

Making Policy Come to Life

A Qualitative Study of COFI Peace Centers for
Restorative Justice in the Brunson Math and Science
Specialty Elementary School and the
Wells Community Academy High School

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INTRODUCTION

School violence in United States is an invisible epidemic. Public schools across the nation are plagued by physical violence, bullying, sexual harassment, and gay-bashing. In Chicago, existing school disciplinary policies—which often rely on suspensions and expulsions as their primary modes of discipline—fail to create safe schools across a number of dimensions. First, students of color are disproportionately targeted with these policies. A recent national survey by the U.S. Department of Education revealed that although African American students make up slightly less than half of the students enrolled in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), they account for over three quarters of the out of school suspensions.¹ Second, these disciplinary policies fail to meet the needs of ever-more diverse student populations. LGBTQ students and girls are particularly disserved by disciplinary policies, which fail to take into consideration their unique needs. Third, not only do these groups face bullying and harassment from peers but frequently from adults and teachers as well. Fourth, issues of school violence are typically treated as isolated problems with problematic students, rather than as an indicator of broader systemic failures at the school, district, and national levels. Overall, harsh disciplinary policies fail to elicit the systemic responses needed to produce safe school environments where students thrive and develop healthy social relationships and where their academic and social success is fully fostered.

When implemented strategically and comprehensively in district-wide public education, restorative justice programs can transform school violence and conflicts into opportunities for healing social relationships while capitalizing on student potential. Restorative justice creates meaningful educational

opportunities for students otherwise alienated from schools. Restorative justice is a viable alternative means for resolving conflicts that will keep students in school and reduce district reliance on expulsions and suspensions. In addition, restorative justice has the potential to greatly improve the overall school culture and atmosphere, which can have a tremendous influence on enhancing overall school safety. Finally, implementation of restorative justice policies sends a clear message to students that they are valuable school citizens, and that their families, administrators and teachers all have a clear stake in their academic success and life opportunities.

This report focuses on the implementation of restorative justice programs in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) by Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI).² Specifically, we document the Peace Centers at the Brunson Math and Science Specialty Elementary School and the Wells Community Academy High School. We examine how the Peace Centers work to help reduce unnecessary and ineffective suspensions; we explore how COFI's restorative justice programs help students succeed in school and learn to resolve interpersonal conflicts; and we consider how these restorative justice processes have been able to change the overall climate of these schools, particularly through relationship-building. Drawing on ethnographic research methods, we analyze restorative justice through the interview data from a small sample including COFI affiliated parents who work in the schools to coordinate and facilitate the Peace Centers and two CPS school staff members who partner with COFI in this effort. This report is intended to provide rich ethnographic insights into the existing data that already attests to the success of many restorative justice initiatives

in schools in the U.S. and worldwide.³ By bringing these COFI school-based restorative justice programs to life through the voices of those in the schools who have committed to them, we hope to detail their processes, reveal their aims and purposes, and clarify their impacts and outcomes.

The remainder of this report is organized into five additional sections. The next section provides a brief overview of restorative justice philosophy and research on the implementation of restorative justice in other U.S. school districts. We then provide background information about COFI and their implementation of Peace Centers in CPS. Following that is the research methodology section, which includes an overview of the history of the project and our research design; a description of the two schools in which we conducted our research, focusing particularly on the schools' demographics and summaries of their climate surveys; a description of the observation and interview data collection process as well as brief backgrounds for each of the respondents in this study. The fifth section of the report presents the ethnographic data analyses. The fifth section is divided into multiple sub-sections, each providing insights into the work the COFI does and its meaning according to the COFI affiliated peacemakers and CPS administrators we interviewed. We conclude by suggesting how this research on COFI's restorative justice Peace Centers in two public schools can meaningfully inform CPS policy and be effectively implemented district-wide to address the current failings of school disciplinary policies. Our hope is that this inside view of Peace Centers, from the perspectives of the COFI affiliates and CPS staff will serve as a catalyst for CPS to fully fund restorative justice programs district wide.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

Restorative justice is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible. Restorative Justice is not only a way for those affected by conflict to be a part of the solution, but it is also a way to promote community involvement.⁴

Restorative justice is a viable alternative to current failing discipline and school safety policies, one that is productive and proactive. The theory of restorative justice holds that in the traditional retributive systems in which punishment is central, one social harm is merely replaced by another. In schools, this cycle occurs when the “offender” is removed from the school through a suspension and the social relationships that were strained continue to go unrepaired, while causing increased harm to the original offender. Restorative practices also reject two basic assumptions that are foundational to traditional retributive systems. First, in the retributive systems, the assumption is that all offenses should be assigned a punishment to some degree independent of both their relative context and relative particular transgression and second, that the victim experience is universal rather than particular. In contrast, restorative justice practices shift the focus from the universal to the particular, and emphasize the specific context of the incident and its effect on particular relationships within the school community.

The practices associated with restorative justice encompass a wide array of methods, everything from peer juries and mediation to peace circles, parent/student conferences,

and victim conferences. At their core, restorative philosophies focus on restoring relationships that are harmed in school conflicts. When implemented properly, these techniques can address school safety in a manner that treats core safety concerns and have the potential to yield transformative changes in school culture. By including everyone affected by the incident including victim, offender, and community, restorative justice techniques are much wider in scope than other more traditional forms of school discipline while still foregrounding the particular context of individual incidents.

