

EdJustice

# Freeing Schools from the School to Prison Pipeline

Educators share strategies for  
keeping kids in the classroom  
and out of the courtroom



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## NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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We, the members of the National Education Association of the United States, are the voice of education professionals. Our work is fundamental to the nation and we accept the profound trust placed in us.

## OUR VISION

Our vision is a great public school for every student.

## OUR MISSION

Our mission is to advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.

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These principles guide our work and define our mission:

**Equal Opportunity.** We believe public education is the gateway to opportunity. All students have the human and civil right to a quality public education that develops their potential, independence, and character.

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**Democracy.** We believe public education is the cornerstone of our republic. Public education provides individuals with the skills to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy.

**Professionalism.** We believe that the expertise and judgment of education professionals are critical to student success. We maintain the highest professional standards, and we expect the status, compensation, and respect due all professionals.

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**Collective Action.** We believe individuals are strengthened when they work together for the common good. As education professionals, we improve both our professional status and the quality of public education when we unite and advocate collectively.





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## A message from the President of the National Education Association

Lily Eskelsen García



Every student deserves to learn—and every educator deserves to work—in a safe school. But zero toler-

ance school discipline policies, which were supposed to make schools safer, have done more harm than good, pushing kids out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system at extraordinary rates. When students aren't in school, they can't learn. Let's work together to keep more kids in the classroom and out of the courtroom. **Start by taking NEA's pledge to shut down the school-to-prison pipeline.**



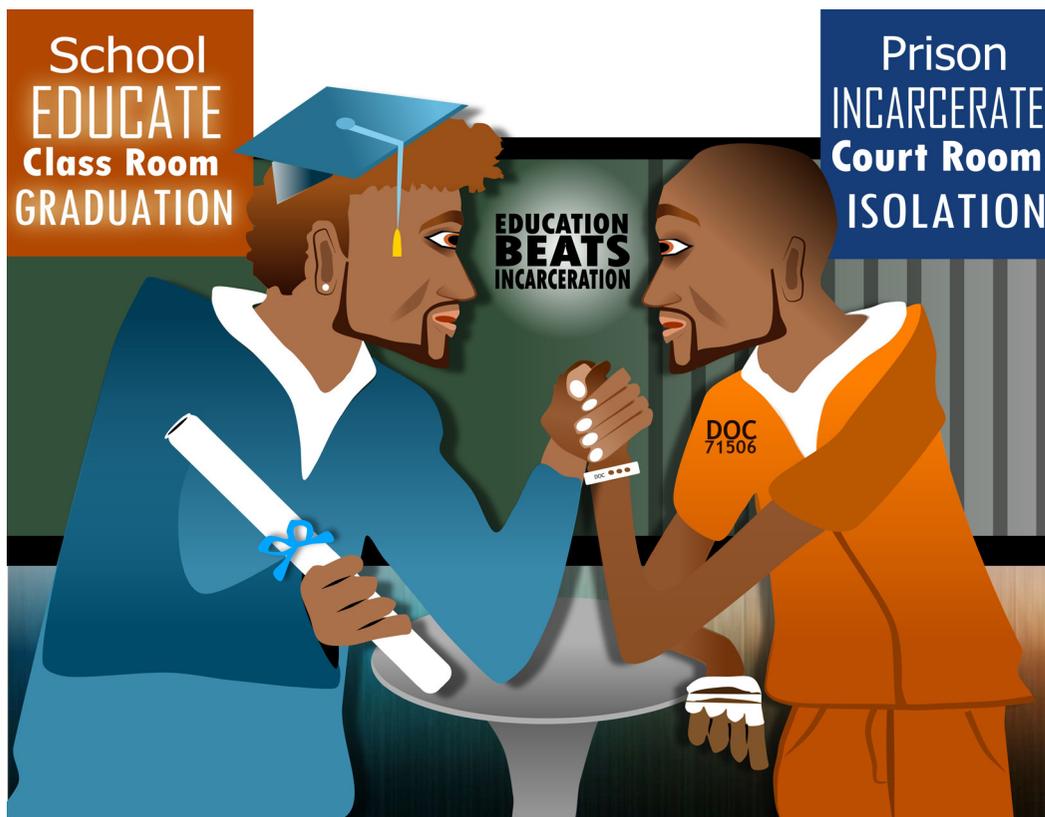
## A message from National Recording Artist

Aloe Blacc



# Freeing School from the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Educators hold one of the keys to keeping more kids in the classroom and out of the courtroom.



Artwork by former student: Daniel Bryner

## Selina Garcia has nothing but praise for her teachers.

When the feisty and outspoken student was arrested and sent to an adult jail for 21 days for getting into a fist fight (she says she was protecting a middle school student bullied by an upperclassman), her teachers visited her in jail and wrote letters to her lawyer that helped hasten her release.

When Selina was freed but forced to wait an additional two weeks before returning to school, her teachers provided her with the resources and support she needed to catch up with her classmates.

Asked how she managed to survive her ordeal and graduate after missing five weeks of school, Selina answers simply: "My lovely teachers."

What's going on when a 17-year-old who's been shunted from one foster home to another suddenly finds herself transported from school to prison for fisticuffs that in another time and place would have been handled at the school level?

In her own case, Selina points to school policy that abdicates much of the responsibility for disciplining students to school resource officers (school-based police). "Many are trained to deal with crime on the street rather than trouble in school hallways" says the former North Carolina student, who believes that better training would benefit both students and staff.

Every student deserves to learn—and every educator deserves to teach—in a safe school. But zero tolerance school discipline policies, which were supposed to make schools safer, have done more harm than good, pushing kids out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system at unprecedented rates.

Add to the mix overburdened educators, cuts to school counseling programs, and police (often referred to as school resource officers), and you've got the makings of . . . well . . . a school-to-prison pipeline.



# Prison INCARCERATE Court Room ISOLATION

## **Them's Fightin' Words**

Not everybody's happy with this expedient expression. The term school-to-prison pipeline can ruffle the feathers of the most dedicated and caring educators, making it seem as if they're personally responsible for thrusting students into the system.

Yet no one can deny the numbers. Across the country, school suspensions and expulsions, referrals to alternative schools and law enforcement, and school-based arrests have increased, blurring the line between the education and criminal justice systems.

It's even worse for students with disabilities, LGBTQ youth, and students of color. Studies have found that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are far more likely than their White peers to be suspended for the same conduct at school. Not only are they punished more severely, but often for behaviors that are less serious.

Black students are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of White students, while Black and Latino students account for 70 percent of police referrals. It's even worse if you're a Black student with disabilities. Then the numbers soar, with a suspension rate greater than 25 percent in some districts.

