused on integrating problem-solving into content areas such as language arts, social studies, math, and science. From 1978-1992 we were a program of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In 1992, we established CRC as an independent organization.

A project born of the civil rights and peace movements, racial justice has always been integral to all of CRC's work. We were pioneers in anti-bias education, training teachers, young people, parents, and community organizations about preventing and interrupting bias since the 90's. Chosen by Mayor Dinkins' administration, we trained 1,000 NYC volunteers in our model, which has always included perspective-taking, cultural sharing, and discussions on the institutionalized nature of racism and other forms of oppression. Power, privilege, and the internalization of oppression are at the core of our training.

Increasingly, we saw the interrelationship of bias and bullying behavior and, building on conflict resolution and communication skills, we created trainings to prevent and intervene in bullying. Our model for bullying prevention and intervention was chosen by the state of Connecticut as one of a select few schools should follow. As internet use grew, we created workshops and materials to address cyberbullying.

From the beginning, our format for workshops was a model quite close to a restorative one. Rooted in indigenous traditions, restorative practices (RP), of which restorative justice is one part, allow people to develop connections and empathy and address and repair harm. As an alternative to punishment, restorative practices encourage collaborative problem-solving, accountability, amends, and healing. Restorative circles include participants sitting in a circle around a centerpiece, a circle-keeper prompting rounds of storytelling or sharing, a talking piece passed around as each participant speaks, and the creation of shared agreements. They often include an opening ceremony or activity and a closing ceremony. Our workshops always took place in a circle, included sharing reflections in go-arounds, and using consensus, though we weren't yet using a talking piece or centerpiece, and hadn't yet shifted from facilitation to circle-keeping.

In the early 2000's restorative practices became popular. Always pursuing professional development, we further expanded our knowledge of and refined our use of RP. We adopted missing circle elements and began implementing more restorative content into trainings. We were among the first trainers to implement RP in NYC public schools. As more schools incorporated RP for community building, dealing with conflict, repairing harm, and reducing suspensions, there was also a resurgence of interest in peer mediation programs.

In addition to staying current with innovations in the alternative dispute resolution field, we've always stayed abreast of innovations and best practices in education theory and child development. To best support students, we integrated trauma-informed methods and social-emotional learning (SEL) techniques into our RP, peer mediation, and conflict resolution curricula.

As a national dialogue about ending mass incarceration developed, schools became interested in alternatives and ways of preventing the criminalization of youth. We have long understood the stakes and the rewards of implementing restorative justice (RJ) in schools. Our approach to RP, which holistically incorporates the skills and concepts of SEL, conflict resolution, anti-bias/anti-racism, and mediation, supports schools in interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. To be effective, we believe schools need to be using all of these methods and ideas.

We offer multiple, engaging modalities and formats to foster community and provide information and skills including small and large experiential workshops, one-on-one consulting and coaching sessions, circles, conferences, presentations, and town hall-style meetings. Our comprehensive, evidence-based model addresses the whole child, the whole school, and the community context to achieve a lasting, positive school culture. We use circle processes to help the school community develop a shared vocabulary, common conceptual framework, and skills to productively negotiate conflict and crisis, prevent, identify, and intervene in harmful incidents, learn from challenging occurrences, and deepen relationships.

We've stayed true to our Quaker roots by remaining open to new perspectives and ideas, proactively discussing challenges, and reaching consensus on solutions. By 2015, when we began our work at Middle School 217 in Queens, NY, we had already refined a powerful model and provided thousands of hours of customized professional development and student and family workshops in NYC's multicultural and multiracial schools.

Setting a Foundation for Restorative Practices at MS 217

For the last 6 years, CRC has played a key role in a collaborative process that helped MS 217 transform into a model school. In 2012, having been identified as a school with one of the highest suspension rates in NYC, resources were made available to turn MS 217 around. Principal Patrick Burns showed his critical support for restorative work. He sent four of his deans to an RJ training which, in 2014, resulted in Burns bringing in coach Matthew Guldin, of Cross Cultural Consulting Services, to begin incorporating RJ into their discipline procedures. Guldin's focus is on alternative methods of discipline and the practice of *100% respect*, a model that balances the power dynamic within the hierarchical structure of schools. Burns then added Morningside Center for Social Responsibility for staff development and coaching in community-building circles .