Restorative justice strategies also emphasize important life-long skills such as non-violent communication, active non-judgmental listening, conflict transformation, developing empathy and rapport, and understanding and managing anger. These and other practices of restorative justice align with new theories of social and emotional learning. In social and emotional learning, as in restorative justice, it is critical to teach students strategies to create and maintain strong social ties, to engage in reciprocity in relationships, and to take individual responsibility for one’s actions and relationships. These life-long interpersonal skills of both restorative justice and social and emotional learning, when taken together, work in tandem to strengthen communal relationships and a sense of responsibility to the community for students, both in school and in their neighborhoods.⁵

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE THEORY AND PRACTICE IN US SCHOOLS

Several school districts in the U.S., with demographics that compare well to CPS, have shown success from the implementation of restorative justice programs. In Oakland, California for example, a case study of Cole Middle

School, published by the Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice at UC Berkeley, noted that “Suspensions declined by 87 percent and expulsions declined to zero at Cole Middle School during the implementation of restorative justice.”⁶

In Minnesota, a more in-depth and longer-term case study followed schools across a district in South St. Paul. They also reported compelling figures: “Lincoln Center Elementary, reported behavioral referrals for physical aggression were reduced from seven per day to fewer than two. Moreover, acts of physical aggression declined steadily, from 773 in 1997-1998 to 153 by 2000-2001.”⁷ A newer interim report issued in the summer of 2011 shows continued progress with pilot schools in Minneapolis, which showed “slight increases in positive feelings about school and adults at school, feeling safer at school, and increases in talking to family members about school and people they are dating.” This study further “showed encouraging trends in student behavioral changes including a significant reduction in fighting and a slight reduction in cutting classes or skipping school.”⁸

Other school districts across the country are acknowledging the benefits of restorative justice practices and are implementing programs. Denver Public Schools, for example, saw such rapid successes with their programs that the Colorado Department of Education expanded the program from one to seven schools over three years. In a 2008-2009 report detailing the results of the pilot programs researchers noted that 30% of students showed improvements in attendance, and those who improved showed fairly dramatic improvements a “reduction of nearly 50% in period absences per quarter and over 60% in period tardies per quarter.”⁹ In terms of behavioral improvement, in the sample studied, there was a nearly

“90% reduction in average instances of office referrals and out-of-school suspensions.”¹⁰ Students surveyed also showed a marked improvement in total Emotional Quotient (EQ) scores, which were defined as “Efficacy in dealing with daily social emotional demands as well as overall positive mood”—a score that directly relates social emotional learning goals. These early promising results lead to a wider implementation of restorative justice practices and even more promising results. By 2010 Denver had widened the scope of the project to 17 schools, with outstanding results, most notable a dramatic reduction of nearly 6,000 suspensions over the same timeframe in preceding years.¹¹

As the studies above show, restorative justice encourages positive behavioral trends, reduces the time spent on discipline, and equips students with valuable tools for lifelong skills in conflict management. However, at the philosophical core of restorative practices is a systems-based holistic approach to dealing with issues of conflict. This system, by definition, necessitates a whole-school approach to be effective, and broader implementation district-wide enhances its effectiveness even further. Many studies concur that a fragmentary, piecemeal approach to implementation shows little to no effect. This is not to say the restorative practices are appropriate for every disciplinary circumstance and should be a total replacement for traditional systems; however, in order to be maximally effective the approach should be widely adopted at all school levels and district-wide.

BACKGROUND: COFI POWER-PAC AND PEACE CENTERS

Our mission is to strengthen the power and voice of low-income and working families at all levels of civic

life – from local institutions and communities to the city and state policy arenas.¹²

Since its start in 1995, COFI has been involved in leadership training and community organizing with low-income communities in Chicago in order to improve schools, communities and policies. The starting point for COFI’s work is their leadership-training program, which builds community capacity for low-income families.

By encouraging parents—primarily mothers—first to address their personal goals and dreams, COFI helps parents recognize that skills honed as a parent can translate to leadership skills in the larger community. It helps them realize that many day-to-day family struggles are rooted in public policies that have public remedies. Parents who become leaders can create change within themselves, apply what they have learned to their communities, then to the larger systems that affect families, and beyond.¹³

One of the successful outcomes of COFI’s extensive leadership training and organizing model is that a group of parent leaders from COFI started a Chicago membership-based organization, controlled and led by parent leaders, called Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council (POWER-PAC). Founded in 2004, POWER-PAC has been an important voice for Chicago’s Latina and African American women. They have engaged in city-wide educational improvement campaigns to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, to reinstate recess in CPS, to reduce structural barriers to enrolling children of color in quality early education programs, and to replace “zero tolerance” policies with restorative justice philosophy and practices with a new CPS Student

Code of Conduct. Their core efforts center on: eliminating the school to jail pipeline, reducing expulsions and suspensions of students, and creating an environment for success for children, as documented in the COFI-POWER PAC report, *Parent to Parent Guide Restorative Justice in Chicago Public Schools—Stopping the School to Prison Pipeline*.¹⁴

In 2005, COFI’s POWER-PAC launched its Elementary Justice Campaign to address the problem of out-of-school suspensions and secured funding from the Cook County Juvenile Division of the State’s Attorney office to form its first Peace Center, an afterschool program at the Milton Brunson Math and Science Specialty Elementary School. Brunson’s Austin Peace Center has now been operating for seven years. In 2010, COFI opened a Peace Center at the Wells Community Academy High School, offering lunchtime programs with peace circles.