No one disagrees with zero tolerance for violent and dangerous behavior, but who can defend or explain the five-year-old whisked away in a police car for violating school dress code or the 12-year-old hauled away in handcuffs for doodling on her desk with an erasable marker? There are plenty more examples of outsized reactions to minor transgressions that defy logic.

Suspensions don't immediately result in a ride from a classroom to a cell, but you'd be surprised how closely the two are linked. A Council of State Governments study found that when a student was suspended or expelled, his or her likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system increased significantly. And not surprisingly, students with a history of school suspensions are also less likely to vote and take part in civic activities. Turns out, suspensions are a bigger forecaster than poverty of whether a student will hit the books or the street.

Once a student has a record, even if it's just for a minor, non-violent offense, it can follow you the rest of your life. Just ask Denver student Brandon Vigil, who was caught up in the court system for scribbling on a bathroom wall in elementary school. The school called in police officers and the 10-year-old, who had never been in trouble before, ended up with a ticket and a court date.



## Reversing the Trend

In an effort to reverse this disturbing trend, a coalition of national organizations, parent groups, and even federal government agencies are working to foster awareness of the issue. In 2014, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice released a school discipline guidance package to help schools craft protocols that improve school climate and decrease discipline disparities.

The promising news: School districts that are implementing positive discipline practices and working to improve school climate are seeing a reduction in overall suspensions. After Colorado passed the Smart School Discipline Law (considered by some to be the preeminent example of comprehensive school discipline legislation), out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement rates all decreased, with expulsion rates experiencing a 25 percent drop.

Despite this notable progress, the referral of Black and Native American students to law enforcement actually increased. A reduction in overall numbers doesn't always mean a reduction in disparities, says Dwanna Nicole, Senior Policy Advocate for the Advancement Project, who emphasizes the need for candid conversations and greater action around discipline disparities.

"I get it—educators are under an immense amount of pressure," says Kevin Gilbert, an NEA Executive Committee member who became a discipline reform advocate after meeting a young man who spent three weeks in a detention center for talking in class. "But schools have to use common sense and not push out students for minor discipline infractions. We have to stop using school resource officers and the juvenile justice system as discipline proxies," stresses Gilbert.

Selina Garcia's experience certainly would have been different had her fistfight been penalized by the school rather than escalated to the actual penal system.

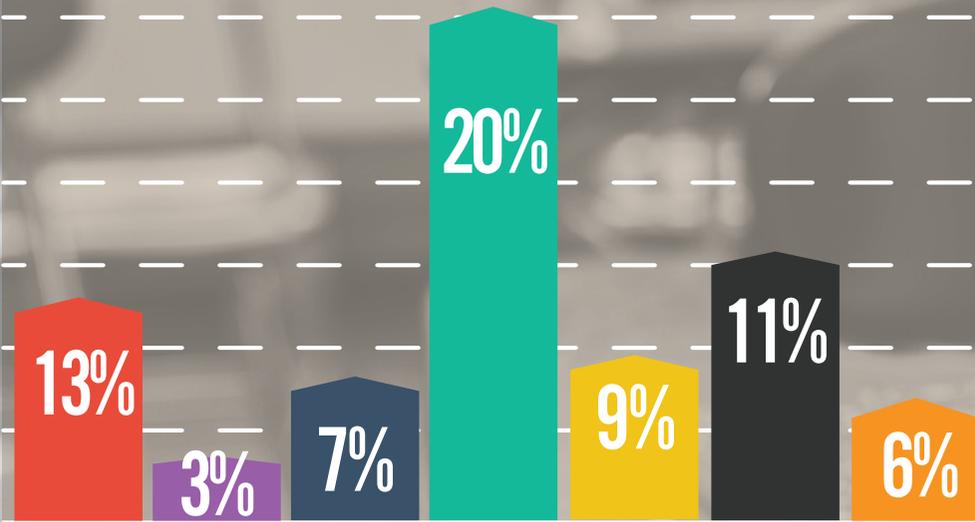
The teenager never should have spent three weeks in an adult jail. Any chance of a future for Selina could have ended there. But support from educators who knew and believed in her made a difference. Her school pushed her out of the nest, says Selina, but her teachers refused to let her fall.





# Students receiving out-of-school suspensions by race/ethnicity and gender

## BOYS



## GIRLS



Native Hawaiian/  
Other Pacific Islander

American Indian/  
Alaska Native

Hispanic/Latino  
of any race

Two or  
more races

Black/African  
American

Asian

White



# Students receiving out-of-school suspensions by disability (IDEA) status

**13%**  
Students with  
disabilities  
(IDEA)

**6%**  
Students without  
disabilities

# Students Speak Out,

## I Survived The School to Prison Pipeline



### Brandon Vigil

Colorado student

When I was 11 years old, I decided to scribble on the walls of the boy's bathroom with a Sharpie magic marker. I don't know why I did it, but they caught me in the act.

The school called in police officers—not assigned to the school but from the streets. It was my first time with a police officer and they gave me a ticket and a five-day suspension. I had to go to community service and I was definitely the only 11-year-old picking up trash on the highway. Everyone else was 16 to 25 years old.

My family was ashamed of me and I was ashamed of myself. I didn't know how it would affect my future until recently when I attended a career fair at my school. I was interested in becoming a police officer and I found out that

you can't have a criminal record and it killed my sense of hope.

One solution to fix this problem is to protect children in elementary and middle school from police contact and harsh punishments that take them out of school and isolate them. It's a traumatizing experience and there are better ways to teach these lessons instead of using shame, fear, and isolation. Instead of giving me a criminal record, why couldn't the school have given me the task of painting the bathroom wall and doing some kind of community service in my school?

There are too many harsh punishments for small things. Zero tolerance is a real problem. It becomes a reason why you don't want to go to school. Will a mistake I made in fifth grade ruin my future as an adult?

I SURVIVED SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

### Selina Garcia

former North Carolina student

The education system never has enough money and when funding for busing got cut, middle and high schoolers had to ride the school bus together. The bus driver and I saw one of the older girls bullying a little middle school kid who was a fraction of her size. We told the school security officer but no one did anything. I hate bullying and I'm not afraid to speak my mind. After the third time of me seeing her bullying this kid, I told her to chill out. She ended up getting in my face and I pushed her and we started fighting.



When I got off the bus, the school resource officer arrested me directly outside of the cafeteria in front of the entire school. He told me he was making an example of me, and I needed to learn my lesson.

Even though I was 17, they sent me to an adult county jail for three weeks. My teachers visited me there and wrote letters of support to my lawyer. When I was released, the school made me stay out an extra two weeks, even though the court said I was approved to come back. By that time, I was five weeks behind. But my teachers gave me extra support. With their help, I ended up graduating three days before my 18th birthday.

