

Report on

Restorative Approaches to School Conflict Management



UNIVERSITY
of MARYLAND
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CENTER FOR
DISPUTE RESOLUTION

The Center for Dispute Resolution at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law (C-DRUM) partnered with Callaway Elementary School in western Baltimore City. The project aimed to provide teachers and administrators with conflict management strategies designed to reduce disruptive classroom behavior, increase student engagement in school, lower suspensions and expulsions, and improve overall school climate.

Interventions

Restorative Practices

C-DRUM provided restorative practices training and support to promote a positive approach to classroom management and discipline. Daily classroom circles cultivated a sense of trust, empathy, and community. When misconduct occurs, restorative dialogue tools and conferences encourage students to reflect on the impact of their actions on others and promote problem-solving to repair the harm from the incident, prevent future misconduct, and reintegrate the student back into the classroom.

Second Step

All teachers received grade-appropriate anti-violence curriculum called “Second Step Skills for Social and Academic Success,” which provides lessons to improve students’ socio-emotional and conflict resolution skills.

Mediation Services

C-DRUM offered mediation services for student peer conflict, but the school did not actively use it. The principal requested that C-DRUM focus on attendance mediation, to bring teachers and parents of students at-risk of chronic absenteeism together for a facilitated conversation about how to remove barriers to school attendance.

Summary of Results

The first year of the program in 2014-15 resulted in dramatic improvements in school climate, with students reporting increased feelings of safety and belonging. The number of students suspended decreased by half (from 39 to 19 students), and the total number of suspension incidents dramatically declined from a total of 78 incidents in 2013-14 to 23 in 2014-15. Although Callaway’s student population increased in 2015-16, the number of students suspended remained steady 22 students, and total suspension incidents at 27.

Although causation cannot be proven in this study given the lack of controls, the principal credited restorative practices with decreasing disciplinary incidents and creating an environment more conducive to learning.

We thank our generous funders!

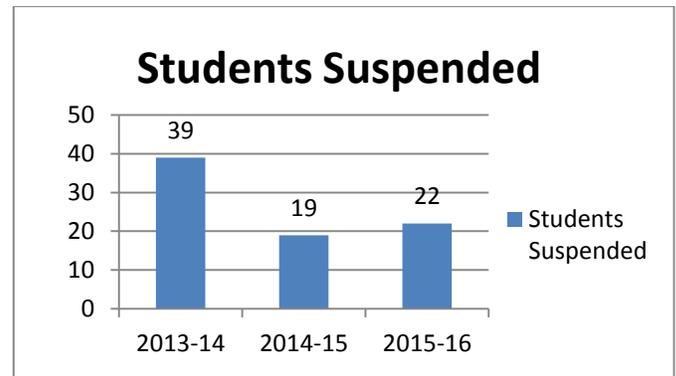
The University of Maryland Center for Community-Based Engagement and Learning provided start-up funds in 2014-15. The Charles Crane Family Foundation continued funding through 2016.

Results: Dramatic Reduction in Suspensions

In the first year of the project, the administration reported fewer disciplinary referrals to the office, less serious types of misbehavior, and, consequently, dramatically reduced suspensions.