COFI Peace Centers host intensive restorative justice sessions and teach students conflict resolution skills. Parent facilitators run the COFI Peace Centers; they are the “peacemakers” or “circle keepers.” Highly trained in restorative justice practices by Chicago area organizations,¹⁵ the peacemakers are also very familiar with the neighborhood schools in which they become peacemakers following their training. As peacemakers, these parents are responsible for helping children and youth to resolve conflicts that would otherwise frequently lead to suspension or expulsion. COFI explains the peacemaker role:

They facilitate weekly groups with students who are referred by teachers, parents or themselves—based on a concern about the student’s behavior or a belief that the student is at-risk of serious trouble at school or in the community. Peacemakers

mentor the children who learn de-escalation and conflict resolution skills that can be utilized at home, at school, and on the streets.¹⁶

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In 2010, as a part of the national effort to eliminate the Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline (also called the school-to-jail pipeline or simply “pipeline”), Roosevelt University’s Mansfield Institute for Social Justice and Transformation (MISJT) held a citywide summit including educators, activists, community organizations and academics to address Chicago’s entrenched pipeline. Following the summit, MISJT advisory board faculty and staff committed to integrating issues about the pipeline as a one-university social justice activist agenda that would include developing and integrating it into course work across the curriculum, developing faculty research, facilitating public panels and speakers, training students in restorative justice practices, partnering with CPS to bring restorative justice into the schools, and partnering with a wide range of area community organizations to support their restorative justice, activist, and legislative work. One of the highlights of this agenda was the development of the Activist Scholars program by Stephanie Farmer, who is a sociology professor and MISJT Advisory Board member. The Activist Scholar program asked university faculty, particularly those on the MISJT Advisory Board, to mentor selected students to conduct research in partnership with Chicago area community-based organizations that were working to stop the cradle-to-jail pipeline. This research is one of the project outcomes of the Activist Scholar program.

As a member of the MISJT advisory board and faculty member in education and women’s and gender studies, Dr. Leslie Rebecca Bloom set

up the project with COFI and put together a team of activist scholars for the 2011-2012 academic year. Rachel Colias and Katherine Klotz participated for the entire year, Olivia Kaplan participated for the fall semester, and Chris Mack participated in the spring semester and summer of 2012.

The team used participatory qualitative research methods, primarily focusing on observations of two of COFI’s Peace Centers and interviews with COFI peacemakers and school staff. We worked with COFI’s executive director, Ellen Schumer and POWER PAC’s Karen Lynn Morton to design the study. Together, we discussed what we needed to learn about restorative justice from these two sites and how best to gather the data. Ms. Morton was our liaison with the schools and peacemakers and helped us to gain access to the Peace Centers at the Brunson Math and Science Specialty Elementary School and the Wells Community Academy High School. As the summaries below of the school climate surveys conducted at these schools indicate, students were much in need of a restorative justice program to increase their safety and life opportunities.

RESEARCH SITES/SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS AND CLIMATE SURVEY RESULTS

Brunson Math and Science Specialty Elementary School: Brunson School¹⁷ has approximately 720 African American students enrolled, making up 96% of the student population. In addition to the African American students, there were 15 Hispanic students, 2 white students, 2 Native American students and 13 students categorized as multi-racial or “other.” All grades in the school, pre-kindergarten up to eighth grade, are predominantly African American.

In 2009, 60% of Brunson’s 6th, 7th and 8th graders took a Student Connection Survey; they were asked questions about the physical, social, and emotional climates and the support system of the school. When asked about whether or not the school had a safe and respectful climate, 3% of students reported that the climate was excellent, 52% said it was adequate, and 28% thought that it needed improvement, meaning that they did not feel physically safe because of fighting, thievery, and incidents of vandalism on campus. Students reported feel emotionally unsafe because of teasing, bullying, and harassment. Additionally, students were surveyed on the social and emotional learning environment, in which only 5% of the students said that the environment was “Excellent.” Fifty-six percent of students said it was adequate and 23% reported that it “Needs Improvement;” a category used to indicate that peers were not “socially skilled” and lacked the abilities to resolve conflicts. Shockingly, 38% of the students surveyed reported that their classes were boring and irrelevant to their education. The students also said that their teachers seemed unmotivated and did not believe that their students could keep up with rigorous work.

Wells Community Academy High School: Wells High School¹⁸ has 447 Hispanic students, making up 49% of the student population, and 428 African American students, making up 47% of the student population. The rest of the student population is made up of 21 white students, 1 Native American student, 3 Asian students, and 19 multi-racial or “other” students. Ninth and tenth grade generally have more African American students, while the later grades, eleventh and twelfth, are made up of more Hispanic students. Over the course of the last fifteen years, the student population has shifted

from predominantly Hispanic to almost half Hispanic and half African American.

In 2008, 61% of the student body at Wells took a Student Connection Survey documenting how they felt about the environment of their school. Only 4% of students felt that they had a safe and respectful school climate, 65% said that it was adequate, and 31% of students felt that the climate needed improvement. Many students also did not feel that they were emotionally safe due to bullying and harassment. When the students were surveyed about the social and emotional learning environment, only 3% thought that it was excellent and that students have good social skills, work well in teams, generally do well with their homework and tests, and resolve conflicts peacefully. Sixty-nine of students thought the learning environment was adequate, and 28% felt that it needed improvement because of conflicts and no one being able to solve their problems respectfully. To go along with these results, 33% of students thought that their teachers had low expectations of the students and did not make any effort to encourage them. These students also said that their classes were boring, unchallenging and unhelpful.

In a 2007 attendance report,¹⁹ the percentage of students that attend school on a regular basis was 74%. This number can be broken down into the separate grades; 71.9% of ninth graders, 72.6% of tenth graders, 76.4% of eleventh graders, and 76.8% of twelfth graders attend regularly.

DATA COLLECTION

Observations: A portion of the qualitative research also consisted of observing and participating in the Wells Peace Circles. The Wells Peace Circles that we observed were

exclusively female and held twice a week.

Interviews: We interviewed seven participants, one time each. The interviews we conducted focused on the respondents' experiences with the two Peace Centers and their perceptions of how the Peace Centers are making a difference at Wells and Brunson schools. Towards these ends, our interviews focused on the background of the interviewees; their understandings about the role of restorative justice in schools; their evaluations of how restorative justice practices have influenced the schools; and particularly, their thoughts about the influence of restorative justice on reducing conflicts among students and the reducing suspensions and expulsions. Here we present background portraits of each of the interviewees, five who are affiliated with COFI and two from CPS. We use pseudonyms for all CPS staff interviewed and quoted.