If there was one thing I could change about the way schools discipline kids, I would change the way schools use resource officers. When something happens, the counselor should be the first person to step in, an administrator second, and the principal third. SROs should be the last resort. Schools are pushing out teenage kids and putting them into the adult system. Then when they get back into the real world, you wonder why they act the way they do.



## Daniel Bryner

former Washington student

I was a great student until the beginning of 7th grade, but when I got to middle school, everything changed. People knew I was different and more of a boy, so they classified me as a lesbian. I was transgender but, didn't know or understand what was I was going through.

In elementary school, there's no divide between boys' and girls' sports. But when you get to middle school, gym class becomes torture and the bathroom situation makes life even worse.

The first day of middle school was so horrible, I skipped the second day. I got a three-day suspension for skipping, so I decided to just skip some more. I would show up for attendance and skip out by second period. I was suspended several more times before being expelled altogether. The school at the juvenile detention center was the only one that would take me because the only alternative schools were for high school students.

I missed so much school, I had a lot of time on my hands to get in trouble. I committed a burglary with another kid my age and was locked up. When I was released at 15, I started going to high school, but I had the very same problems I had in 7th grade.

When I had to use the bathroom, I walked to the Safeway down the street. By that time, I was late for the next class. When you start skipping that much school, you put on this façade like you don't care. But I did care and I was, like, man this sucks.

I didn't graduate high school. I stopped going and got my GED instead. Kids are cruel when they don't understand, and I had been instilled with a lot of

self-hate. When 99 percent of the world tells you that you are a sin, you fall victim to that mindset.

I regret not pushing through to finish high school. Schools need to figure out what's going on with a student before they reach the point of no return. The first day I skipped, the school sent letters to my parents but the school didn't talk to me.

Don't be afraid to give kids a second chance and sometimes a third chance because not everyone learns at the same speed, and you have no idea what some of these kids go through. Because people can change. I've seen it happen; it happened to me. The entire trajectory of our lives can be changed when someone steps in and gives us chances and opportunities. Now, I'm a graphic artist who advocates for juvenile and social justice through my art. I've testified in front of my state legislature about the HB1651 Youth Opportunities Act. As a result of our advocacy, a lot of the language has been revised.

This is the first time I've come out publicly about being transgender. It feels good to get it out there. It's something I've been holding on to for too long. I used to think my life journey was debilitating, but it's turning out to be my purpose. We go through what we go through so we can help others.



# SCHOLARCHIPS: A SCHOOL-TO-COLLEGE LIFELINE FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

One of over 2.7 million young people in the U.S. with a parent in prison, Yasmine Arrington was a high school student with dreams of college when she discovered there were no scholarship programs for children of incarcerated parents. "There were scholarships for kids whose parents were deceased and scholarships for kids whose parents were in the military—even programs to send them to prom—but there was nothing at the time for students whose parents were incarcerated," says Yasmine.

Yasmine's mother passed away her freshman year of high school, and her father had been in and out of prison for much of her life, leaving the teenager with little financial support. This is the point where most people would have concentrated on their own future, but not Yasmine, who had been a Jack Kent Cooke Foundation scholar since the 8th grade. With a mission statement, a business plan, and a

seed grant from a national youth organization, Yasmine launched ScholarCHIPS, a nonprofit program that offers scholarships, college prep, and a support network for children of incarcerated parents.

Now a graduate of Elon University in North Carolina, Yasmine is a recipient of the Black Girls Rock Award, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Matthew J. Quinn Prize (which honors outstanding achievement in community service) and the Linowes Youth Leadership Award.

**NEA: Tell us about some of the students who have been helped by ScholarCHIPS?**

**Yasmine:** One of my scholars has two parents sentenced to life in prison. Another scholar has a parent on death row. Statistics tell us that students with parents in prison are more likely to drop out of school and end up in prison themselves. But we shouldn't put students in a box and assume it's not worth it to invest



in them. We have kids who are dealing with life issues you couldn't imagine who are excellent students moving forward with their lives.

**NEA: Can you share a success story about one of your scholars?**  
**Yasmine:** Gabrielle Gould is the student I mentioned whose parents are both in prison for life. She'll graduate from Bowie State University this year with a degree in business administration and a concentration in management. She says what makes ScholarCHIPS so special to her is we're not just a scholarship program; we're a family. We all relate because of what we've gone through.



**NEA: There's a national conversation right now about the school-to-prison pipeline. What insight can you share with educators?**

**Yasmine:** It makes a difference when a school is less tolerant of youth and their behavior. When I grew up, there were more in-school suspensions. It's crucial to have trained professionals who can communicate with these young people. You don't know what issues they're dealing with at home. Some are neglected. Some may be sexually or physically abused. Some have parents with substance abuse issues. And some have parents in jail.

Usually when a parent is incarcerated, that creates other issues in the household. That leaves one parent working one or two jobs; since they're not home, the older children have to take care of their younger brothers and sisters, which creates stress and cuts into study time. Students need support more than anything. They need to know somebody cares because if they think nobody cares, they'll act out and end up in trouble.

**NEA: What support did your teachers give you?**

**Yasmine:** I always loved being in the classroom. I loved to learn.

But middle school was a weird time for me. I was depressed and emotional. My school counselor and 7th grade math teacher were amazing. My math teacher was the one who told me about the Jack Kent Cooke foundation, which changed my whole life. My 8th grade social studies teacher is now one of my ScholarCHIPS board members. My teachers were invested in me and my education. I trusted them with information about my family and they gave me resources. At that age, I was building social capital and I didn't even know it. That's the lesson I teach my scholars—that education opens doors and their teachers have social capital. I remember how supported my high school vice principal made me feel. She had a bright smile and a positive attitude. She always told me how proud she was of me. Every student needs that.

**NEA: How can educators connect their students with ScholarCHIPS?**

Students can email us at [scholarchipsfund@gmail.com](mailto:scholarchipsfund@gmail.com) or direct message us on Facebook. They can also like us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/ScholarCHIPS](http://www.facebook.com/ScholarCHIPS) and follow us on Twitter @ScholarCHIPS.

**NEA: One more thing. We love that the CHIPS in ScholarCHIPS stands for Children of Incarcerated Parents. How'd you come up with such a cool name for your program?**

**Yasmine:** My grandmother gets the credit. How awesome is that?





## Anne Arundel County

With a population of 555,743, Anne Arundel County is wedged between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., with the Chesapeake Bay running along its eastern edge.

