



WHY RESTORATIVE JUSTICE?

A SCHOOL CULTURE AND DISCIPLINE
APPROACH THAT WORKS

Alternatives

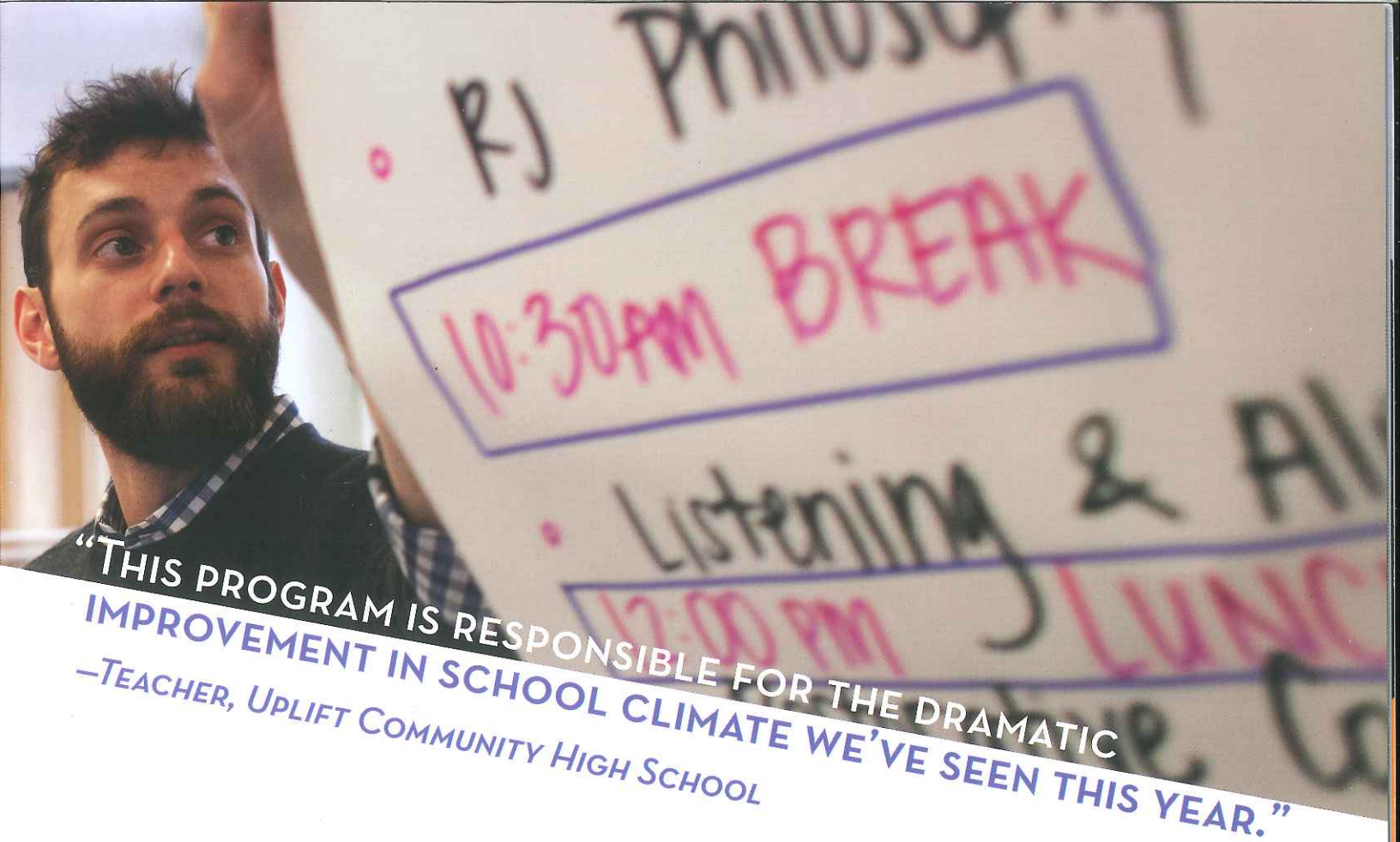


WHY RESTORATIVE JUSTICE?

When school and classroom environments are safe and supportive, students are better able to focus on learning. In too many of our schools students are made to feel like they are on lockdown, with stiflingly harsh and arbitrary rules that are inconsistently enforced. Students have often been so alienated by their relationships with teachers and school staff that they disengage from school. The over-use of suspensions and punitive discipline is just one element of a larger school climate issue that affects schools nationwide.

Restorative Justice is an important solution for addressing all of these issues, and helps schools become safe, supportive, and equitable environments that value the potential of all youth to succeed. This approach is taking root in schools across the United States and is based on practices that encourage meaningful accountability, repair harm and build relationships, rather than require retribution for wrongdoing. In practice, Restorative Justice addresses the core causes of conflict and fosters leadership development over time.