CRC was brought in during the second year of restorative work to collaborate with Morningside on training and teacher coaching. Typically, CRC starts out with teachers, and then expands to administrators, parents, and others. In this case,

however, because of the high rate of suspensions, we chose to start by training and coaching administrators and deans in de-escalation techniques and restorative alternatives to suspension. The rate of suspensions quickly dropped, as they immediately saw the effectiveness of RP in creating accountability and reducing recidivism.

CRC began coaching teachers in restorative circles and added parent training soon after. Our framework, curriculum, and experience enabled us to help unite and harmonize efforts of families, administrators, teachers, and children to disrupt the driving forces of punishment and exclusion that reproduce a cycle of failing and suspensions. As part of our whole school approach, we aimed for all members of the school community to experience circles and trained teaching assistants, cafeteria workers, maintenance staff, school secretaries, and school safety officers. Additionally, we helped strengthen relationships between parents and MS 217. Understanding and supporting the whole child has been crucial to the reduction of disruptions, conflict, bullying, and, ultimately, disciplinary referrals and suspensions.

100% Respect

In collaboration with Guldin, we implemented the *100% Respect* model throughout the school. Students were asked to brainstorm what 100% respect between students looks like, describing specific behavior they would see. The next week, students were asked to write what student respect for staff looks like, then staff and students discussed and wrote up what staff respect for students looks like. A group of student leaders compiled and summarized the information. The school held assemblies where each grade had leaders ratify the documents. Finally, they held a culminating program at which the whole school agreed to this declaration of 100% Respect – a school-wide set of agreements posted prominently throughout the building– and applauded their collaborative process. It was amazing! We helped facilitate drafting a code of conduct and a restorative process to implement and adhere to the community agreements. The entire school community had collectively contributed to building a school culture based on a foundation of respect, active listening, empathy, problem-solving, mediation, and harm-repair, where constructive conflict resolution is normative.

School Climate

Our dynamic, whole-school approach improved the climate throughout MS 217. Before the pandemic, when a person walked into the school, they were frequently greeted warmly, getting the sense this is a special, welcoming place. Unlike many NYC schools, there's no metal detector. The school safety officers often greet visitors with “How are you doing today?”, “Can I help you?”, and “Nice to see you”. Posters announce, “This a diverse school” and “Everyone is welcome here”.

The 100% respect ethos is a hallmark of the change in school climate. There's been a tremendous increase in students' realization of their academic and emotional potential resulting from being in an environment where they feel respected. Several teachers and administrators attended the *growth mindset* training and now the school displays uplifting posters with messages like, "It's not 'I don't know', it's 'I'll give it a try'" and "My brain is like a muscle; when I exercise it, it gets stronger." No one tags these posters with graffiti or tears them down.

Along with other deans, Dean Paulin walks the halls and if he sees a scrap of paper on the floor he picks it up. Students see him do this and it communicates, "Our school is important. It's a safe, neat place. You are safe in these hallways." All of his actions convey, "This is a respectable place." Dean Paulin will challenge students if they break a school agreement, but does so respectfully, as he is invested in RP.

Trainings and Sessions

Circles with Teachers

CRC supported teachers to create an environment in which cooperation enhances relationships between and among students and teachers. We helped students see they have many choices regarding bias and conflict and taught them skills for making positive choices.

Many NYC schools, including MS 217, use *advisory*, a regularly scheduled period when teachers provide support to students in small groups on academic and social issues or help them plan beyond the current school year. A main goal of the advisory is to give students more opportunities for SEL and to discuss things pertaining to their age and grade level in small supportive settings.

At MS 217 half of the school, every other week, has advisory in smaller restorative circles. (Depending on the size of a class, it could have 5-15 students, the average being 10-12.) For example, guidance counselors might go around to eighth grade advisories and, in circle, give a lesson on the different high school options and discuss the high school application process.

While advisory is taking place, the other half of the school attends an assembly where there might an experiential lecture or film and discussion. We started staff training in advisory circles and then coached teachers to be circle-keepers. With half of their class in assembly, teachers did community-building circles in their advisories. We began with grade 6 and, after year one, moved to grade 7 and then grade 8. Advisory works well with RP and this school made use of the structure for implementation.

The first phase with teachers was coaching them in their advisory sessions, by joining circles with students and either observing what they were doing, modeling, or co-circle-keeping, depending on the teacher's needs and comfort level. Classes in each grade had some circles with common content and structure, in addition to having unique teacher-designed circles.

