

# Restoring Respect

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## Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

by Diane Lefer

When the Los Angeles Unified school board voted in May 2013 to ban the practice of suspending students for “willful defiance,” the blogosphere roiled with outrage. “Moron” was one of the mildest words used to attack school board president Monica Garcia and her colleagues. Students were referred to as thugs and animals, with black and Mexican American students singled out for particular abuse. Teachers said they wouldn’t be able to teach if they couldn’t remove disruptive students from the classroom. Both candidates for mayor declared their opposition to the new policy.

So why would the board want the distinction of being the first school district in the US to take this step?

California Supreme Court Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye has explained that being suspended triples a young person’s likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system within the year. A study conducted by Johns Hopkins University and focused on a major city in the Northeast found that even a single suspension in the 9th grade doubled the chance that a student would drop out of high school.



It should seem obvious: when kids aren’t in school, they may be left to their own devices in the streets; when they miss class for suspensions and court dates, they fall behind. When they fall behind, they are bored and frustrated in class and more likely to get in more trouble and be punished with more suspensions, incarcerated in a juvenile facility, or to drop out altogether, too often leading to a lifetime of anger, frustration, lost opportunity, and an increased likelihood of criminal behavior.

So suspension rates matter. But while suspension policy got the media attention, it was only a small part of the district’s School Climate Bill of Rights. Over the next couple of years, zero tolerance policies, metal detectors, harsh punishment, low expectations, and school police with the power to arrest kids for any minor infraction would all give way. Teachers and staff would be trained and resources put in place so that schools could be transformed from a foretaste of prison to a welcoming home where all young people are wanted and supported, treated with respect, expected to show respect in return and to succeed.

“School Climate” — rather than “school reform” — is the term used by those seeking to replace the prevailing model of punishment and retribution in our schools with a model of restorative justice that promotes social harmony and healing for the individuals involved as well as their community. While our schools do need reform, unfortunately “school reform” has come to mean the privatization of public education through charter schools and policies that pit parents against teachers and principals, teachers against administrators, with teachers facing arbitrary evaluations and teachers unions being blamed for everything that’s gone wrong in our public schools. School climate specialists see a focus on social justice as a key to solving behavioral problems rather than relying, as the default response, on law enforcement, suppression, and criminal justice.

In Los Angeles, the school board had good reason to believe the School Climate Bill of Rights would make

classrooms better, not worse. Members only had to look at James Garfield High School in East LA, in a neighborhood plagued with all the stereotypical problems of poverty, drugs and gang violence. While more than 720,000 students in California's public schools were suspended or expelled during the 2010-11 school year, Garfield High won national attention by lowering its suspension rate from over 600 per year down to one single instance and then to zero. Far from resulting in classroom chaos, behavior improved, test scores and graduation rates went up. Later in this chapter I'll consider how this was accomplished.

My own interest in the school-to-prison pipeline — though I didn't yet know the phrase — was sparked in 2008 when I met a young man I'll call Claude. He was 19 years old and said he was going to jail. His crime? Being late for school. Claude explained he'd racked up hundreds of dollars in fines for truancy and tardiness. He had no money and so when he turned 18, the tickets generated an arrest warrant and now the police were looking for him. Claude obviously believed this, but how could this be? I started asking around. Middle class parents laughed. Their kids had ditched school to go to the beach and nothing happened. Tickets? No one had heard of these. I asked a few activist attorneys. They had never heard of such a thing.

Then I met Kim McGill, organizer for the Youth Justice Coalition made up of, led by and for, young people in the Los Angeles area who've been impacted by the juvenile justice system. This, she said, was exactly one of the problems her group was protesting as a member of Dignity in Schools, a nationwide organization just getting off the ground to advocate for new approaches to student behavior issues. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, with a dropout rate higher than 40%, students weren't dropping out of school, McGill told me. They were being pushed out — and into the criminal justice system. Youth were being ticketed or even arrested right at the school door, led off in handcuffs for offenses as minor and nonviolent as tardiness.