It is a commuter county, but there are also some major employers within the county, including the National Security Agency, Fort Meade, Northrup Grumman Corp. and Southwest Airlines (at the Baltimore-Washington Thurgood Marshall Airport). It is also the home of the U.S. Naval Academy and the Maryland State Capital.

Anne Arundel is a prosperous county with a median family income of almost \$98,000. And yet, like in the rest of the U.S., the signs of growing economic inequality are also quite evident.

The number of food stamp households has more than doubled since 2006—as has the number of students eligible for free or reduced price meals. The homeless population has more than doubled since 2008. There are three major public housing complexes in the county, and the median income of their residents is \$15,000.

The Community Foundation of Anne Arundel County reports that the county's "most compelling needs" are "affordable housing, transportation, and quality child care."

Some 79,518 students attend Anne Arundel County public schools, and 24,750 students attend Anne Arundel Community College.

## How one School District Cut Suspensions In Half



Sean P. McElhaneey "Mr. Mac"  
Principal, Old Mill Middle School North

Old Mill North Middle School is the poster school for Anne Arundel's turn around.

Over the past ten years, Old Mill North has gone from being one of the worst in the district—a school rife with gangs, drugs, and fights—to being one of the best.

The school's staff turnover rate has declined, and where once many parents were desperate to get their children out of Old Mill North, now they're eager to get their children into the school. Test scores have risen. Referrals, suspensions and expulsions have dropped. So has bullying.

### What changed?

Well, for starters, the leadership changed, with a new principal and assistant principal taking over in 2004. And in 2005, the Assistant Principal Sean McElhaneey became Principal—a position he has held ever since.

McElhaneey, who everyone calls Mr. Mac, has brought to the task of turning around Old Mill North Middle School a very different vision for the school—a vision he believes in passionately:

"I've worked hard to get the staff to understand that we are the family. We are raising these children. We have to smile and say good morning to every child, every day. We don't raise our voices unless we have a very good reason. This has to be place kids come to be safe, to be happy, and to learn. Being happy is what I focus on the most, because if they have that, the rest will fall into place and their achievement will increase. That's what we've seen—we know that it's true."

Mr. Mac has developed a reputation among the staff for being a very good listener. He is also credited with being very good at breaking down the barriers between the predominately white staff and the students, 60 percent of whom are minorities.

He and the staff have implemented a positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) strategy, which is all about strengthening the relationships between the staff and the students. Indeed, Mr. Mac preaches the gospel of relationship building:

"We have to make the connection with the child—that's the foundation of everything we do. If a child's family is homeless, we've got to know it. If a student comes to school tired and stressed because the police busted down her front door at 4:00 a.m. to arrest her father, we've got to know it." Mr. Mac thinks it is often something that happened outside the school in a student's life which leads to the student to cause trouble in school.

In addition to PBIS, Mr. Mac sings the praises of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program which he brought to the school. He thinks it too has played a major role in the school's turnaround by signaling to one and all that Old Mill North Middle School is serious about academics.



# It's all about relationships. Systemic change

in school climate requires the building of positive and respectful relationships between educators and students, between educators and educators, and between educators and students' families.

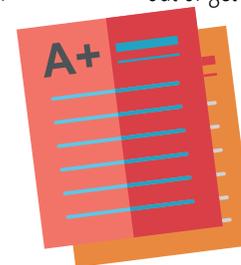
Marquenta Taylor, School Counselor at Meade High School and NEA member

## Lessons Learned

- It takes time. It took three years after rolling out a “positive behavioral interventions and supports” (PBIS) strategy before referral, suspension and expulsion numbers started to decline. Systemic change doesn’t happen overnight. (NEA Bully Free School Climate Summit Conference Proceedings, [www.nea.org/bullyfree](http://www.nea.org/bullyfree) )
- There is no miracle cure. No single program will create a safe and supportive environment in every school throughout a district. Rather, it takes a multiple initiatives. Clearly PBIS was important in Anne Arundel, but so were other initiatives such as Kids At Hope ([www.kidsathope.org/](http://www.kidsathope.org/) ).
- It is especially crucial that educators get to know their students in order to provide the students with the support they need to succeed. That educator-student connection forms the foundation for everything the educator wants to accomplish in terms of academics and student behavior.
- The key to implanting PBIS was using teachers in each school as trainers and coaches. It proved far more effective than outside experts and consultants or the drive-by professional development day.
- Pressure from an outside community organization, in this case the Anne Arundel County NAACP, can intensify a

district’s efforts to reform its student behavior policies and practices. The NAACP filed a complaint with the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Education in 2004 contending that African American students in the Anne Arundel schools were receiving harsher punishments than white students for similar offenses. That complaint led to an agreement between the school district and the NAACP, and many minority educators in the district say it has made a positive difference.

- You can drastically reduce the overall number of poor and minority students who are being suspended or expelled, and still have a problem—that is, minority students still represent a disproportionate number of the students who are being suspended and expelled. The district is now looking at “restorative practices” as a way of making the implementation of the student code of conduct more equitable. (Restorative Practices: A Guide for Educators, [www.otlcampaign.org](http://www.otlcampaign.org) )
- Growing economic inequality in the U.S. has even intruded into prosperous counties such as Anne Arundel. Consequently, Anne Arundel public schools have seen the number of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals more than double over the last ten years. There are now more low-income families in the county, more single-parent households, and more homeless families. The social and economic conditions in which children are growing up have a tremendous impact on schools and classrooms, whether you are in Baltimore, Appalachia or Anne Arundel.
- “The big change I have seen in this district over the years is that there used to be a widespread assumption among the adults that some kids simply weren’t going to make it whatever we did—they’d drop out or get kicked out.



Now the idea has taken hold that every kid can make it and we have to help them make it.”—Kate Snyder, NEA member and middle school social studies teacher and 18-year veteran of the Anne Arundel County Public Schools

# Interview with Psychologist Dr. Virginia L. Dolan

Dr. Dolan has the unwieldy title of Coordinator of Behavioral Supports & Interventions, Equity & Accelerated Achievement, Anne Arundel County Public Schools. She was instrumental in introducing the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Strategy (PBIS) to the district in 2004, and has overseen its implementation. PBIS has played a major role in reducing referrals and suspensions in the district.



(For more information about PBIS, see the NEA Bully Free School Climate Summit Conference Proceedings, [www.nea.org/bullyfree](http://www.nea.org/bullyfree) ).

NEA: PBIS puts considerable emphasis on reducing teacher referrals of students to the school office, correct?