We did many circles directly with students, with teachers observing us. Sometimes, if they only had a little training, they felt less confident and would ask us to do a circle. One teacher didn't have the confidence to come up with a center-piece so CRC's Priscilla Prutzman brought her one. After three circles with that class, Priscilla returned later in the year to observe. The teacher circle-kept perfectly and was still using the center-piece.

As teachers became more confident, they would run their own circles, and when more experienced, they began content circles, infusing SEL into lessons from units they were working on. By 8th grade, there might be a circle on test preparation. Test anxiety was a popular subject for circles. We did several circles on how to keep yourself calm before a test and how to prepare.

We observe teachers 1-3 times a year, give them feedback, and share suggestions. In some cases, teachers struggled with taking more space than students in the circle. That's when we would offer to model circle-keeping.

We supported teachers of students with special needs and did some circles with their small classes, (4 or 5 students). We had written curriculum years ago with the NYC Department of Education (DOE) on using CRC themes with students with special needs and concluded that cooperation and affirmation work really well with trauma-informed practices. Because it was often difficult for some of these students to step outside of their own feelings and visualize another's point of view, conflict resolution was harder. Trauma-informed circles try to avoid triggers and are as positive as possible. The more we did cooperative and affirming work with them, the easier it was to do conflict resolution and the students responded well.

Student Run Circles

By year three, 8th graders were doing circles- ones they designed and circle-kept for their class. Some were incredibly good at it. Many of these students also trained as peer mediators.

Parent Circles

We see family-school communication and engagement as essential to the success of RP in schools and strongly promote it. When we arrived in year two, we began parent circles. To attract parents, Principal Burns put signs all over the sidewalk, inviting

them in for coffee and donuts. We had everything prepared upstairs and, with their breakfast in hand, he ushered everyone to the circle! We held these sessions every Monday morning. At first, we had Spanish and Arabic translation. The majority of the Spanish-speaking parents continued to attend, while the Arabic-speaking parents' attendance dropped off.

The principal started doing circles in parent meetings. These tended to be long, with parents delving into the personal and exploring incorporating circles at home, noting they might help with family conflicts. They shared about needs and feelings. The more we met, the deeper the discussions got. We discussed the impact of being judgmental, where judgmentalism comes from, including culture. We did a parent circle on handling students' testing anxiety. We did a lot mindfulness, which they loved, appreciating time to relax. They indicated they wanted more, so we start doing mindfulness at the beginning *and* end. As circles in other parts of the school increased, we had fewer parent circles and then the pandemic hit. We hope to resume parent circles this fall.

Training & Involvement of All Members of the School Community

In order for the processes to be effective, everyone has to speak the same language and contribute to building this new school culture. We call it a whole school approach because, in addition to educators, students, and parents, we involved staff from every part of the school in training on RJ, circles, and the 100% respect process.

The school safety officers, which in other schools are called security or cops, are one of the most important groups to work with in moving a school from a punitive to a restorative model. When there are conflicts in schools, they typically view students as suspicious or even criminals. Since receiving our training, the MS 217 safety officers are more like helpers with authority. They maintain order *and* they're kind. They love and are friendly with students and interrupt bullying. Often, people view school safety officers as human metal detectors. But in a restorative model school, they can really show up for kids in positive ways.

Turnkey Training for Onboarding New Staff

Already a large school, MS 217 continues to grow. Its improved reputation has increased enrollment and it's favored for its wonderful diversity. Therefore, new staff are always being added. MS 217 maintains the positive dynamics by training new teachers in the school's restorative methods and culture. Priscilla and Joyce Griffen (Morningside) trained new teachers at lunch for several weeks. They gave a condensed version of a five-day training, followed by classroom coaching. Some teachers already had training in previous schools, as restorative has become widespread in NYC.

We've also trained staff to turn-key their knowledge. They learn how to plan and conduct their own circle-keeping workshops, include experiential activities, design small group work, manage time, and elicit evaluations. When CRC trains on facilitation and circle-keeping, participants learn listening and questioning skills, how to balance content and process, and how to determine if workshop goals were accomplished.