Los Angeles isn't unique. In the US, hundreds of thousands of students are arrested at school, often criminalized for minor acts that have major consequences, effectively ending opportunities for high school graduation and continued education, employment, service in the military, and more. A small number of young people are disturbed and violent enough to need more intensive intervention and supervision than an ordinary school can provide — but hundreds of thousands of them?

National studies have shown again and again that black students disproportionately face suspension for “willful defiance” — an extremely subjective offense — when white students with the same behavior get a mild reprimand or a call to the parents. Students with disabilities are also punished severely and at a disproportionate rate. Statistically, therefore, Claude was exactly the kind of kid most likely to be shunted down the school-to-prison pipeline. Not only was he black, he was poor. He grew up in foster-care and besides having a slight speech defect, he'd been diagnosed with severe psychological disability. The only part of his story that was unusual is that his tardiness had not led to his arrest while still in school.

Here in LA, school climate initiatives may seem like an agenda from the left as the drive to implement alternatives to punitive discipline was spearheaded by activist organizations, in particular, those led by people of color demanding equal treatment and equal justice for their children. But when I surveyed the landscape nationwide, I also found support from the United Way; a range of health foundations; Probation and Corrections Departments; universities; business organizations including the Chamber of Commerce in Nashville, Tennessee; and the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to the conservative ideals of “limited government, free enterprise, private property rights and individual responsibility.”

It's a simple nonpartisan idea: that every child deserves graduation rather than incarceration, and that positive outcomes for kids is good news for the US. But how is this to be accomplished?

### **Trauma-Sensitive Schools and Child Soldiers**

Attorney Connie Rice, co-founder of the multiracial civil rights organization, the Advancement Project, has noted that kids growing up in some LA neighborhoods show post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) levels comparable to

children in war zones. As for children with a parent absent due to incarceration or deportation, Ann Adalist Estrin, Director of National Resource Center on Children of Incarcerated Parents, notes that this absence feels as life-threatening as a loaded gun. Kim McGill believes youthful gang members, severely traumatized by violence, should be treated as child soldiers and rehabilitated rather than incarcerated.

I thought of them when Nancy Riestenberg, school climate specialist for the Minnesota Department of Education, referred me to the research that informs the MindUp (TM) curriculum created by the Hawm Foundation, aimed at giving children the means to regulate their emotions — and therefore, behavior — in the classroom and in life. Though not a brain researcher herself, Riestenberg helped me understand some of the findings. Sensory information entering our brain goes first to the amygdala which asks *safe? or not safe?* If the information signals safe—for example, *I see a teacher who is smiling at me, so I think it is ok to walk into the room*, that information proceeds to the prefrontal cortex and we have conscious thought and learning. If the amygdala thinks the sensory input is not safe—for example, *that adult is yelling like people who hit other people, so I better leave! Hide! Fight!*, the brain responds with fight, flight or freeze. When that happens, information does not go on to the prefrontal cortex, and there is no conscious thought or learning.

“We know that 1 in 3 children are affected by trauma,” says Natalie Turner, associate director of the Area Health Education Center at Washington State University in Spokane. “In high poverty communities, that number is higher.” By 2007, Turner knew of the work being done in Massachusetts by Susan Cole and others about how trauma affects learning. The ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study conducted for the CDC by Kaiser Permanente in San Diego — in a mostly white, middle class study group of more than 17,000 respondents — revealed high numbers as well as a correlation between childhood trauma and negative physical health for adults.

Children with high ACE scores also tend to struggle with academics, behavior, and attendance. As AHEC assessed mental health treatment systems for children and looked at interventions for high-risk kids and families, it was clear that the need was far greater than the mental health treatment system could handle. Though a clinician herself, Turner saw a public health approach was needed for an adequate response to children suffering traumatic events.