**Dr. Dolan: Yes. A lot of referrals are triggered when a student defies a teacher. We emphasize that the teacher not take a student's defiance personally. Instead, the teacher needs to understand what's behind the student's act of defiance, and if the teacher already has a good relationship with that student, the teacher can defuse the situation. We call it 'deferred referral.' Of course there are certain student behaviors, detailed in our Code of Student Conduct, that require a referral.**

NEA: Let's talk about students being suspended from school.

**Dr. Dolan: Suspension is almost always a bad option. You lose the kid and research shows the school climate doesn't improve.**

NEA: What about the troubled student?

**Dr. Dolan: Out of every 1,000 to 2,000 students, 10 to 15 will require intensive intervention. Our school counselors and social workers play a critical role in keeping an eye on these students and getting them the help they need. What's more, we've expanded our school-based mental health services for students.**

NEA: Why the emphasis on mental health services?

**Dr. Dolan: Because there is an epidemic of trauma out there. We are seeing more and more traumatized children—children you have been yelled and screamed at their whole lives and/or children who have been physically abused or have witnessed physical or verbal abuse. Such trauma impedes the**

**healthy development of a child's brain, and can cause serious cognitive and behavioral problems.**

NEA: Your district has reduced referrals and suspensions by more than 60 percent over a ten year period. What's next?

**Dr. Dolan: We still have a disproportionality problem, that is, minority students still account for a disproportionate share of our referrals and suspensions. We are looking at restorative practices as a way of dealing with this problem.**

(For more information about restorative practices see: Restorative Practices: A Guide for Educators, [www.otlcampaign.org](http://www.otlcampaign.org) )

NEA: When did you start down this road of trying to improve the district's student behavior policies and practices?

**Dr. Dolan: It was after Columbine in 1999. And our initial efforts were rather clumsy. When No Child Left Behind was passed that was a huge motivator to do a better job of keeping track of every student in the system.**

NEA: What were your biggest challenges in implementing PBIS?

**Dr. Dolan: Well first it was data collection—PBIS is data-driven strategy. Whenever a PBIS person goes into a school the first thing they say is, "Show me your data." We had to improve our data collection and analysis related to student behavior.**

NEA: What about staff buy-in and training?

**Dr. Dolan: They of course are essential. We learned that using teachers in each school as trainers and coaches was far more effective than outside experts and consultants or the drive-by professional development day. Teacher training teachers turned out to be the key for us.**

# EDUCATOR TO EDUCATOR

## Lessons from Juvenile Hall

Steve Repetto, San Francisco Bay Area

### For juvenile hall teacher Steve Repetto, teaching students who have been caught up in the criminal justice system makes the victories even sweeter.

Steve Repetto admits he was apprehensive his first day teaching in juvenile hall (after passing through four steel security doors, Repetto entered a locked classroom with two guards stationed outside). Three years later, Repetto loves his job. “I’m so happy I ended up where I am,” says the high school teacher who has taught “high risk” kids his entire career. “Teaching a motivated student is not as exciting as teaching a kid who’s had bad experiences at school,” explains Repetto. “For me, the challenge is getting a kid with five high school credits excited about education, the world, and the universe beyond his neighborhood. That, to me, is teaching.”

Repetto teaches math, science, English, history, and physical education to teenage boys who he says have been traumatized and exposed to the worst of humanity. In addition to students who’ve had a hard life, says Repetto, he also sees many special education students who weren’t diagnosed properly or given the appropriate services because their schools are so underfunded. Yet despite what his students have been through, affirms Repetto, they strive to create a better life for themselves. “Many want to graduate high school, go to college, and create a better future for their children than the one they were given.”

Repetto is proud that Mt. McKinley Juvenile Hall has had more graduates in the past year than in previous years. He credits better program coordination and on-line technology, telling the story of one 13-year-old student who “couldn’t read at the Cat in the Hat level.” After taking part in Mt. McKinley’s Reach program where students work an hour daily with specially trained tutors, the student ended up reading at a 9th grade level. “He left with a smile on his face,” says Repetto, “telling us how much he learned while he was here. He’s back in high school and we haven’t seen him back here, which is a good sign.”

As good as it feels to celebrate the victories, the last thing Repetto wants is for your students to end up in his classroom. The lessons he’s learned apply to all students, declares Repetto, who has some pithy advice for colleagues who are “on the outs” (working in mainstream schools).



### Tools To Use

**Be available.** Students often need an adult to talk to—someone they feel they can trust. A lot of educators are nervous about how this looks from the outside and understandably so. But find a way you’re comfortable with to build relationships that help students. At a former school, I had a student whose dad was incarcerated and whose mom was on welfare. This student’s

reality was that he needed a job. I arranged for him to get transportation to his job interview and made sure he had breakfast that morning. He got the job and he got his diploma through the job corps program. When students trust a teacher or school counselor or nurse enough to share information about their lives, they can get the help they need. Do what you can to be a safe place for your students.

**Meet the parents.** When kids are in trouble, especially serious trouble, their home lives are often chaotic. So when I talk with their parents, I always lead with praise. That’s huge. Parents of troubled kids are used to hearing negative news about their children. When I’m in IEP (individual education plan) meetings with the parents of special education students, I make sure to tell their parents at least one positive thing about their child. In my former school, I had impromptu, informal conversations with parents as they dropped their kids off or picked them up from school. And I always invited parents into my classroom. One of my students had been kicked out of two classrooms before landing in mine, and he had convinced his mom that it was always the teacher’s fault. Because of my open door policy, however, his mom spent time in my classroom and saw firsthand what was really happening. As a result, she ended up backing me and her son finally had his feet held to the fire. The lesson is: Open the lines of communication any way you can—in person, by phone, or online through a work email account or Facebook page. The more we show you care, the better off everybody is. It’s a win-win for both sides.

**Link classroom to career.** My students tell me all the time, “Get us ready for work.” So I always try to make the connection between the lesson they’re learning and its usefulness in the/their world outside of the classroom. To get them to focus on their writing skills, I tell them if you’re working in construction, you have to be able to write a bid. If you’re a mechanic, you’ll need to write a service history. If you’re manager in the tech industry, you’ll need to write a report. Writing doesn’t have to be fancy; it has to be good and free of errors. During a math lesson, my students complained that learning about decimals and positive and negative integers was “stupid.” I asked them, “Who here likes money? Who likes putting money into and taking money out of a bank? They got it and their attitude changed. They are so focused on work because their parents are struggling to make a living and bring groceries into the house, which is why some of these kids turn to a life of crime. One of my students told me he robbed a store because he was starving.