COFI Peacemakers:

Karen Lynn Morton has been affiliated with COFI for 9 years. She is a COFI Parent Peer Trainer and is the founder and coordinator of the Austin Peace Center in the Brunson School in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago and Wells Community Academy High School. She was also a founding member of Parents United for a Better Brunson (PUBB). She is active with the Austin-Wide Parent Network and was Regional Chair and Brunson Chair of the No Child Left Behind committees. Ms. Morton is also Co-Chair Emeritus of COFI's POWER PAC.

Felipa Mena has been a COFI affiliate since 2002, working with both COFI and POWER-PAC as a community activist. With Ms. Morton, she established a branch of the Austin Peace Center at Wells

High School. She is the primary recruiter and lead peacemaker at Wells. Ms. Mena says that her sense of mission for restorative justice and for leadership at the Wells School is motivated by the 2009 street shooting of her son who had graduated from Wells school.

Marietta Morton has been involved with the Peace Center at Brunson for over six years. Mrs. Morton was introduced to COFI when they came to Brunson School where she retired from and had 3 grandsons attending. Mrs. Morton was trained as a circle keeper by her daughter Karen Lynn Morton in 2005 and in 2009 by Jane Nicholson. Mrs. Morton became involved in the Peace Center and Restorative Justice after witnessing the harsh discipline policies in schools. She has served on the Local School Council and is currently on the Leadership Council of POWER PAC.

Laurella Scaggs has been involved with the Brunson Peace Center as a parent peacemaker for approximately six years. She was introduced to restorative justice practices through her involvement with COFI. She is the lead peacemaker at Brunson Her training as a restorative justice circle keeper was in 2005 by Karen Lynn Morton and in 2009 Jane Nicholson. Her personal experiences with her own grandson's subjection to punitive forms of school discipline motivated her efforts to implement restorative justice practices to mitigate the harsh punishments students often face for minor infractions. Ms. Scaggs is a member of the Local School Council of Brunson School and Co Chairperson of POWER PAC.

Joyce Edwards has been working with the Peace Center for approximately three years at Francis Scott Key School. She was introduced to restorative justice through her involvement with COFI, and has been involved as a parent peacekeeper

with The Austin Peace Center . An Austin neighborhood resident, she is very familiar with the challenges young people face growing up in that area. Ms. Edwards serves on the Local School Council of Key School CPS Staff:

Oscar Blades (pseudonym) has been an administrator at Wells Community Academy for four years. He was first introduced to COFI and Peace Centers by Felipa Mena. He is interested in the rehabilitative possibilities of restorative justice and has been very supportive of the Peace Center's effort to work on conflict resolution with students from Wells.

Marcia Norman (pseudonym) has been in administration at Wells Academy for three years. She works with the Lead Peacemaker and with the principal to refer students to the Peace Center. She is involved with students who are at risk of dropping out and helps students plan for school success.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to have verbatim data from the interviews, one of our research team members transcribed all of the interview data, which she then distributed to all the team members for review and to make sure we were all familiar with all of the data; we also all read the observation field notes. The team individually coded the transcripts for major themes, we met to discuss emerging understandings and analyses and to write parts of the document together, to distribute individual work products, and to co-edit the work.

As the remainder of this report will illustrate, empirical data from the COFI peacemakers and school staff gave us authentic and often profound access into understandings of the ways that restorative justice improved the

lives of students and the climates of schools.

COFI PEACE CENTERS AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN PRACTICE

This section of the report presents and analyzes the ethnographic data we collected, and is divided into five subsections, each providing specific insights into restorative justice. Each subsection details aspects of the work that COFI does and the meaning that our interviewees make of this work.

“STOP GIVING KIDS THE SIGNAL THAT THEY'RE CRIMINALS”: ALTERNATIVES TO CRIMINALIZATION AND SUSPENSION

COFI peacemakers are concerned about the continued use by CPS of zero tolerance policies that emphasize the criminalization of youth for behavioral infractions that do not require police attention. Such policies and practices create an educational climate that conveys to students that criminality is assumed and that their academic success is less important than disciplinary actions. Given that the zero tolerance policies of the Student Discipline Code were replaced by restorative justice in the 2006-2007 Student Code of Conduct, Ms. Morton argues that it is important for CPS to “stop giving kids the signal that they're criminals” by using zero tolerance policies and policing schools to the extent that they still do. She makes clear that even though adults and school administration know that youth are going to make mistakes, it does not mean that schools should have satellite police booking stations in school buildings or that when students do “mess up,” that police “have to take [students] to a station. It's crazy!” Ms. Morton continues, “that's giving a child the sense of ‘we're already criminals, the police

are already here.” Such practices give students a “sour taste” for schools, Ms. Morton says, and results in many students feeling like they shouldn't even attempt to come to class because they are either going to be sent into the hallway or suspended. Further, as Ms. Edwards states, suspensions alienate students from education “because when children are suspended it's like a vacation for them. They're at home, doing nothing. When I say nothing, I don't mean *nothing*. They're playing video games, watching TV all day as opposed to being in school doing something constructive.” Overall, practices of expulsions and suspensions lead to a hostile and repressive learning environment for the students and estrange them from schools, ultimately preventing them from advancing in their education.

In contrast, Peace Center facilitators and administrators all agree that when schools have Peace Centers and students are referred to them, there is a substantive shift away from the entrenched punitive forms of school discipline that are so prevalent in CPS. Restorative justice keeps students in schools and helps them to learn life-long skills in conflict resolution and anger management that can be used outside of school, in keeping with strategies of social and emotional learning that CPS is promoting.²⁰ As Ms. Morton concisely explains, Peace Centers are vital to schools because they “give an alternative to out of school suspension and give students the opportunity to correct their behaviors and take responsibility for their behaviors rather than to just put them out [of school] without any learning.”