Harm Circles

During our second year of peer mediation training, school safety officers had the opportunity to experience the benefit of harm circles. A situation arose in which two students not chosen as mediators kept sneaking into the mediation training, dishonestly claiming, "Our teacher said we could come." They were looking to get out of class and saw what we were doing as a safe space. They thought they wouldn't get into trouble, but school safety officers caught them running in the hallway. We had a circle with them, which was a turning point. When the safety officers saw the impact of a circle, our relationship with them changed dramatically and they fully came on board with RJ. When there's a good relationship with safety officers who have a commitment to shifting from punishment to restoring relationships, ongoing harm circles can have a huge, positive impact on the school.

We planned to do harm circles with students in the school suspension room, however the Dean started doing circles on his own. These circles helped students be accountable for their actions and feel welcomed back into their classes, and reduced recidivism,

Burns said the biggest issue, during COVID, was students breaking into online classes and sessions and posting inappropriate content, including cursing and lewd videos. One high-performing student was caught repeatedly engaging in this behavior and was one of M.S. 217's only known suspensions during this time. Despite the suspension, they used RJ. The student apologized to the whole school and was welcomed back. It turned out this was a very bright student who was bored.

Peer Mediation

Peer mediation is a critical component of RP that enables people to take ownership and constructively deal with conflict and harm. In year two, we added a peer mediation program. We helped guide MS 217 to create the structure for a successful program, trained students, and supported them in helping classmates more productively navigate conflict. Students learned and practiced listening skills, how to ask open questions, and how to help peers brainstorm appropriate solutions for their conflicts. MS 217 selects leaders from each class to form their Dean's Council, many of whom become peer mediators, then Social Media-tors. (see next section). In

addition, several students, not already school leaders, became mediators, which comports with a tenet of peer mediation – mediators represent everyone.

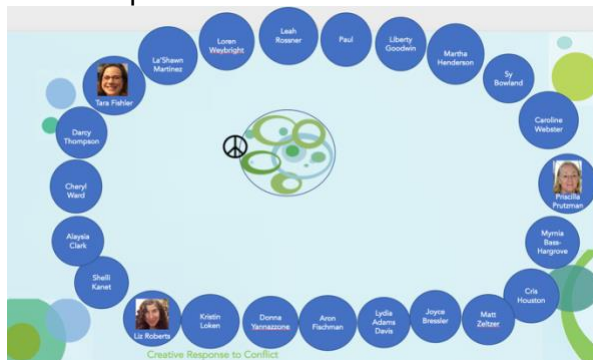
Social Mediators!

Because there had already been a lot of successful innovation, MS 217 was a perfect place to begin a new collaboration. In 2019-2020, recognizing the significant problem of cyber-bullying, we developed a ground-breaking *Social Media-tors!* program. CRC started a partnership with [Bridg-It](#), thanks to a grant from JAMS and the Association for Conflict Resolution. Social Media-tors! is a program in which students are trained to intervene in online conflicts and promote pro-social behavior through the Bridg-It app's *shout-out* system.

Those already trained as peer mediators were given three days of training on responding to cyber-bullying. Students learned to intervene in disputes and bullying on social media, report harmful situations, and foster a positive school environment using Bridg-It *shout-outs*. Staff were trained in how to manage reports, support students, and use the resource center to implement RP. *Shout-outs* are meant to be used school-wide to create a positive school climate.

Our last day of in-person Social Mediator training was March 11, 2020. At the end of the day we heard one of the 1,700+ students tested positive for COVID 19. We elbow-bumped goodbye and haven't been back since. Along with our partners, we lost NYC and Board of Education funding due to pandemic related cutbacks. Fortunately, we still had this JAMS grant which allowed us to continue virtually.

During the pandemic, we shifted our approach and supported student leaders in training their peers online in both peer mediation and social mediation. Before the pandemic, CRC had already developed our *virtual circle template*. In online circles and trainings we use and train others to use this tool, which simulates sitting in a circle to help teachers hold online classes and circles with a greater sense of community and connection. Initially used for our international restorative circles, we have now taught over 1,000 educators using it. A *virtual talking piece* is moved as each person speaks. In recurring groups, we add participants' pictures to their "seat". We used this template for Social Media-tors.



Remote learning presented us with a few challenges for which we needed to creatively problem-solve. The first was getting students to sign on. Out of 19 social mediators, our first remote skill-building session had a few students, with adults outnumbering them. The next session we had twice as many students, and it doubled again the next time. We had an ongoing problem with students who didn't turn on their cameras and sometimes their mics. They may have been embarrassed by their home. Some didn't have strong enough internet or a working camera or mic, and some were shy.