Why Restorative Justice? A School Discipline Approach that Works is a collection of stories and case studies that demonstrate the benefits and impact of Restorative Justice on students, schools and entire communities.



“THIS PROGRAM IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT IN SCHOOL CLIMATE WE’VE SEEN THIS YEAR.”
—TEACHER, UPLIFT COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Since the early 1990s, schools largely, and increasingly, adopted punitive discipline and “zero-tolerance” policies in reaction to “bad” student behavior. These approaches are often ineffective because they do not get to the root causes of the behavior, nor do they create real accountability for students’ mistakes. In many cases, they actually make problems worse, and often times student misbehavior continues and escalates.

Research has shown that young people who have been suspended even once are three times as likely to drop out of high school. And young people who drop out of high school are eight times as likely to be incarcerated. Additionally, young men of color receive a disproportionate amount of suspensions, and it is even worse for young men of color with disabilities. Zero-tolerance approaches put school resources toward policing (electronic searches, surveillance cameras, and police officers) and pushing students out, instead of toward teaching, support and peace.

This is why it is so important to rethink how we approach school discipline and implement a better system.

OUR VISION OF WHAT’S POSSIBLE.

Restorative Justice is an important solution for addressing all of these issues; helping schools become safe, supportive, and equitable environments that value the potential of all youth to succeed.

In a Restorative Justice school, there is a sense of community and respect that helps everyone focus on learning. The school culture is welcoming and supportive, and time invested in building strong relationships helps prevent conflict. When conflicts do arise, everyone involved has the opportunity to tell their version of what happened, and everyone works together to create a solution that includes meaningful accountability and repairs previous harm. Everyone also has the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, and conflicts are not allowed to continue or escalate.

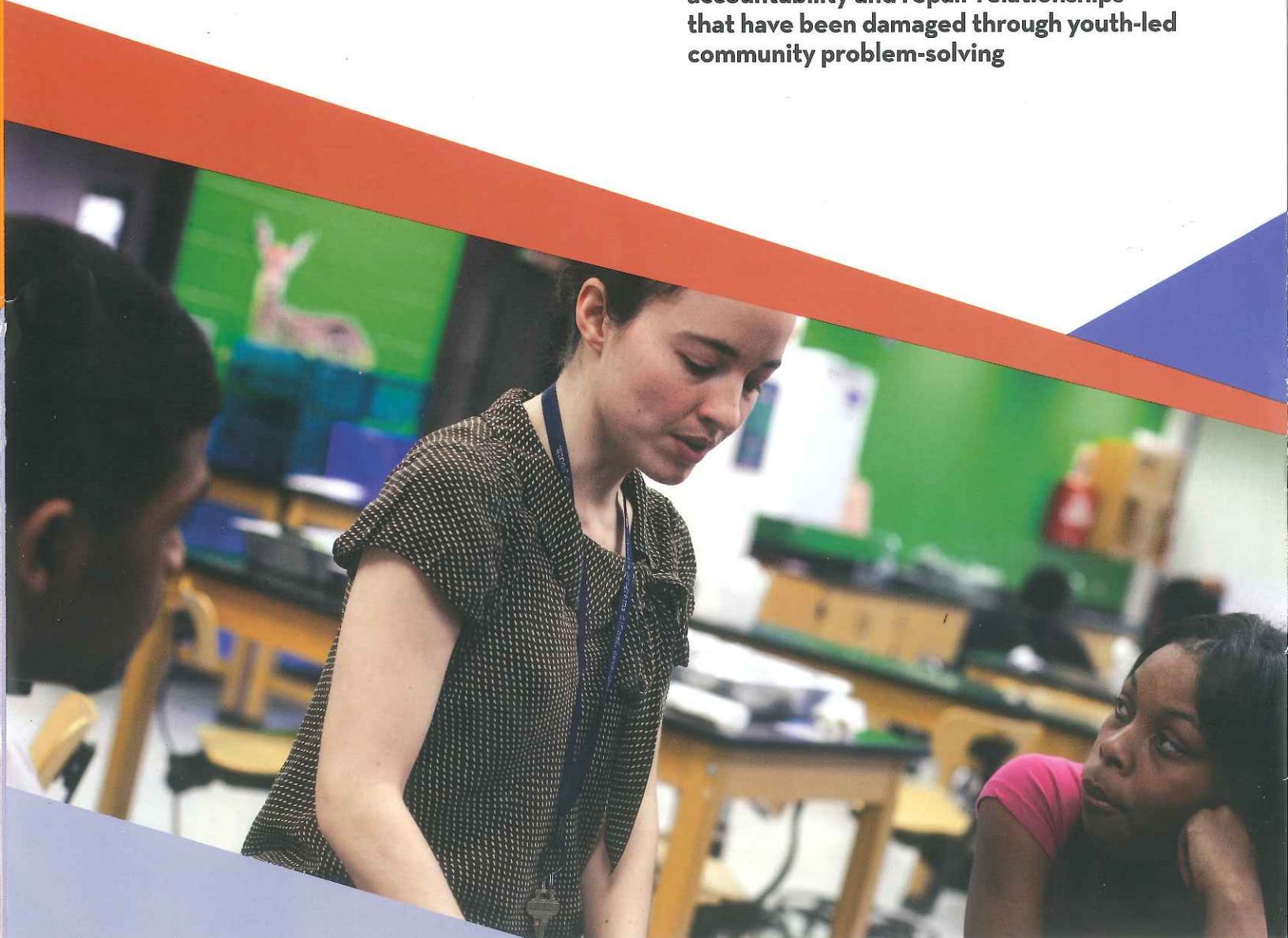
HOW DOES IT WORK?