Oscar Blades, a principal dedicated to the restorative justice process and to keeping students in school, reserves a room at Wells for a COFI Peace Center. For him, restorative justice reduces suspensions and expulsions because its strategies both prevent

conflict before it happens (proactive) and stop escalation when conflict does occur (reactive). He explains that when a conflict does not result in, or escalate to, physical violence or “lead to physical blows,” then restorative justice has been preventative. Preventing violence is the greatest hope for school-wide restorative justice programs. However, in the aftermath of a conflict or when a conflict does escalate, he refers to it as restorative justice “consulting.” By this Mr. Blades means that the purpose of restorative justice is to help students who are already in conflict, “face each other and discuss the consequences of their actions, rather than being subject to punitive measures that typically ignore the root causes of the conflict.” By utilizing restorative justice in this manner Mr. Blades is taking a real-world approach to conflict, accepting conflict as both an inevitable dimension of the human condition and an opportunity to teach students the valuable skills they will need to defuse conflict throughout their lives.

Ms. Mena also views restorative justice as a means “to try to stop [students] from going to jail and try to stop a lot of suspensions in the schools.” Ms. Scaggs asserts that “the role is to keep kids from being suspended, out of school, and to...let them know what they do is not a criminal act.” She tells students, “You can still be in school and do what you need to do, but you don’t have to go in the classroom to act up.” Mr. Blades concludes that “the mission of the Peace Center is to do conflict resolution in order to avoid more extreme consequences at school, like out of school suspensions.”

In order for the Peace Centers to achieve their goals and for restorative justice make a difference in the daily lives of students and the schools they attend, Peace Centers need to be adopted fully by CPS as concrete alternatives to school-based police stations and to implement the 2006-

2007 Student Code of Conduct’s commitment to restorative justice practices in place of zero tolerance policies. As the analyses below will show, the Peace Center COFI has created at the Wells and Brunson schools do just that.

“WE DON’T JUST UP AND DO IT”: INITIATION AND REFERRAL PROCESSES

Once COFI and the schools form partnerships and establish a Peace Center, they then follow a set of procedures to get students involved. At the Brunson and Wells schools, which invited COFI to initiate Peace Centers in the schools, Ms. Morton coordinates the procedures. She is the liaison between COFI and the schools. She explains her role:

I coordinate the program, set up the dates, get the referrals for the children, do the intake with the parents, and assign the children to whichever peacemaker is going to be there, and actually go out and talk about the Peace Centers and about restorative justice. It’s work.

Ms. Morton further explains that “once the Peace Center is set up, the process of getting students involved in them has to start.” Teachers are, of course, integral to the process of recruiting students into the Peace Centers. Ms. Edwards explains that “it’s mainly the teachers [who recruit students] because they know better than [main office staff] would who is heading down the wrong path.” Once a teacher decides to refer a student, there is, as Ms. Morton noted above, an official process that goes into play with the Peace Center Coordinator, the school administration, and parents. Ms. Edwards explains the official route that is needed:

The teachers have to do a referral to the principal. The principal then

in turn notifies Lynn that we have a potential participant; Lynn in turn calls the parents or guardians and does an interview with them. There’s papers to sign and if the parent agrees then that student comes to the Peace Center. We don’t just up and do it, you know.

While many main office staff may not have the hands-on experiences with students that teachers do, Ms. Norman, as an administrator, is responsible for knowing these students and helping them to make connections with the Peace Center. She is a staunch supporter of restorative justice and often refers students to the Peace Center. She explains that those students she refers typically are ones who she knows “have issues with other students.” She says that when she talks to girls especially,

I try my best to provide information, explaining the reason why I do think that they need to share their feelings because I noticed that some of the girls but girls have a lot inside of them and they don’t know how to work out. They come in, they have arguments... they don’t know how to channel those issues so I think the Center is a good place so they can share their feelings or talk about issues that they might have.

As an administrator, one who has seen positive changes in school safety, climate and student development through participation in the Austin Peace Center, Ms. Norman further believes that she needs “to advocate more, I have to be more proactive... referring the students that I can help.”

The peacemakers at Wells are very grateful that they have so much support from the school administrators; they believe that the student engagement they get as a result of administrative

support is helpful to their long-term sustainability. As Ms. Scaggs explained, “We have a very loving, understanding principal and assistant principal, who love what they do and what we can do for the kids.” When the administration demonstrates their respect for and approval of the peace circle as something that benefits the students, the teachers will participate in the process of referring students and in doing so, support the Peace Center and its mission.

Ms. Morton also explains the vital role that parents play in the process of engaging students in restorative justice. She speaks to each student’s parent(s) before involving students in a peace circle, not only because parental support is mandated, but more importantly, because it helps the Peacemakers to better understand the specific situations that the students are experiencing. Ms. Morton explains that too often parents hear from an outside party or source about what has supposedly happened with their child. Ms. Morton asserts that it is critical for parents be involved and that as the coordinator she talks “to the parents at least once because when you have those conversations, a lot will come to light...and you can help the child. I think the only way you can help a child is if the parent is involved.” Further, as Ms. Morton clarifies, many times the root of the problem is a domestic situation that the student is dealing with, and if the COFI peacemakers do not know about such situations from the perspectives of both the student and the family, they are at a disadvantage to helping students. Thus, part of COFI’s goal is to always remember that student behaviors may be extensions of home problems, that students’ problems are not isolated, and therefore, peacemakers need to assess holistically all the possible factors that are impacting a students’ behaviors and performances. This practice of COFI talking to families relates directly to

restorative justice practices in that it allows the all parties to more clearly address conflict and problematic issue instead of severely punishing the youth. Further, including families in the restorative justice process is in keeping with the COFI/POWER-PAC emphasis on empowering parents to become strong advocates for their students and their communities as a whole. We will return to this issue below, to discuss how families working together with Peace Centers benefit the students and their families. This in turn mobilizes and encourages important forms of communication, rather than simply relying on isolation and punishment as mechanisms to deal with school issues.