**Keep it real.** My students want lessons that are relevant to their lives, presented to them in a way that’s relevant. It’s very hard for my students to sit and read a book, but they’re very tech savvy and used to getting most of their information from a computer or smartphone screen. They would much rather watch and discuss a video on the Revolutionary War than read a book and answer 20 questions. I help peak my students’ interest about the world by sneaking excerpts from the TV show *Cosmos* in my science lessons or an episode from a travel channel show in my history lessons. A lot of my students have never left their neighborhoods until they’re in the back of a squad car coming to my facility. So when they become intrigued by a place they want to visit, I ask them, “If you think that’s cool, what can you do to structure your life to save money to get there? For a lot of high-risk kids, their only goal is survival—going to sleep safe and waking up safe. I help them identify and pursue additional goals as a critical part of their educational experience.

**Respect is a two-way street. [or] Show respect.** If you set up a classroom with mutual respect, you’ll generally have fewer problems. There are many ways to show respect; even the smallest gestures make an impact. Some juvenile hall teachers won’t let the kids get up to sharpen their pencils, but I tell my students I trust you to sharpen your pencil and not create an incident. That means a lot to them. I use key phrases like, “I trust you” and “you did a great job.” It makes a difference. I look at each student, and each case, individually. It helps me to view my students as kids who’ve committed crimes as opposed to kids who are criminals. I’ve had students tell me, “I wanted to fight him, but I won’t do it in your classroom. I won’t disrespect you.” If a student does disrespect me in front of the class, I try to defuse the situation with humor instead of anger. The realization that many of my students have been hurt and come from really stressful backgrounds helped me understand where their outbursts come from. The book *No Such Thing As a Bad Kid! Understanding and Responding to the Challenging Behavior of Troubled Children and Youth* by Charles Appelstein really helped me change my perspective and find the good in my students.



# EDUCATOR TO EDUCATOR

## Trauma- Informed Teaching

Kimberly Colbert, Kimberly Doran, Stephen Collins,  
St Paul, Minnesota

### A growing body of research is helping educators recognize and address the link between childhood trauma and trouble at school.

An urban educator who's seen it all, and who earned her "props" teaching students with in-school suspensions, Kimberly Colbert is on the front lines of the debate over student discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline. "It used to be called the cradle-to-prison pipeline," notes Colbert, a phrase she believes is far more precise and useful. "Are we saying society's interest in children should just begin when they start school? It's not about blaming the family. It's about calling out all institutions—how about health care, housing, and wages?—that are supposed to help families prepare their children to go to school and become successful adults. It's everyone's responsibility."

Colbert teaches English at Central High School in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she and her colleagues are training to be "trauma-informed" educators. Drawing on a growing body of brain research linking childhood trauma and trouble at school, some districts are training educators to recognize that students' behavior issues may be symptoms of traumatic stress. "Looking at student behavior through a trauma-informed lens," explains Colbert, "helps us understand how homelessness, malnourishment, transient families, and unsafe neighborhoods may debilitate students and derail their behavior."

Steve Collins and Kimberly Doran, the school social workers, elaborate. "Instead of looking at disruptive behavior as 'this kid is defying me,'" says Collins, "we look at the factors that are driving a student's behavior." Collins and Doran acknowledge that all bad behavior isn't trauma-based; sometimes it's just defiant, but they counsel that if educators are working with students whose circumstances are traumatic or who come from communities that have experienced historical trauma, it helps to factor trauma into the equation.

"We have to acknowledge how resilient these students are based on what they have experienced," says Collins. "The fact that they are present and able to function as well as they do is a testament to the strength of the human spirit."

"If studying trauma helps us create interventions that keep kids in school and learning, then it's worth the effort," adds Doran, who shares trauma-informed strategies for supporting students and educators.



### Tools To Use

**Create a safe environment.** Hallways can be chaotic when there are a lot of students moving from one place to another. We talk to teachers about simple things they can do at the beginning of class to calm the fight or flight response that originates in the amygdala, the part of the brain that controls emotional responses and behavior. We just had

an iPad rollout for every student at our school, and we're having students download self-regulation apps, like Breathe2Relax and ZenView. Some large classrooms have physical self-regulation spaces set aside for students where they can collect their thoughts and regain emotional equilibrium. It's a way to give kids space without having them leave the room. Another way we give students safe spaces is by allowing them to form a wide variety of niche groups. Being able to take part in groups like the Gay-Straight Student Alliance; the Muslim Student Association; and She, an advocacy group for young women, helps students feel accepted, involved, and invested in their school community.

**Establish rites and rituals.** Trauma involves a lack of safety, perceived or real. Students who have experienced chronic trauma need to know educators will keep them safe. Consistency and routines, knowing what to expect, helps students feel safe. So does knowing the reasons behind rules and regulations so they don't feel arbitrary or abusive. We also teach educators to pay attention to students' nonverbal cues, such as changes in their typical behavior like putting their head down in class, ignoring social interactions with peers, avoiding eye contact and social connection with teachers. Some of this is basic classroom management. We tell educators you're already doing many things the research says is trauma-informed care, so let's name what they are, like greeting students at the doorway, knowing and using student names, learning the "thing" that sets the student apart in a realm other than academics, complimenting specific versus vague skills, and separating behavior from character and from academic success.

**Build relationships and trust.** Developing relationships with traumatized kids that will help them trust you is critical, because trust allows students to learn. We talk to educators about using positive communication cues: how to make eye contact and use active listening cues like head nodding, proximity, and not multi-tasking when talking with students. We talk about using humor as a safety valve and how it humanizes educators when students know their teachers can make mistakes too. We also teach educators to be purposeful in how they talk to students—that includes words as well as tone of voice. We explain,

"When you said this to a student, he heard this. Did you mean it that way?" Also, kids who've experienced trauma may struggle with reading social cues, non-verbal ones in particular, so we have educators model how to read social cues, such as making sure the content of the conversation matches the affect.

**Don't forget to take care of yourself!** Educators are extraordinary but sometimes they need to be reminded that they are. They're notorious for devoting all of their time and energy to students and leaving none for themselves, but learning self-care allows you to take better care of your students. Most schools operate at a pretty frenetic pace. The kids arrive and it's go, go, go until they leave. Secondary trauma, like secondhand smoke, can lead to burnout if educators aren't careful. We talk with educators about different ways they can incorporate well-being and balance into their lives, and we challenge them to model self-care for their students. We encourage them to identify a support system, find positive ways to engage with colleagues, and choose a healthy intervention—whether it's yoga, dance, sports, or some other form of relaxation. We also recommend apps they can use for meditation and breathing.

**Bargain for the support students need.** To prepare for our union contract negotiations, we engaged parents and the community by talking to them about what they thought students needed to be successful. We passed out surveys and held town hall meetings to find out what our students' families wanted. With their help, we successfully bargained for five new social workers for the district.