We found the chat function was extremely important and students, who frequently text, readily adopted it. The more we met, the more they used mics and cameras. Some students stayed on after sessions and then turned their mics and cameras on. One student said Zoom froze if he used the camera and others had the same problem. We adjusted our activities to ensure our training remained interactive and involved different modalities, including kinesthetic, visual, auditory, and integrating apps students suggested.

While we might have done a 4-6 hour in-person training, it was hard to have the students focus longer than 1.5 hours online. We used various formats– working in pairs and small groups and using movement. We were already doing experiential learning in person, so we had ideas for retaining students' attention online. We found adults also need this variation! Teaching online was more efficient as there was no travel time and no handouts to duplicate, as they were emailed and stored. Despite not being in-person, MS 217 peer mediators have been learning to recognize and safely intervene in online conflicts.

Student Presentations at Conferences

Prior to COVID, a unifying activity was having MS 217 educators and students present two years in a row at Lehman College's RJ conference on our whole school approach. Two students presented along with two guidance counselors, Dean Gega, Dean Paulin, a teacher, and CRC and Morningside facilitators. The students, who were also mediators, talked about the program, highlighting mediation. Some parents commented on changes they saw in their children particularly after the peer mediation training, and one parent said they started doing circles at home. The session closed with a Q & A session. The students also presented part of the keynote address. It was exciting for parents and students to demonstrate their knowledge on the subject of restorative at big conferences. There was also a student-run restorative conference at a high school, at which an MS 217 parent and student led a presentation on circle-keeping.

Why MS 217's Transformation was Successful

Collaboration as a Key to Success

Collaboration has been a significant part of the process of turning this school around, though, Principal Burns initially felt collaboration would be difficult. When we first came to present, Joyce, the Morningside trainer/facilitator was skeptical too. We said we would do coaching. However, Morningside was already coaching, as some of the teachers had taken their 5-day restorative training and Joyce was contracted to follow-up with those teachers, so we needed to clarify our role.

Joyce was initially using Morningside's year-long circle curriculum for 6th grade. Once they got comfortable leading circles, the teachers decided they wanted to create their own circles. By then, CRC was fully involved and we had to learn how to compliment and support each other's work instead of duplicating and leaving gaps. We had different working styles. Morningside teaches with a very specific plan while CRC has a more open-ended approach, asking about goals and offering possibilities. We gradually merged, working together beautifully.

CRC was ahead of many in incorporating peer mediation into RP, and had a lot of experience with peer mediation, whereas Morningside was not doing peer mediation at MS 217. Joyce hadn't done peer mediation training for years and used a different model. So, Priscilla took more of the lead on that training. After Joyce learned our process they co-facilitated peer mediation training. Priscilla always prefers to work with someone and Joyce was used to working alone, though she came to really enjoy working in tandem. Priscilla and Joyce would jointly plan most of the parent circles together and co-circle-keep. They also divided the work for teachers who needed classroom coaching. Dean Gega was very helpful in setting up the trainings. She is still the mediation coordinator at the school.

Dare to Revitalize Education through Arts and Mediation (DREAM), a Bronx-based group also contracted to work with MS 217, was in its early stages as an organization. CRC had trained them in peer mediation years earlier. They didn't want to do mediation training and asked us to continue doing it, which we've now done for several years. DREAM hired a facilitator to come in as a mediator coach to run an afterschool mediation club, in addition to some lunch-time skill-building sessions.

We also collaborated with part-time staff of Margaret's Room, a space at MS 217 funded by the Safe at Home Foundation. This "is a dedicated safe room in schools where students can go to talk or 'hang out' in a comfortable environment that feels safe to them – a place where respect and confidentiality are the rule." They provide "healing services to youth who have been traumatized by exposure to violence

including domestic violence, child abuse, teen dating abuse, and sexual assault." We worked with them to run circles focused on abuse.

It's rare to have this much ongoing collaborative work in schools. Often training organizations work independently, competing for resources. Schools commonly receive unconnected trainings, with no over-arching plan. Having multiple practitioners and stakeholders focus so much attention on strategic, shared objectives and model problem-solving and cooperation was very valuable for MS 217's transformational journey.