Restorative Justice practices actively foster strong relationships, accountability and community problem-solving. These approaches focus heavily on prevention to establish a strong school culture, rather than just reacting to individual incidents of misbehavior. Our model of Restorative Justice is unique and involves comprehensive, full-school implementation where we work with students, teachers, security staff, and administrators to make this shift.

Alternatives is a pioneer of using restorative practices in schools. We started the first peer jury (now called peer conference) at Senn High School in Chicago in 1996. Since then, Alternatives' Restorative Justice program has partnered with Chicago Public Schools to provide training, technical assistance, and youth programming to help Chicago schools build community, repair relationships, and implement restorative alternatives to suspension and detention.

IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS, WE FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING CORE AREAS:

- **Shifting school culture to create a community of care that values staff and students as whole people with diverse strengths, experiences and challenges**
- **Classroom community-building strategies including team-building activities, creating classroom guidelines, and circles to build relationships before conflicts arise**
- **Restorative language and conversations to address conflicts immediately with open communication**
- **Peace circles to resolve ongoing conflicts among groups of students, staff and/or parents**
- **Peer conferencing to facilitate accountability and repair relationships that have been damaged through youth-led community problem-solving**



Many commonly used elements of restorative justice, including talking circles, peer conferences and restorative conversations, create a non-judgmental space for the student, those affected, and members of the school community to collectively discuss what happened, build accountability, and find solutions.

Our model can be adapted to build more restorative relationships according to the specific needs of any given school. The following stories showcase different approaches to Restorative Justice in the words of the teachers, students and school staff who have seen the positive impact these approaches have made in their lives and schools.



"I AM SO THANKFUL THAT WE NOW HAVE A FORMAL MEANS OF USING COMMUNICATION TO RESOLVE CONFLICT, WHICH IS REALLY SOME OF THE BEST EDUCATION THAT OUR STUDENTS CAN GET!"
—TEACHER, UPLIFT COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL



STORIES

ARE YOU 'ABOUT THAT TIGER LIFE'?

As a principal, you see the areas within the school that are strong and those that need support. While we have always had a number of social service agencies, I realized that Douglass High, the home of the Tigers, needed more love and support in the areas of professional development and classroom management. Our culture and climate needed more investment, too. As staff, we needed to model appropriate behavior for students to learn how to be engaged and successful community members. In addition, we needed to be less punitive in our approach to discipline.

I also knew that in order to build a more positive culture in our school, we had to give teachers a chance to gain new skills and tools in classroom management so they could be successful.

Before, if a student broke our cell phone policy or engaged in a fight, we would mandate out-of-school suspensions for days. When they returned to school, they would simply go back to class — nothing was done to resolve issues between

students and we didn't have a process to re-engage students in the school community. Our culture was not where I wanted it to be. So we asked ourselves, "What are suspensions teaching our kids? Does it give them the opportunity to model different behavior?" The answer was simple, but the solutions were not as easy.

Through a partnership with Alternatives, I learned more about restorative practices and their use for school discipline and culture building. I became well-versed in things like circle-keeping and understood how Restorative Justice could spill over into the classroom. I also learned that relationship building was at the heart of restorative approaches, a technique we already knew worked among our staff when it came to teaching our students.