While the referral process is one important route to creating access for students to the Peace Center, as the COFI coordinator, Ms. Morton will also talk to teachers and administrators about those students she knows and she will “personally send kids [to the Peace Center] and ask for them.” By doing so, she takes an active role in the lives of the students with whom she interacts. Rather than merely adopting a reactive stance to conflict, she tries to spot issues before they evolve into conflict, to speak with the involved parties, and encourage them to participate in the Peace Center.

Ms. Mena also is actively involved in recruiting students into Peace Center involvement. At the beginning of the 2011 school year, there was fairly poor student attendance at the Wells Peace Center. Some students attended once and did not return, although there were some students who became regulars to the group. Ms. Mena therefore worked hard to recruit more participants and bolster attendance by walking around the cafeteria joking and conversing with the female students while campaigning for their involvement with the Peace Center. She says, “Oh yeah, I go to the-

lunch room, talk to ladies, and explain what the benefits they have if they come in here and try to convince them to participate in the program, for their benefits.” After a few weeks after the start of the school year we observed, Ms. Mena had assembled a regular group of girls for a sustained group.

Students themselves also volunteer to attend peace circles. Ms. Morton explains that she has talked to “students who’ve heard about the Peace Center and referred themselves.” Even though participating in Peace Centers is an option, schools do not force the students to use Peace Circle. However, after one or two sessions, generally suggested by the school instead of a harsher punishment, the students frequently continue attending knowing that they are benefiting from the unique process and attention available to them at the Peace Centers. Ms. Mena affirms that “the ladies coming here is voluntary, and we have a lot of them.”

“PROVIDE THAT SENSE OF COMMUNITY THAT STUDENTS WERE LACKING”: PEACE CENTER CIRCLES

Much of the research on restorative justice argues that it works because it provides a structured means for students to resolve conflicts and manage anger in a safe environment with a caring adult.²⁰ The peacemakers agree. Through this safe environment, a strong sense of community is created and students can experience growth in interpersonal skills.

One way that COFI creates a safe environment for some of the students most in need to have the Peace Center address their unique needs, is by having separate peace circles for girls and boys in the Brunson Peace Center. As Wells has 49% Hispanic students, in order to be linguistically inclusive, the peace circles are run in both English and Spanish. Ms. Mena

believes that being sensitive to gender and language issues is important for establishing a safe climate for students, where they can express their emotions more easily, have support to be successful in school and be given the tools they need to continue being successful in life. For the girls, who are often the targets of bullying, peer harassment, sexual harassment, teen-dating violence, cyber-bullying, and threats and injury in school, having an all-girl peace circle is particularly important.

Further, peacemakers agree that they can help students learn to express their feelings, whatever those feelings are, but that this can only be accomplished in a safe space. Therefore, peace circles are conducted using restorative justice strategies through which students learn how to productively and respectfully talk to each other, express themselves, and listen respectfully. As Ms. Scaggs explains, restorative justice strategies include a system in which the students who wish to speak must first be holding a specific item designated as the “talking piece.” The student holding the talking piece is the only one allowed to talk. Ms. Edwards explains that while a student has the talking piece, everyone faces that “particular participant and that person would open up and share.” The peace circle process is therefore effective in helping the students share their thoughts and emotions with the rest of the group, while providing respectful guidelines for talking and listening. Learning to listen without responding or reacting is an important thing to be able to do and the requirements of the peace circle help students to learn to make a habit of respectful listening. As a result, Ms. Scaggs says, “there are no outbursts or anything in the circle.”

While outbursts are discouraged, the peace circle is nonetheless a safe place where students can unreservedly vent

their feelings and not feel guilty or shamed about what they are feeling. They can even cry, as Ms. Mena notes is an important part of what happens safely in a Peace Center: “These students.... I see when they bawl sometimes. Some I see when they bawl and they, uh- Yeah, they grow up.” Ms. Mena knows that helping students to be able to express painful emotions, to be emotional, and to admit hurt without being judged is part of learning about yourself and therefore, a growing experience that ultimately is providing the girls with “more opportunities” in their lives. Ms. Norman agrees about how restorative justice process in the Peace Centers creates an opportunity for students to have “a place in which they can release whatever they might have.” She firmly states that with access to Peace Centers, the students “don’t have to fight, they don’t have to argue, they don’t have to feel depressed.” One reason why students are able to express themselves in Peace Centers and “sit down and speak their minds” is because, as Mrs. Morton explains, “they know when they come to the Peace Center that everything they say in the Peace Center, stays in the Peace Center. Nobody goes out and talks or slander them or anything.” Ms. Norman agrees. She explains that the norms of the peace circle mean that a student can talk about gossiping, which is all too often why student fights get started, but once they talk about it in the circle, “they leave it there in the room. They don’t have to worry. It’s a healthy process.”

“BE A CARING ADULT, A LISTENING ADULT”: FOSTERING ADULT-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

One of the most effective means through which the Peace Centers support students is by creating an environment where productive

adult-student interactions can flourish. As Ms. Edwards told us, it is of vital importance that Peace Centers function as comfortable and confidential environments for the students to talk to peacemakers about any issues they are having with peers, teachers, or family members. Being able to share their stories with adults who are actively engaged and non-judgmental and who can identify with some of what they are experiencing, is very valuable for fostering academic and personal development. Everyone we interviewed strongly expressed the importance of these interactions and shared powerful stories of how these important restorative justice interactions benefited students.