Because our collective efforts and model enabled this school to turn around so dramatically, reducing incidents of discrimination, conflict, and suspension and increasing connections between and among educators and students, it began to be known as a model school. People from all over the New York Metropolitan Area, including politicians, other organizations, and educators, came to observe circles, learn about *100% Respect*, and see how deans incorporate RP into their discipline approach.

Buy-in

Clearly the early support and enthusiasm of the principal was instrumental in MS 217 becoming a model restorative school. Dean Paulin has also been a great advocate for *100% Respect* and RP. He is like a restorative justice superhero, walking around the school and immediately using RJ with students in a conflict in the hall or in the cafeteria. And the students love him. Same with Dean Gega who has become the mediation dean!

Guidance counselors have also really been onboard. Once they were trained and aware of more effective methods to deal with conflict and harm, each segment of the school community saw the value in shifting away from the traditional, retributive method. When a significant percentage of a school is invested in the vision, restorative practices can become a reality.

Diversity

Because MS 217 is in Queens NY, one of the most diverse places in the U.S., the school community is incredibly diverse and the staff reflect back to students and families what a strength this is. Educators emphasize that everyone is welcome and appreciated. In addition to being a multiracial school, there's religious diversity and they have always actively welcomed LGBTQ+ people. There are rainbow flags everywhere, and several teachers carry rainbow flag key chains. It's easier for RP to take hold in an environment where difference is celebrated and inclusion is cultivated.

Discoveries and Insights

While our collaboration enabled us to help MS 217 achieve its goal of transformation within about five years, we recognize ample funding made this possible. A few of the schools we've worked in had funding to hire a full-time RJ coordinator, though we recognize for many schools, particularly in the U.S., where education is severely underfunded, a lack of resources presents a significant barrier. Schools with fewer resources may require a great deal more time to move away from traditional methods of discipline. So, in addition to a whole school approach and buy-in from the school's leadership, funding is key to the success of restorative in schools.

Principal Burns did his own research, polling the student body. One year, by grade, he polled students on the circles we held, asking which part students liked best. We learned they liked check-ins most, which spoke volumes about their need to be heard as whole people, and not just as students showing up for class, having to produce test scores. After getting that feedback, we never skipped check-ins. Another lesson is related to the mindfulness activities we do to help circle participants become calm, present, and ready for the work ahead. When we began incorporating mindfulness into circles, most found it a bit strange and some would giggle. However, it quickly proved indispensable as students were more relaxed and focus. We got affirming feedback and never skip mindfulness either. No one giggles anymore!

Soon after we moved online, George Floyd was murdered. MS 217 students in our peer mediation and Social Media-tors sessions were clearly affected by this and we needed to create space for them to process their feelings and thoughts. We were able to connect bullying and violence seen across the country, but were careful not to be didactic in order to attend to the trauma and fear being stirred up. This clarified the necessity of remaining flexible with students and being capable of putting aside a day's plan when something important like this emerges. Changing school climate, building community, and RJ to support academic achievement and mitigate incidents of violence and bullying can only work when we address children's emotional and material needs, experience, and societal factors impacting them.

We certainly learned collaboration is vitally needed to transform a school in this way and requires extra effort in communication, a willingness to negotiate and accept differences in models, styles, and curriculum, and patience with the process of trust-building. More than anything else, to serve a school effectively, training groups and organizations need to operate with a genuinely cooperative approach, recognize each partner contributes their own strengths, let go of unnecessary self-interest, and truly build something new together.

Taking Next Steps

It's too early to know all the ways COVID will impact schools in general and MS 217 in particular. We'll have current peer mediators train a new group of students next year and hope to resume parent workshops and classroom coaching, including circles on how COVID has affected the school community. We'll continue training new teachers on RP and expect some training could remain virtual. Flexibility will be important as schools return to in-person learning. We plan to support educators with this transition by problem-solving, offering a positive, optimistic approach, and using mindfulness and activities emphasizing gratitude, self-care, and kindness. Our efforts to contribute to an environment of safety where everyone feels welcome will be even more needed.

We're committed to system-wide change by shifting schools to a restorative model to reduce police in schools and disproportionate interactions of Black & Brown children with the juvenile justice system. Because districts are, at last, prioritizing safe, pro-social and inclusive learning environments, they are seeing that restorative practices can reduce disciplinary referrals, effectively slowing the school-to-prison pipeline and improving outcomes. We continue to expand our restorative work to schools across the country and take pride in watching schools' transformations.