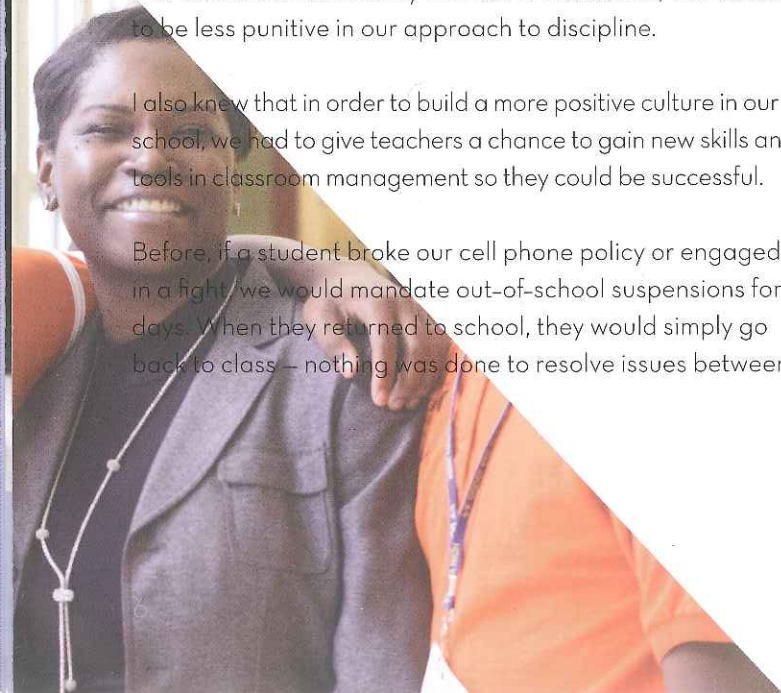
Restorative Justice keeps students in school and holds them accountable for their actions. Even more, the restorative practices give students the opportunity to have a voice in the decision-making process when determining how problems will be handled.

The impact at our school has been huge. For one, our disciplinary records have shifted dramatically. Before, we had one of the highest suspension rates in Chicago Public Schools. Over the course of six weeks in this new school year, we only had three school suspensions — none of which were out-of-school — and all were resolved using restorative practices, like a parent conference with a student-dean and a teacher.

We're seeing results in the classroom, too. Instructional delivery and rigor must always be a priority in every school. Restorative Justice is a valuable complement because it allows for greater student engagement. This isn't to say that there won't be any distractions within the classroom, but because of the relationships that Restorative Justice encourages, now teachers are prepared to address distractions in a manner that meets them where they're at and attempts to re-engage disruptive students rather than push them out.

Restorative Justice provides a unique lens on how to build relationships with students and how to consistently model appropriate behaviors for them — a behavior we've coined with the phrase 'Are you about that Tiger Life?' At Douglass, Restorative Justice has indeed embedded into our way of life and our entire culture has benefited.

— Ms. Perry, Principal at Douglass High School





LEARNING TO MAKE ROOM FOR PEACE

Having spent fifteen years as a teacher, I pride myself in having a good rapport with my students. However, I'm human, and can sometimes become frustrated when the students aren't engaged with the lesson or seem to be in their own world. Discipline in our classrooms is quite honestly one of the biggest issues teachers face.

Last year a fight broke out in our school. Although it involved younger students who weren't even in my 8th period class, my students had just witnessed a fight, so tensions were high and students were visibly upset. I began teaching, but after about five minutes, it became clear that no learning would be able to take place. So, I put the day's lesson plan on hold and convened my class for a talking circle.

A talking circle is just one example of a restorative method that encourages teachers to ask questions and engage in a conversation as opposed to giving advice or offering subjective opinions in a one-way direction. It's a difficult practice at first, but is immensely impactful.

As a teacher, I want to quickly fix problems – but that's not always what students need. Asking questions and respectfully listening to their answers offer ways to directly address the issue at hand, and give students a chance to verbalize how they're feeling and come up with their own solutions. It was empowering for the students who wanted to talk to say their piece and after, there was space for authentic learning to occur. Restorative Justice methods like this also reinforce the shift from taking a student's behavior personally to using such situations as opportunities to empathize with them and strengthen relationships.

Our school is small and we're housed in a community that had one of the highest murder rates in the city not too long ago. Our kids witness too many instances of death and are exposed to and experience large amounts of trauma which undoubtedly impact their health and learning inside of school. So I encourage students to make use of our Peace Room, where we regularly hold grief circles that allow them to process and heal from trauma.

This year a student caught my attention as he yelled my name down the hall saying, "I need to get my friend to the peace room. I've got to get there."

I noticed the friend he was referring to was teary-eyed and slumped against the hallway wall. After hearing about the pain he was experiencing, we were able to connect the student to a social worker and a guidance counselor. But more than that, we simply gave him a space to hold an honest conversation inside of a community he could trust. I thought to myself, if restorative practices like this hadn't been there, where would that student have gone?