Ms Norman, for example, told us that because many students either do not have a parent with whom they can confide or with whom they want to confide, as is typical of many youth, it is important for them to have other adults in their lives with whom they can talk. Ms. Mena agrees. She explains that often, “the ladies don’t get advice or have other persons, teachers, counselors, and principal--they don’t talk with parents so they don’t talk with other [adults].” Ms. Mena, like all peacemakers, therefore encourages these adult-student interactions so that she can give advice through “one-on-ones because they have issues...when we talk with them one-on-one we know the problems they have and we help them.” Students are often mistrustful of adults, and so the opportunity to speak to an adult who they know will listen to them, without getting angry at what they say, fills an important role in students’ lives. According to Ms. Norman, restorative justice provides students with “a healthy way of listening to...and a helpful way of talking to an adult” who can offer “positive ways to solve issues,” especially in contrast to what may be more negative or naïve solutions

that their peers might suggest. Ms. Edwards similarly expressed the importance of the adult peacemakers in the students' lives:

They always have something to share, always, and we as adults listen. They have a chance to ask us questions as well, knowing that we were not always adults and they will say, 'Okay, when you were in seventh grade, did you do this, did you do that? If so, how did you handle this situation?' And you know, we would share with them that we went through some of the same things that you're going through. You're not the first one to go through this. So they love us sharing as well as them sharing with us so it's not a one way street; it's two way.

Ms. Scaggs gave an example of the benefits of having a peacemaker to talk to for a young man who always acted rebellious and rejected adult authority.

He just didn't want to talk and just acted up. So then after he started coming to the Peace Center he calmed down and then he was able to talk to [those he had conflicts with] and if then he had problems, he knows to come to find a peacemaker, talk to the peacemaker, and then go back to the class.

The peacemakers also are insightful about how they build and construct their relationships with students. Ms. Scaggs says that students know that she is there "to help the kids, to give them someone to come and talk to while they're in school." She wants them to be able to "come in and say, 'You know, Ms. Scaggs, I had a bad day.' They don't want anyone yelling at them." She argues that kids would relate better to adults when they can use their own language "and they open up more without anybody yelling at them." She asserts, "That's

why we need the peace circle [and Peace] Center at Brunson." Mrs. Morton envisions her role as an alternative adult to talk to who is not on the school staff and is "like a grandmother to them." Therefore, when the kids are in the Peace Center, "I don't see the things the teacher sees, because when they come to me they're better [behaved]." She cultivates this grandmotherly role with them because "They won't be better behaved unless they look at me and think I'm their grandmother for real."

Teachers are also important adults in student's lives, ones with whom some students have very special relationships that help them grow and learn and other relationships that are in conflict. While COFI peacemakers feel that not enough teachers are knowledgeable about restorative justice or take advantage of what the Peace Centers offer, when teachers do get involved, the payoffs are great. Therefore, COFI works to include teachers in peace circles. Ms. Scaggs and Mrs. Morton told us of an instance in which two girls were having a dispute with a teacher. In order to resolve the conflict, Ms. Scaggs explained that she and Mrs. Morton "had the teacher and the girls come into the circle and they talked, [which] solved the situation with the teacher and the girls in the classroom." In the end, "they all came together in accord." Ms. Morton also tells this story as an example of how important it is for teachers, as central adults in students' lives, to get involved in Peace Centers:

I will always remember early on in our circles...we had a group of girls that were not getting along with the teacher and the teacher actually came in and sat in the circle. She actually was a participant. She came in as a participant, not to flex her muscles that she was the teacher, she came in as a participant in the circle, trying to get something right in her class and that really made a

difference in how the young ladies responded to her because they found out things about her. The girls knew how circles go but for her to come in and share and be that open with them, it made a big impact on that classroom.

Mr. Blades believes that although "we still have a ways to go" he appreciates that teachers' increasing receptivity to school-wide Professional Development workshops on "de-escalation, on how to be a caring adult, a listening adult, how not to respond in kind if a student responds in a way that's very negative," are indirectly connected with the process of the Peace Centers."

Finally, the peacemakers also teach students to interact with their parents in ways that reduce family problems that have resulted in student classroom behavior problems. Ms. Edwards recounts a particular situation in which a girl was getting into trouble at school, and it turned out that she was actually angry with her mother because she was never able to visit her paternal grandparents or her father who was incarcerated. Rather, her mother only arranged visits with the extended family of her siblings, to whom she was not related. Ms. Edwards explained that "after we talked about it, she knew how to approach her mother in a respectful way and let her mom know how she felt about wanting to visit her dad's side of the family."

"IT WOULD BE A REVOLVING DOOR": THE BENEFITS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

COFI peacemakers and school staff all shared final stories and reflections with us about the ways that they have seen students benefit from attending peace circles and having peace makers available. They told us that they saw positive changes in students' attitudes toward school and felt that there

was both an overall improvement in school climate, but most importantly, they reflected on how restorative justice contributed to reductions in suspensions. In this final section of our analysis, we share the respondents' reflections on the benefits and impacts of student involvement with the COFI Peace Centers with particular attention to specific examples that are respondents narrated.

Mr. Blades' evaluation of the benefits of the Peace Center at Wells is extremely enthusiastic. He told us that "from the very beginning we have had less fights" and that the Wells attendance is "up ten percent." He believes that the Peace Centers are helping the kids "get the hang of life" and learn that school "really matters... and they need to take education seriously." Mrs. Morton similarly told us that she has seen improvement in Brunson's "school climate since COFI has been there." Ms. Norman also has seen benefits resulting in her feeling "really positive toward it" and creating "great expectations for it." Further, having a Peace Center with trained peacemakers available in the schools, even when a peace circles is not taking place, is especially seen as a benefit so that peacemakers are available for students to talk to them when they need it and so that they can provide responses to conflicts when they occur and then be there to work with student until the conflict is solved, so that the conflict does not escalate and result in suspensions. Ms. Edwards explains that

Whoever has a conflict with another student, we resolve it right there. It may take more than one time to come, but it's resolved and when it's said and done they are friends. So there's no animosity where, 'I'm gonna get you out the school.' That's history.