**Acknowledge what educators know.** When we talk to our colleagues, we honor their work. We tell them, we know you're great at what you do, but we want to show you how you can increase your awareness by observing student behavior through a trauma-informed lens. As a result, our school staff is really open to the conversation. They tell us these conversations have shifted the paradigm away from blaming students and have helped staff expand their tool kit of interventions around student behavior, providing new insight about how to connect with students, especially those who struggle.



# EDUCATOR TO EDUCATOR

## Making the Most of Middle School

Lynn Harrison and Shenice Brevard,  
Derwood, MARYland

### Middle school educators use award-winning strategies to reduce student referral rates.

You know you're onto something good when your school goes from referring over 1200 students to the principal's office to under 30 in just one year. "As a staff we were thrilled at the respect that was growing in our building," says Lynn Harrison, coordinator of Redland Middle School's Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS) program.

The PBIS process emphasizes constructive interventions as an alternative to punitive discipline. Redland, a bright, airy middle school with students who look like they're happy to be there, has won an award for its efforts every year since starting the program in 2009. Equally impressive, Redland's referral rates broken down by student ethnicity are pretty evenly distributed among White, Black, and Hispanic students—unlike some schools that improve their overall numbers but still show disproportionate referral and suspension rates for students of color.

"Even though we didn't have a high suspension rate," says Harrison, "many students were being referred to the office and teachers were reaching frustration level. Referrals mean that students are not actively engaged in learning, which can result in suspension. We knew we had to be a lot more proactive about preventing negative behavior."

How did they do it? How did Redland reverse the numbers and revitalize the overall school climate? By responding to the unique needs of middle schoolers, says assistant principal Shenice Brevard. "Not only are middle school students different from elementary and high school students because of the physiological changes that occur during their middle school years," explains Brevard, "they're highly influenced by peers and media and these distractions can lend themselves to more disruptions in the school environment."

To get a handle on the situation, Redland focused on setting expectations, building relationships, and engaging students. Harrison and Brevard share the award-winning strategies that have made the school a PBIS star.



### Tools To Use

**Implement school wide expectations and teach positive behaviors.** Once we determined our core expectation and school motto—Respect School, Self, and Others—we set behavioral expectations for the classroom, hallway, buses, and cafeteria and posted these throughout the building and in all classrooms. Staff

and students are taught the expectations through modeling, and lessons throughout the year reinforce these expectations Even our announcements end with our school motto.

**Employ peer mediators.** Peer mediation is a positive behavior intervention that has worked well for us. School counselors train student volunteers to mediate incidents involving their peers. For example, a peer might intercede in a situation where two students were referred to the office for using inappropriate language during an argument. At this age, it helps students to have someone who understands where they're coming from—someone who can relate to them and give them positive feedback. Sometimes kids come up with ideas to solve problems that adults wouldn't think of.

**Have fun with creative rewards.** Our students earn "Bulldog bucks," paper money with a picture of our school mascot, as a reward for positive behavior, like picking up somebody's books in the hallway or helping another student solve a thorny math problem. All students have to do is follow our Respect School, Self, and Others motto. Bus drivers hand out three dollars for good behavior on the bus. Substitute teachers hand out two dollar bills to students who follow directions, help others, and show respect and responsibility. Teachers and other staff members hand out one dollar bills. When students earn enough money, they can shop in the "Dog Pound" (our school store), where they can buy everything from school supplies to apparel, like hats and tee shirts. Ninety percent of the items in the store are donated by parents, while the rest of the merchandise comes from PBIS grant money. Sixth and seventh graders love shopping in the Dog Pound, but we had to up the ante for older students, who use their Bulldog bucks to get into the Dog Pound Café, during lunch. The Café is an eighth grade hangout with Wii, air hockey, a variety of board games and puzzles, couches, chairs, and a flat screen TV—all from donated funds.

**Match students with mentors.** We have a year-long mentoring program for kids who are struggling behaviorally or academically. Grade-level team leaders match students with educators who volunteer to monitor and

work with a particular student. If the student and teacher already have a great relationship, students are more likely to work hard for their mentor and strive to improve their behavior or grades. Members of Redland's Instructional Leadership Team also work with mentees after school once a month to support academic achievements as well as build personal relationships. In addition, Redland runs a chapter of Courageous Young Men, a program that nurtures young men academically, socially, and emotionally.

**Get student input on behavior contracts.** Customized behavior contracts help keep some students on track. Rather than a long laundry list, contracts consist of just two to three goals that the students help to identify. If a student is an English Language Learner or receives special education services, we also get input from the educators in that department.

**Teach social and emotional skills.** Students have a 20-minute advisory period class each day after third period. Weekly lessons center on learning social and emotional skills, such as friendship, bullying, and conflict resolution and academic skills, such as organizing and good study habits. Each month, the lessons highlight a theme: one month, respect; the next month, responsibility; and the next, caring. During the other four days of advisory period, students can sign out and go see another teacher for extra help or work on their own work during that class period.

**Work through minor incidents.** Teachers are taught the difference between what warrants an MIR (minor incident report) and what warrants an automatic referral. When a student misbehaves, we file an MIR and follow a series of steps to address the issue. The first time a student doesn't follow the code of Redland Respect, the teacher gives the student a warning and records the incident in MyMCPS, a web-based data tool that's a one-stop portal for staff. The second time the teacher might have lunch with the student and perhaps notify the parents, as well as documenting the incident in MyMCPS. The third step is the same as the second. If there's a fourth incident, the student is referred to our office administrators who meet with the student and phone home. If needed, we make mental health services referrals for students and parents.



## Exploring Positive Alternatives

Jennifer Jacobson, Salt Lake City, Utah

### High school teacher Jennifer Jacobson finds that dispensing with the label “troublemaker” frees students and educators to do their best.

Jennifer Jacobson’s first visit to Horizonte Instruction and Training Center, she was amazed by what she saw: students who had been sent to this alternative high school because they had been banished from their home schools, often for being “troublemakers,” were actually engaged in class and engrossed in learning.

Jacobson, a high school social studies teacher who also teaches at the Westminster College School of Education, maintains there are a lot of misunderstandings about students who are labeled as troublemakers and that schools must take the trouble to find out why students are acting out.

“So many students come to us labeled, then you sit down with one and find out this kid has a parent who is incarcerated and he’s had to constantly move back and forth with relatives,” says Jacobsen, who discloses that over 85 percent of the school’s student body qualifies for free and reduced lunches.

Horizonte is a very diverse school with an ever-growing student population, many of whom are classified as English Language Learners or special education students. Jacobson notes that a significant number of students qualify under the McKinney-Vento Act as homeless—students who live in shelters and transitional housing, or who bunk with relatives or friends. She also points to the students who work full time outside of school, not arriving home until the early hours of the morning.