“Once you’ve been exposed to the information, you can’t un-hear it,” Turner says. “You have to think about your personal role in doing something about it.”

That meant going where the children are: our schools.

“Educators know that kids are coming in with heavy things on their plates impacting their ability in school,” Turner says, “but they didn’t know what to do.” In training teachers and administrators, she stresses that being trauma-sensitive isn’t about a new curriculum or a new tool. “It’s about a process, about getting serious about understanding a child’s behavior. We talk about what all kids need: safety, predictability, and consistency.”

Each classroom is different, but each teacher can reflect on what routines and rituals exist during the class period or school day. What happens during unstructured time, especially during transitions? What about the physical environment? For example, you can help young children manage the perception of danger and the consequent state of arousal if they are able to remove themselves to a quiet place with beanbag chairs or stuffed animals.

Mostly, Turner says, training is about “empowering teachers to look at behavior in a different way,” to recognize that when kids act out, “it’s what they do to feel a sense of safety or control. Once you understand that, you realize that punitive strategies are ineffective for kids who’ve lived in traumatic circumstances.” She believes our ideas about classroom management are flawed: “We are taught to talk to kids about rules,” but when something triggers threat-arousal and danger and puts them back in survival mode, “they can’t hear that. They have to modulate the emotion before you can have that conversation with them.”

Turner works with teachers “on things in their own control, setting up the physical environment, and their own responses to behavior in the classroom. “When we hold a mirror up to our own behavior, we can see how we

contribute to the power struggle.”

Turner teaches breathing, relaxation, simple yoga poses and stretching — for teachers to use for themselves, to restore their own calm and balance. They can then teach these practices to the kids to modulate emotions and bring the students’ energy level down when necessary. “As long as they are hyper-aroused, they will not be receiving instruction.”

In a trauma-sensitive school, all teachers and staff receive training, and the approach applies to all students. “You don’t need to know the trauma history,” Turner says. “Don’t pathologize or stigmatize kids. Instead, think about what you can do universally for *all* kids because you can never know the whole story about families.”

Neither can you understand in depth all the cultures they come from. Spokane is a relatively small city and yet more than 59 different language groups are spoken in homes where Spokane students live.

If an individual child is still having problems, that’s when you get more specialized in your response, Turner says, but “start from the universal approach that sets up the conditions for *all* kids to be successful. We want to foster resilience. That’s what’s going to help them thrive.”

Schools in other parts of the world also grapple with the issue of child trauma. While working with a nonprofit in Cochabamba, Bolivia I learned about *la pedagogía de la ternura*, the pedagogy of tenderness, which influences educators in the Andean countries emerging from dictatorship and armed conflict. Decades of violence have made kids hard, distrustful, silenced, and cut off from feeling in order to survive. If individuals are to reach their full human potential and if their society is to move away from war and repression and toward guarantees of fair and impartial justice, schools must become safe spaces where young people are nurtured, encouraged to think and to speak. Resilience — to use Turner’s word — is the goal, not fearful obedience.

Here in the US, if the word “tenderness” is likely to draw accusations that we’re coddling the thugs, it may be more diplomatic and effective to use a decades-old term from American pedagogical theory: the Warm Demander. A teacher can reach students while being strict and demanding high standards if he or she first establishes a warm relationship, always letting students feel they are unconditionally supported.

All of the overlapping and complementary approaches discussed here work best on a school-wide or community-wide basis but Riestenberg is also a believer in what a single individual can do. A teacher might make it a daily practice to stand in the doorway and greet by every student by name. The day that something comes up and the teacher can’t be there? “You can say *I’m sorry, I wasn’t able to stand in the doorway today but I’ll try to do it again tomorrow.*” It’s such a simple action, and yet for children who may be growing up in an environment in which adults are always inconsistent and never explain themselves, it can make a difference.

“It’s all about relationships, Riestenberg says, “using positive relationship as a means of holding students accountable.”