– Missy Hughes, Teacher & Restorative Justice Coordinator, TEAM Englewood Academy

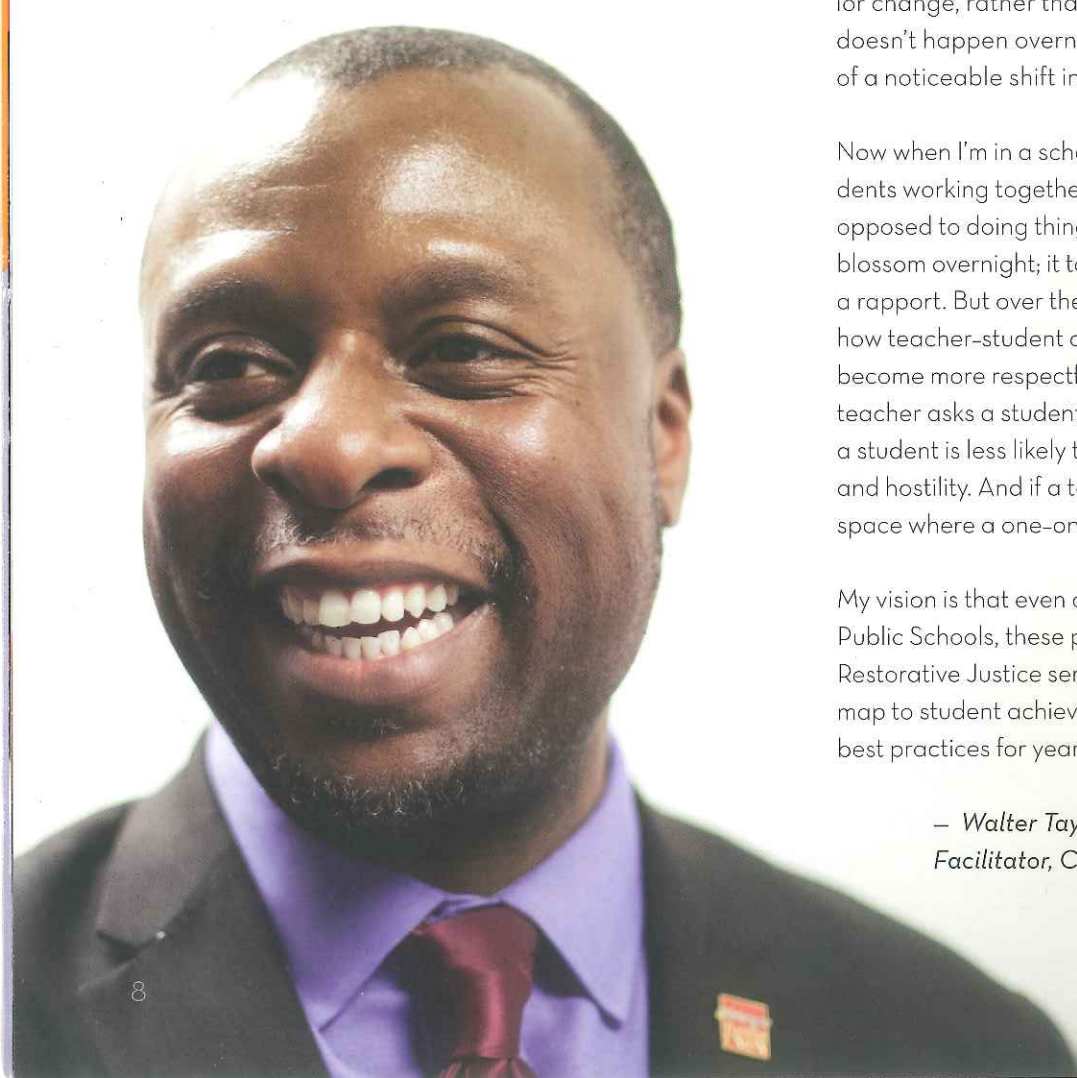




A NECESSARY TOOL FOR OUR TOOLBOX

Students are not only our future leaders, but also our current leaders and strongest allies. They are full of potential and have smart ideas on how and what a learning environment can and should look like. Restorative Justice practices allow teachers and administrators to begin to see students less as problems that need to be fixed, and more so as the capable leaders that they truly are.

As a professional development facilitator with the Chicago Teachers Union - Quest Center, I'm inspired by the impact Restorative Justice is having in Chicago Public Schools. Teachers already have a full load to carry and are spread thin when it comes to their time. Restorative practices lift



some of the burden that maintaining a classroom can bring by providing teachers with appropriate tools to maintain a respectful environment, establish a culture for learning and manage student behavior. It also means teachers are provided with time for more intentional professional development on restorative practices, where they are paid for their training and treated like the valuable professionals that they are.

Through Restorative Justice, Chicago is also finding ways to nurture the leadership of our students, for example, when we hold "healing circles." Just this year, we held a healing circle at Douglass High School to give a group of students, teachers, principals and administrators the opportunity to learn from and about one another in a quiet, personalized setting within the school. They divided themselves into four groups, each facilitated by a young man who was seen as disruptive and hard to reach prior to the restorative meeting.