Ms. Morton also noted that community service can be used in

place of suspensions, which has a number of benefits, including the creation of a sense of community in the school.

Instead of a lot of detentions and suspensions here at Brunson they're actually having the kids do community service, help around the school, and that, along with other restorative practices, when it's done right, is going to help build community and help them feel responsible. They're not gonna be so quick to write on that wall if they're the one have to clean it off.

The Peace Centers are also benefitting students who are involved in incidents of bullying. Ms. Mena explained that by working with the Peace Center, she and Mr. Blades were able to deescalate the problem, resulting in Mr. Blades choosing to stop the suspension processes:

Mr. Blades called the students in to the Peace Center, and we talk with two students. They agreed [that] they don't want to bother one another and be bullying. We stopped the suspension for them. And the ladies signed a contract... [and] they don't do the problem again.

Regarding the same incident, Mr. Blades agrees that he would not have had the option to not suspend these students had the Peace Center not been available, and he is grateful that having an opportunity to help the students talk through their differences meant that they get at the underlying problems causing their behaviors.

the students [previously] would have probably gotten an in-school suspension or a detention or some other type of consequence without being able to really in-depth discuss what the underlying issues are and disagreements.

Mr. Blades, however, does not always stop suspensions. In some instances, such as the one he recounts below, he and the Dean "synthesize" punishment with restorative practices.

I was facilitating two different sets of girl fights. A consequence that the Dean mediated was eight sessions with the Peace Center and limited suspension for those who actually fought. Before [we had the Peace Center] a student might have gotten a full, out of school suspension. Now you can synthesize that, to include some part of out of school suspension, but balanced by having to go to Peace Centers.

Thus, although Mr. Blades believes in using restorative justice as an alternative to harsh discipline, he and the Dean "still use [suspension] as a consequence. But I think that the data will show that it, it's gone down quite a bit." Indeed, according to Ms. Morton, although it is difficult to ascertain the exact numbers of reduction in suspension days, COFI records indicate that they "have saved 506 days of suspension thus far this year" through their school programs. COFI peacemakers are helpful that, as Ms. Morton expresses it, "hopefully, very soon, restorative justice will be the go-to thing rather than the afterthought. That everybody in the school will have an automatic response that 'we're gonna try something else... that suspensions and expulsions are not the first choice but restorative justice will be the first choice.'"

Peace Centers teach students positive alternatives to unfavorable behaviors, productive social interactions, how to work through conflict, and how to avoid fights. Foremost, it teaches them how to be a part of a caring community. If the option for restorative justice did not exist in the Wells and Brunson schools, says Ms. Morton, students would be suspended

and “It would be a revolving door, back and forth, back and forth, kids coming in and nobody’s correcting the behavior.”

CONCLUSION: “MAKE THE POLICY COME TO LIFE”

We have offered but a few of the many examples of how Ms. Morton, Mrs. Morton, Ms. Scaggs, Ms. Edwards, Ms. Norman, and Mr. Blades express their understandings of how and why restorative justice reduces suspensions, increases student engagement in schools, and fosters improved relationships in the school community. Restorative justice strategies, our respondents agree, offer very promising and rewarding alternatives to harsh disciplinary policies and practices. Based on both the analyses of these two Chicago Peace Centers we studied, we have learned that COFI has been successful at implementing restorative justice, which has taught students at Brunson and Wells to resolve conflicts and to interact with peers and adults in more healthy ways. As a result, students are attending classes more and taking more interest in their education; overall, school climate has improved. Most importantly, COFI’s restorative justice programs have made it possible for administrators to reduce their use of suspensions. It is no surprise the peacemakers told us that the students who have been involved in Peace Centers thank the peacemakers for their hard work, for how they have changed their perspectives, and have helped them to resolve their problems. Ms. Scaggs is proud that the students “stop by and say ‘thank you so much’” and Ms. Mena is grateful for the appreciation that the students show for their work: “When you do something positive they see what you are doing for them and they appreciate it.”

What are the COFI restorative justice programs in the Peace Centers doing that elicits student appreciation? According to our analyses of the data presented above, COFI

- treats students as individuals and shows them that they are worthy of individual adult attention, whose lives inside and outside of school matter thus fostering strong relationships of care and reciprocity;
- empowers students, families and communities because the peacemakers come from the communities in which the students live, thus ensuring a context in which restorative justice is practiced with insight into how students’ family conditions and community conditions influence student opportunities;
- creates peace circles that address diverse students’ needs for using first/home languages and for gender separate safe places; and they
- rely on peacemakers who are well trained and completely dedicated to the restorative justice philosophy, processes, and practices.

Unfortunately, restorative justice is not the norm in Chicago Public Schools, although there have been efforts recently to more widely implement restorative justice district wide. The only way that such practices can be stopped is for CPS to fully embrace the “philosophy of restorative justice” that CPS has included in their formal policies. We end this report with the words of Ms. Morton, whose plea is for CPS to adopt restorative justice not just on paper, but in every school in CPS.

So do what you need to do with the policy, the policy is on paper, it’s there but policies have not come alive. CPS, if this is the policy and this is

what you’re embracing, you need to spend the money on it. Stop getting cameras and start getting principals and administrators, disciplinarians, teachers, getting them the training that they need in restorative justice so they can make the policy come to life.

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