

Founders Week

Public Servant of the Year



Shantay McKinily, MS

School of Social Work
Director, Positive Schools Center

Thanks to Shantay McKinily, MS, Baltimore students have a voice, educators have the tools to transform their schools, and families have a resource in times of need.

McKinily is director of the University of Maryland School of Social Work's (UMSSW) Positive Schools Center (PSC), whose work is built on a strong racial justice understanding and equity focus, approaching school change through embedding restorative practices, trauma-responsive strategies, social-emotional learning, and community voice into schools' routines, policies, and culture. Since leaving her role as a Baltimore principal to lead the center in 2017, McKinily has transformed it from a startup program into a nationally recognized educational innovation center.

"Because of Shantay's long history in city schools, she comes to this work with great credibility," says Wendy Shaia, EdD, MS, executive director of UMSSW's Center for Restorative Change and McKinily's

supervisor. "School leaders know she has experienced many of the same frustrations and challenges they see in schools each day. School leaders also know Shantay successfully transformed her own school's culture and climate and trust her to help them do the same for their schools."

McKinily, whose efforts have led her to be named the University of Maryland, Baltimore's (UMB) 2023 Founders Week Public Servant of the Year, said she joined PSC so she could make a bigger impact.

"I wanted to support principals in shifting and creating the environment that they want for their schools," she said. "A lot of times we have these ideas of what we want our schools to look like, feel like, sound like, and we don't know how to bring that to fruition."

McKinily has helped grow PSC from a budget of \$400,000 and three employees to a budget of \$4.8 million, 35 employees, and 10 UMB graduate students. The center is one of the largest lead agencies in Maryland for community schools. She offers trainings nationwide, and many organizations visit PSC to learn how to replicate its results.

"Shantay has dramatically expanded the resources and reach of the Positive Schools Center through increased funding support, expanded services, and strategic mergers. At the core of these initiatives is a mission to foster school climates where students feel safe and nurtured and where their families feel welcome," said Paul Sacco, PhD, LCSW, associate professor, UMSSW, and McKinily's colleague. "Shantay works alongside vulnerable and underserved families and children to help them thrive in school."

One focus of the center, which supports 13 community schools and coaches about 10 other principals, is using restorative practice to transform school climates. With restorative practice, PSC employees lead circles by asking questions of the students, who each get a turn to share.

"Restorative practice is essential in building school community in an equitable way where students feel like they have some voice in what's going on in the school," McKinily said. "And 80 percent of that is building this community, getting to know each other, supporting one another so that when something happens, and people have to respond that 20 percent of the time, the community is already built. There are norms already in place and agreements already made, which is helpful when crisis comes."

She said restorative practice schools have low suspension rates, because often when a conflict arises, it is resolved using the tools in place. This also supports student attendance.

"We encourage our principals by having people in the school who hold a responsive circle with students and family so that exclusionary discipline doesn't happen," she said.

McKinily is known to say, "Restorative is not something you do; it's something you are" and called the practice "a self-discovery process."

"It's that sweet spot of holding people accountable with love," she said. "If a school tells me that they do restorative practices, they're utilizing a tool, which is a restorative circle. But if they're a restorative practice school, and it's who they are, you're going to see it in how they interact with students, parents, and the community. They're going to find that balance between 'How do I support families and still hold people accountable for the school community agreements?'"

McKinily points to Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts as one of her most rewarding experiences. A city schools investigation found that the previous Augusta Fells administration had inflated enrollment and tampered with grades, but the school has made a turnaround under a new principal who partnered with PSC.

"I really appreciate that they embrace the PSC model of community schools, which includes restorative practice and social-emotional training to shift how students experience their everyday school," McKinily said. "They lowered their suspensions because they use restorative conferencing. They have shifted the school's reputation."

PSC also is called upon to help schools when violence affects students.

"Shantay's cellphone lights up with requests for assistance whenever there is an incidence of violence concerning city students," Shaia said. "City schools know Shantay will corral a group of educators, social workers, and restorative practitioners to respond within hours."

McKinily recounted leading a responsive circle at Edmondson-Westside High School after a student went across the street for lunch this year and was fatally shot.

"I had a discussion with the students about how they felt, and that was the most difficult thing because they were the last students in a classroom to see him," she said. "The teacher felt like, 'If I had held him back for just a little while, maybe he wouldn't have been killed.' She was crying."

PSC also offers help to families such as conducting food drives, setting up vaccination clinics, obtaining computers and Wi-Fi access, and ensuring students attended classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The center continues to support families in times of crisis by providing food, paying BGE bills, and preventing eviction.

“Homelessness is a huge issue, and for us to see a family about to get evicted and find the resources to stop the eviction, that is huge because it stops the family from being put into Social Services,” McKinily said. “We don’t want to break up families; we want families to stay together, and the way in which we can do that is providing sustainable support for them.

“At the PSC, our goal is serving and ensuring that marginalized communities in Baltimore City have a seat at the table and our families and schools have supports they need.”

McKinily said she was shocked to be named UMB’s Public Servant of the Year and appreciates the University recognizing practitioners who work in communities.

“I’m honored because I live by the Shirley Chisholm quote: ‘Service is the rent we pay for room on this Earth.’ ”

— Jen Badie

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