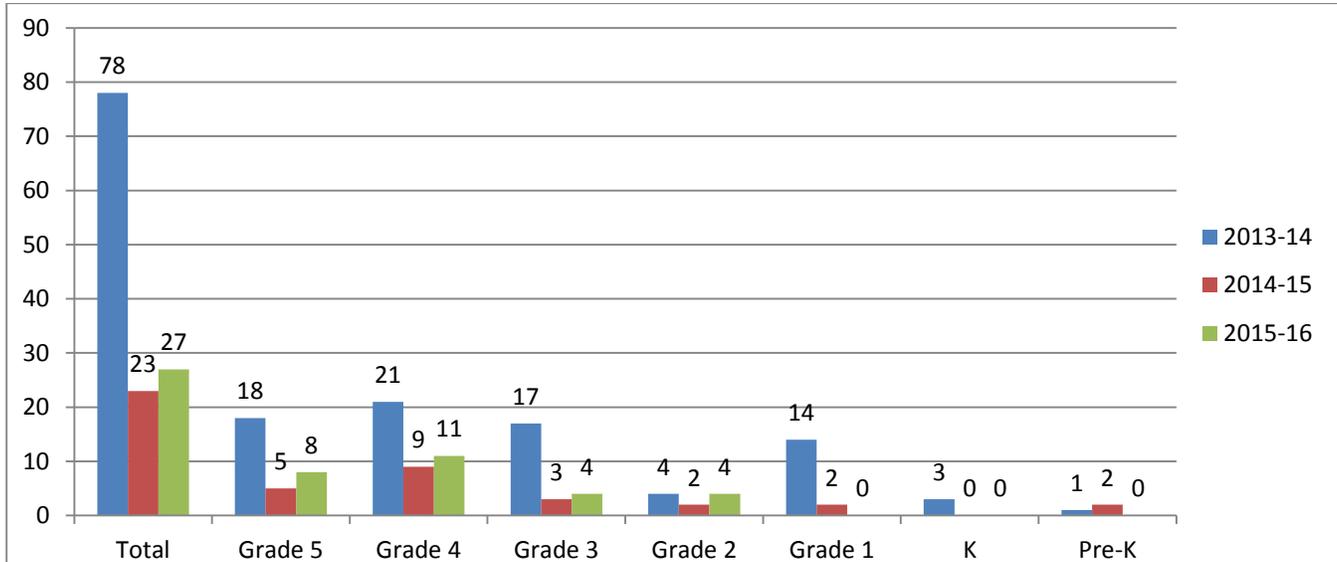
The number of students suspended was cut in half, from 39 students in 2013-14 to 19 in 2014-15. This remained relatively steady at 22 students suspended in 2015-16, even though the total student population increased from 310 students in 2014-15 to 333 students in 2015-16.

Figure 1: Total Number of Students Suspended



As is common at other schools, some students are suspended multiple times. One goal of restorative practices is to prevent repeat misbehavior and multiple suspensions of the same students. There was some progress in this regard, with a decrease in the number of overall suspension incidents: 78 in 2013-14; 23 in 2014-15, and 27 in 2015-16. The graph below shows the number of suspension incidents by grade over the past three years.

Figure 2: Total Suspension Incidents by Grade



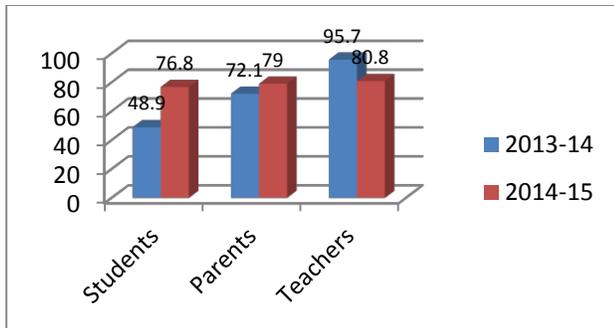
The elimination of suspensions in the lower grades (pre-K through grade 1) is a significant achievement. Callaway continues to focus on improving outcomes for the other grades, especially fourth and fifth grade. The 2015-16 academic year was marked by increased student enrollment due to Callaway's absorption of transfer students from other Baltimore City schools that closed. In addition, teachers in some grades, especially new teachers who had not received restorative practices training, were not consistent with their use of daily restorative circles.

Results: Improved School Climate in First Year

Restorative practices aims to build a strong sense of community and student belonging. Based on annual school climate data collected the National School Climate Center, the first year of the project achieved that goal. Callaway students’ sense of belonging jumped from 48.9% to 76.8% of students responding positively to the survey question “I feel like I belong at this school.”

Parents likewise reported an increase in their perception that their children felt like they belonged at school. The teacher perception of student sense of belonging decreased slightly, but was still at a percentage comparable to that of parents and students.