Not only did the students take pride in keeping the circle on task, they led fruitful discussions which allowed for constructive conversations to manifest. The teachers were stunned and visibly emotional once they began to see the young men as skilled leaders who were capable of behavior change, rather than as headaches. Immediate change doesn't happen overnight, but this circle was the beginning of a noticeable shift in the school's culture and climate.

Now when I'm in a school building, I see teachers and students working together. Teachers do things *with* students as opposed to doing things *to* students. Relationships don't just blossom overnight; it takes time to build trust and establish a rapport. But over the course of just one year, I've seen how teacher-student and student-student interactions have become more respectful in the schools we work in. When a teacher asks a student to do something inside of a classroom, a student is less likely to respond with frustration, aggression and hostility. And if a tense situation happens to arise, there is space where a one-on-one conversation can take place.

My vision is that even as students cycle in and out of Chicago Public Schools, these practices will be the things that remain. Restorative Justice serves as a key component of the roadmap to student achievement and sets the groundwork for best practices for years to come.

– Walter Taylor, Professional Development Facilitator, Chicago Teachers Union - Quest Center

MORE THAN JUST A ONE-TIME PROBLEM SOLVER

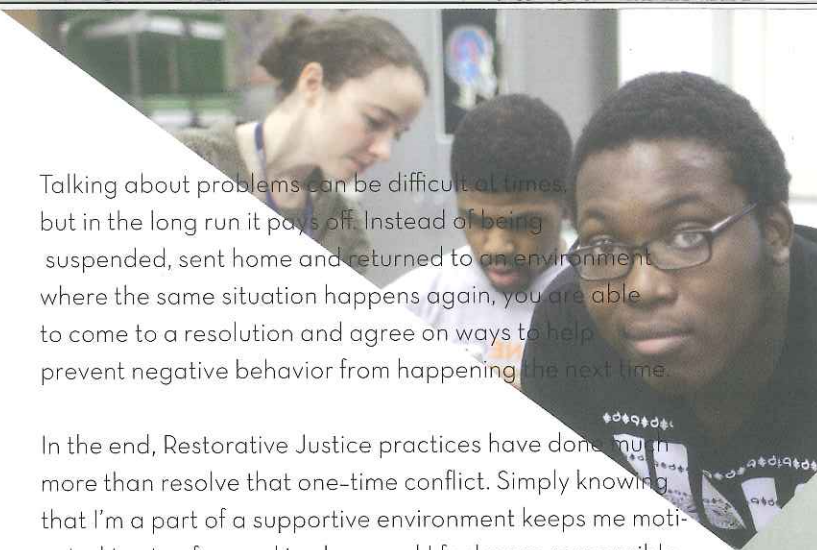
Restorative Justice operates like a two-way street where a teacher and I can smoothly work together, side-by-side, toward one destination: graduation.

Often, I see that my classmates are given referrals, suspensions and even expulsions for very minor offenses. I was given a referral after I talked in class when it wasn't my turn to speak. However, instead of being sent to the principal's office or even worse – home – I was brought to my school's Peace Room.

I didn't know what to expect at first. I sat down with a peer conference leader, a coordinator and my teacher to speak my mind. During the conference we talked about what happened, why it happened and how I could have approached the situation differently.

Inside the Peace Room I knew I was in an environment that was judgment free and with that, it gave me the opportunity to hold conversations and begin to build a healthy relationship with the adults in my life. I decided that next time I would raise my hand before speaking in class, so I wouldn't be a disruption to our learning space.