“You understand why they get to school late,” explains Jacobson, who sees a lot of students who have fallen through the cracks in the system. “They have dreams, too,” confides their teacher, “and when they’re “successful, the payoff is amazing—it’s a life changer.”

Jacobson, who is gratified students often come back to visit after they’ve graduated, says students tell them her they feel cared for at Horizonte. She proposes that some of the practices and programs that have been successful at Horizonte could help mainstream schools keep more students in school.

“Students are quite excited to be here so they meet the expectations we set for them,” she says. “If people are willing to make just small changes in the way we think about these kids, the future is bright.”



### Tools To Use

#### Jump start the day with an advisory class.

Our first period of the day is an advisory class where teachers serve as advocates to about 20 to 30 students. Over the course of the year, we get to know and build relationships with these students, working with them on social and life skills that will help them achieve success in school. We talk to them about how to approach a teacher if they don’t like what’s

going on in class. We talk to them about their graduation plans—sometimes it’s the first time anyone has asked them where they’re going to college. We talk to them about how to write a resume and find a job and how to look someone in the eye and shake their hand. Many students say it’s their favorite class. It’s a chance to be a part of something that feels real. The class is structured in a way that helps us build a good rapport with each student. If my advisory students gets into trouble in another class, they can come to me and be honest about what’s going on because they know I’m their advocate.

**Make the principal the last resort.** If a problem arises with a student, that student is sent to her teacher advisor. If they can’t work it out together, the student then talks to a lead teacher, an experienced educator who serves as a liaison with other teachers, parents and administrators. If the student and lead teacher still can’t work out the problem, the lead teacher calls the parents. The principal’s office is the last stop. It’s fairly rare for a student to be sent to the principal; the relationships we’ve built with our students cut down on their disruptive behavior. Of course if there’s a fight or belligerent name calling using certain offensive words, you’re sent to the principal right away. Even then, we’re not looking to put students out of school.

**Manage attendance proactively.** Many students are referred to Horizonte because of bad attendance at their home schools. We take attendance very seriously, but we are also flexible about working with students. When our students skip school, we ask them to come back with a parent or guardian. We let them know we are watching and looking out for them. We also understand there are reasons some students are late. Some are responsible for taking their younger siblings to school first, some don’t get home from work until the early hours of the morning, some are homeless and don’t have morning routines. So we work with students based on their individual situations. If a student has to miss first period because he’s responsible for driving his siblings to school, we might arrange for him to make up work at the end of the day or take an online course.

**Reinforce positive behavior.** We use positive behavior intervention strategies as a way of teaching good behaviors. We reward students for good behavior because reinforcing positive behavior works better for us than punishing bad behavior. We give out certificates for good attendance at an awards ceremony and students whose good behavior gets them into the “Principal’s 200 Club” may get to attend a movie or have an ice cream party. It really seems to work; even though we have kids with behavior problems, we have far fewer fights than other schools. The students here are generally well behaved and focused.

**Focus on relationship building.** Once you’ve built up trust with students, you can do things in class you never thought were possible because students are excited to learn. We use proximity as one way of strengthening relationships: there’s no staff lounge; instead we eat lunch with students and walk the halls between classes. We make the time to sit down and talk with students to find out about their lives and why they’re exhibiting bad behavior. Sometimes because of other pressures, like standardized testing, we forget we’re working with children and we have to do whatever it takes to help them be successful. If that takes sitting down with them at lunch hour, it’s worth it; in the long run, our students will be more successful and that’s our end goal.

**Expand your view of parent involvement.** We try to involve parents as much as possible, realizing the ways in which parent involvement is expressed can differ culturally. We have a collective view as Americans about what we define as parent involvement, for instance, attending parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school night. But parents in some cultures believe once their child is at school, the school’s in charge. Some parents’ work schedules don’t allow for flexibility. Other parents don’t speak English, so they feel uncomfortable and at a disadvantage. Our first principal instituted a rule: when talking to parents about their child, we had to say five nice things before we said one negative thing. In fact, teacher advisors must make the first call to parents within the first two weeks of school and it has to be 100 percent positive. Every parent wants their child to do well and if you’ve already built a relationship, you become a team. We’re pushing to have interpreters in the classroom during parent-teacher conferences, and our district has been great about translating documents.

**Offer targeted opportunities.** We have a range of programs targeted to specific school populations, for instance: a Young Parents program open to girls and boys and a Head Start program in the building for their children. We have a scholarship fund, financed by private donations, to help students pay for college or trade school (district employees can arrange for automatic withdrawal from their accounts to help fund scholarship programs). We offer career and technical classes through Salt Lake Community College, which is situated next to our school. We have night school programs, one for adults and one for high school students whose responsibilities prevent them from attending during the day. We also offer an outreach program for special education students who are older than 18, allowing them to continue work toward their high school diploma with a special education instructor.

# RESOURCES

## Print & Online Sources

Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools (A Guide for Educators). 2014. National Education Association, Advancement Project, American Federation of Teachers, National Opportunity to Learn Campaign. [otlcampaign.org/restorative-practices](http://otlcampaign.org/restorative-practices)

- Educator's guide illustrates how restorative practices can help schools move away from zero tolerance and toward positive discipline policies that can be integrated into the classroom, curriculum, and culture of schools.

School Climate and Discipline Resource Package. Departments of Education and Justice. [www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html)

- Online resource provides administrators, educators, students, parents and community members with tools, data and resources to improve school climate and discipline.

Lessons in Racial Justice and Movement Building: Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline in Colorado and Nationally. 2014. Padres & Jovenes Unidos and The Advancement Project. <http://padresunidos.org/reports/lessons-racial-justice-and-movement-building>

- Roadmap for organizations and communities on addressing discriminatory policies and practices.

"The School to Prison Pipeline: Time to Shut It Down." NEA Today. Jan. 5, 2015. <http://neatoday.org/2015/01/05/school-prison-pipeline-time-shut/>

- How schools are using restorative justice and other positive discipline practices to reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions.

## Organizations

Advancement Project [advancementproject.org](http://advancementproject.org)

Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color [coseboc.org](http://coseboc.org)

Congressional Black Caucus Foundation [cbcfinc.org](http://cbcfinc.org)

Council of State Governments, Justice Center [csgjusticecenter.org](http://csgjusticecenter.org)

Dignity in Schools Campaign [dignityinschools.org](http://dignityinschools.org)

National Education Association [nea.org](http://nea.org)

National Opportunity to Learn Campaign [otlcampaign.org](http://otlcampaign.org)

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights [ed.gov/ocr](http://ed.gov/ocr)