Figure 3: Percentage of Favorable Responses to "I [My Child/Students] Feel Like I Belong at This School"



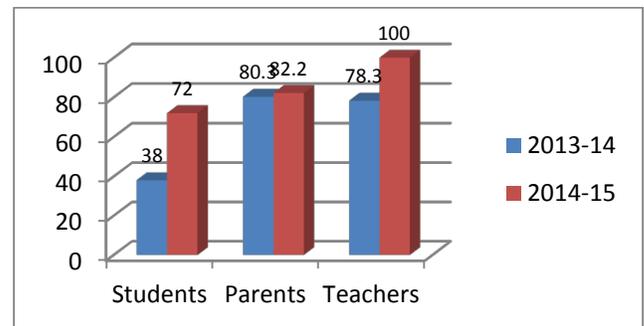
Callaway students’ feelings about their school and teachers showed marked improvement in 2014-15. The percentage of students responding positively to the question “I like my teachers” increased from 92.6% in 2014, to 96% in 2015. Even more impressive, students’ positive responses to the question “I like my school” jumped from 61.3% in 2014 to 83.5% in 2015. Likewise, the percentage of Callaway students reporting “I learn a lot at my school” increased from 88.3% to 96%.

Table 1: Comparison of Callaway Student Climate Survey Responses, 2013-14 and 2014-15

Question	% of students responding positively 2013-14	% of students responding positively 2014-15
I learn a lot at my school	88.3	96.0
I like my teachers	92.6	96.0
I like my classes	69.6	85.9
I like my school	61.3	83.5

The percentage of students who agreed “I feel safe at this school” increased from 38% in 2014 to 72% in 2015. Parents and teachers also reported increases in the perceptions of school safety.

Figure 4: Percentage of Favorable Responses to "I [My Child/Students] Feel Safe at This School"



Although a causal connection between restorative practices and these climate indicators cannot be certain, the increases are consistent with the underlying philosophy of restorative practices of cultivating strong relationships and a safe, nurturing environment in which to learn.

Challenges

Although Callaway has reduced disciplinary incidents and suspensions, many challenges remain to improve school climate.

Student perceptions of mutual respect among peers remain extremely low. Only 24% in 2013-14 to 30% in 2014-15 responded positively to the question “students respect each other.”

In addition, only 14.1% of students agreed in 2014-15 that “students picking on/bullying other students is NOT a problem at this school;” down from 23.7% in 2013-14. Only 19.6% of students agreed in 2014, and 33% of students agreed in 2015, that “student fighting is NOT a problem at this school.” These areas rank among the lowest satisfaction rates for Callaway students on the annual school climate survey.

One goal of the project was to encourage teachers to use the Second Step curriculum to build student socio-emotional and conflict resolution skills. Most teachers did not use Second Step, reporting they had limited time to integrate the lessons given their other curricular demands. Those teachers who used the lessons, however, agreed that their students navigated conflict in more constructive ways (for example, by talking out a conflict with a peer rather than fighting).

In addition, the use of mediation to address student peer conflicts has not yet taken hold. Teachers, perhaps unaccustomed to the idea that students can work out minor conflicts on their own, remain reluctant to refer students to mediation.

Lessons Learned and Sustainability

The biggest challenge for teachers has been integrating restorative circles into their daily routines. Restorative practices are not simply a program—they require a concerted change in a teacher’s philosophy and approach to classroom management. The teachers who were most successful with the consistent use of restorative practices integrated dialogue circles into their daily routine. The principal is requiring all teachers to use daily circles after morning announcement in 2016-17.

As the school experiences staff turnover, newer teachers do not have restorative practices training and are not using the process. Achieving consistent and sustained use of whole-school restorative practices takes constant commitment.

The plan to introduce three different interventions at the same time was overly ambitious. Prior studies have shown that it takes about 3-5 years to integrate a restorative culture in a school. The Callaway administration is still committed to integrating restorative practices more consistently. As the use of restorative practices becomes more habitual for all staff, additional programs may be helpful complements.

For more information, contact us:

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