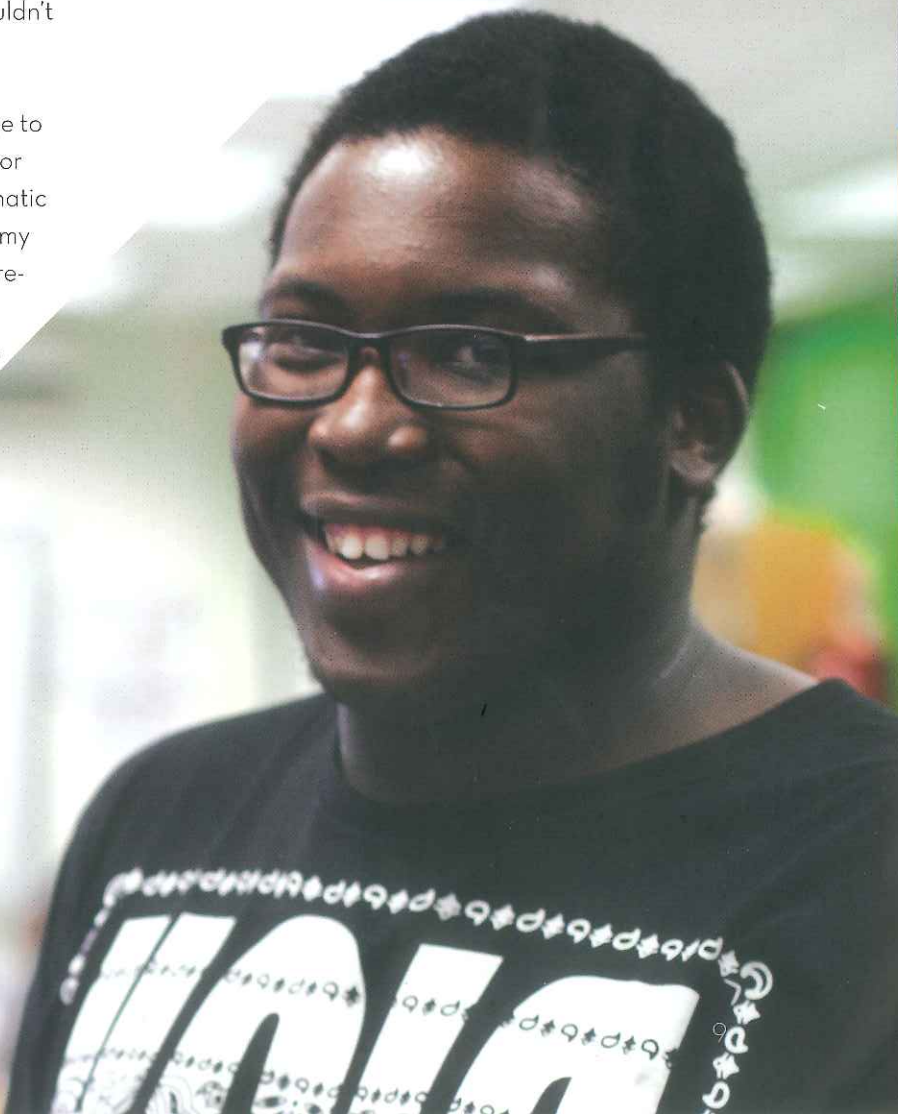
With Restorative Justice practices, I'm allowed to come to a reasonable conclusion without escalating a conflict or argument. I'm allowed to be thoughtful about problematic situations when they arise and understand and share my feelings. It helps me approach situations with a calm, respectful, and mature attitude and resolve conflicts in ways that aren't disruptive— both in and out of school.



Talking about problems can be difficult at times, but in the long run it pays off. Instead of being suspended, sent home and returned to an environment where the same situation happens again, you are able to come to a resolution and agree on ways to help prevent negative behavior from happening the next time.

In the end, Restorative Justice practices have done much more than resolve that one-time conflict. Simply knowing that I'm a part of a supportive environment keeps me motivated to stay focused in class, and I feel more responsible for my grades and accountable for my actions outside of school. I plan to use what I've learned in this program to better communicate with my family, with college representatives and during prospective job interviews later in life.

– Christopher L., 18,
Senior, School Peace Ambassador,
Uplift Community High School



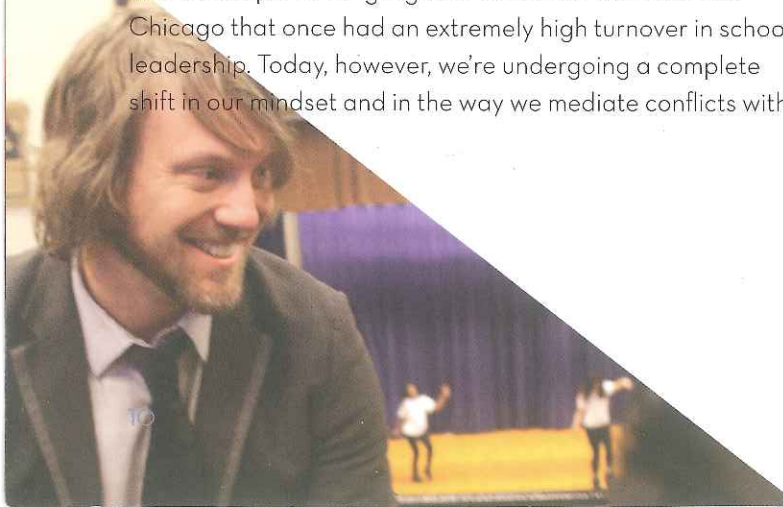


TOGETHER, WE CAN PREPARE OUR STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

Conflict is natural and mistakes are human. If we don't learn from our mistakes and learn how to mediate conflict, then we end up in a community where we hit, yell and resort to violence. We end up in a community where we never work together.

When a kid comes to my school, my staff and I have a set amount of time to prepare that child for the world no matter their background or home experience. If we can't teach them the necessary skills of how to mediate their own conflicts with their mother, father, sibling, spouse or coworker, then we haven't done our jobs as leaders.

At Sullivan High School, we are in one of the most violent and lowest performing high schools in the North Side of Chicago that once had an extremely high turnover in school leadership. Today, however, we're undergoing a complete shift in our mindset and in the way we mediate conflicts with



students.

Take for example the all too common occurrence of when a student bumps into another student in the hallway in between classes. This happened with two of my students who had never even met before; they didn't even know each other's names. One of my students became upset, started to curse and said he wanted to fight the other young man. Before the conflict escalated, a security guard and I instead tried figure out exactly why there was a conflict in the first place.

After engaging in a group conversation, the first young man admitted that his mother had yelled at him before he left for school that morning. His anger from that situation still lingered so when the other kid bumped him, he saw his mother's face. If I had resorted to punitive disciplinary practices and simply sent that student home, I would have never engaged in a conversation to understand what he was going through in life outside of school. Even more, we wouldn't have helped both students come to a mutual understanding and eventually, an apology.

Rarely do victims and offenders come together in our society, and that is perpetuated in the school setting, too. However, communication is a key component of Restorative Justice. Hearing one another's side of the conversation is particularly important in order to break the cycle of offense.

By helping kids take responsibility for their actions, our staff reduced out-of-school suspensions by 73 percent in one year. Most importantly, kids stopped acting up as much: misconduct episodes dropped by 45 percent. Attendance also is way up. It's now at 90 percent, up from 80 percent two years ago.

It makes sense: Empty chairs do not learn. **The first step toward improving academic success is keeping our kids in school.** Sometimes a student will lash out in class when he or she is frustrated, say about math comprehension. With Restorative Justice practices, that student is encouraged to express their frustration by engaging in constructive conversations. Here, they are learning how to adapt to their individual classroom environment, work in group settings and advocate for their unique learning needs – all skills that extend to our student's lifetime success.

– *Principal Chad Adams, Roger C. Sullivan High School*

CASE STUDY

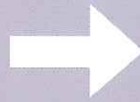
UPLIFT COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

Alternatives' Restorative Justice program prevented **281 days of suspension at Uplift last year.**

We worked with 235 unique "offending students," in a combination of peer conferences and restorative conversations. We saw nearly 70% of those youth only once, and the remainder between 2-4 times.



97% OF YOUTH REFERRED TO PEER CONFERCING COMPLETED THEIR AGREEMENT



98% OF THOSE YOUTH FELT THAT THE AGREEMENT THEY PRODUCED RESOLVED THEIR ISSUE OR CONFLICT



98% OF YOUTH REFERRED TO PEER CONFERCING FELT THAT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE HELPED THEM TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR ACTIONS



70% OF YOUTH REFERRED TO PEER CONFERCING FELT THAT IT HELPED THEM DEVELOP THE ABILITY TO "THINK BEFORE THEY ACT"

“BECAUSE WE ARE PEERS AND RELATE TO EACH OTHER WITH EMPATHY, STUDENTS BEGIN TO TRUST THAT WE ARE THERE TO SUPPORT AND NOT JUDGE... SETTling CONFLICTS PEACEFULLY BIRTHS NEW POSSIBILITIES AND THIS DOESN'T HAVE TO HAPPEN ONLY IN SCHOOL. WE URGE EVERYONE TO START WITH THEMSELVES AND SOON ALL OF CHICAGO COULD BE A 'BELOVED COMMUNITY'.”

— SCHOOL PEACE AMBASSADOR, UPLIFT COMMUNITY HIGH

SAFE SCHOOLS CONSORTIUM

The Safe Schools Consortium brings together partners working across policy and practice to promote reforms that reduce the disproportionate use of discipline practices causing school push-out. We advocate for the broader implementation of Restorative Justice in schools, so that schools can become safe, supportive, and equitable environments that value the potential of all our youth. The member organizations of the Safe Schools Consortium include **Alternatives, Inc.**, **Communities United**, convener of **VOYCE**, and the **Chicago Teachers Union - Quest Center**.

JOIN US!

There are many opportunities to support Restorative Justice practices and make a difference in the lives of youth, in our schools and in entire communities. Alternatives' Restorative Justice Program provides training and technical assistance to help Chicago schools implement restorative alternatives to suspension and detention. We offer professional development and trainings opportunities and also partner with schools as they implement a full restorative justice program at their site.

TO LEARN MORE, PLEASE VISIT ALTERNATIVES' WEBSITE WWW.ALTERNATIVESYOUTH.ORG.



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Positive programs
defined, developed
and led by youth.