## **Social Emotional Learning, and Sad and Angry Children**

I first came across the term “emotional literacy” in the book *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* by psychologists Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson. They contend that “Some boys don’t even have the words for their feelings — sad or angry or ashamed, for instance.” Unable to recognize and name feelings, they can’t contend with strong emotion and are unable to empathize with what other people are feeling. Without emotional literacy, they may fall back on anger and aggression to express themselves. When I mentioned this to a friend in Oregon whose son was sent to prison as a teen, she was startled. Her boy had used almost the same words to describe the men he was locked up with.

The authors of *Raising Cain* based their book not just on experiences with inner city kids, but boys at prestigious prep schools. Recent media reports remind us that cyber-bullying, sexual assault, and slut-shaming show a

profound lack of empathy among some young people — female as well as male — in communities everywhere on the socioeconomic spectrum.

Social skills were traditionally part of what young people learned in school, says Riestenberg. “A school exists within a community. In order for people to complete a course of study and write, they need a certain level of self-regulation and that comes from practicing social skills with each other, learning impulse control, dealing with a certain level of frustration, using words that articulate the frustration that they feel. The individual needs the ability to function in the school and work together in the group.”

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), now offers evidence-based curriculum recommendations to help classroom teachers from pre-K through high school find materials and tools. The Mood Meter, for example, a chart from the RULER curriculum designed by Dr. Marc Brackett of Yale, offers a visual means of recognizing and expressing feelings for those — especially students with disabilities — who struggle with words. Other materials promote a healthy school climate and specifically address issues such as bullying and conflict resolution.

CASEL-approved programs have been shown to promote self-awareness, self-regulation, and respect for others with the result that students are less likely to be disruptive and more able to engage in learning. And teachers who are not overwhelmed by troublemakers are not only able to teach, but can model positive social behavior.

The Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools integrates Social Emotional Learning into the regular school curriculum throughout the city. All adults who deal with the kids receive training, including school bus drivers who are often overlooked though they are challenged with the most chaotic behavior and frequent abuse. Nashville also recognized the larger social justice issues: when students live in poverty or in troubled home situations, social and behavioral health can't be addressed by the schools alone.

Geoffrey Canada recognized that years ago in New York City. He founded the Harlem Children's Zone in the 1990's as a pilot project on a single block to show what could happen if a full range of services addressing all needs were provided to children and their families. By 2010, the well-funded nonprofit had a budget of more than \$75 million and had extended its philosophy to about 100 blocks. In Nashville, with leadership and research from the Chamber of Commerce, the city embarked in 2002 on Alignment Nashville — an ambitious plan to do something similar for every child and family in the entire metropolitan area.

Like most cities, Nashville already had a wide range of nonprofit service providers — 175 of them. The Chamber's study found, however, that without coordination, social services were often duplicated or fragmented while many families still couldn't — or didn't know how to — gain access to what they needed. Alignment Nashville was launched with input and participation from parents and community members as well as representatives from government, schools, nonprofit organizations and the business community. Every school was then linked with a nearby site at a community center or church that hosted service providers. Some school campuses themselves became the one-stop site for physical and mental health services, food and clothing banks, parent education, and more.

### **Restorative Justice: Taking Responsibility and Making Amends**

Recently, in Los Angeles, a student who mouthed off was required to write a letter of apology to the teacher. The teacher wrote a letter in response and then both of them read their letters aloud to the class. Teacher and student in this way engaged with each other as human beings while affirming in front of the group what behavior is acceptable and unacceptable. When this incident was reported in the LA Times, once again there was outrage over the “coddling” of barbarians.

The student-teacher letter exchange was an example of restorative justice, a set of practices that has migrated from the criminal justice system to some American schools.

This approach might have been the best response when Brandon Serpas was bullied as a gay high school student. He recalls that the teacher ignored it but his Southern California school was supposed to be committed to anti-bullying efforts, Serpas says, and so he went and talked to the assistant principal. The result: the offending boy was suspended — and back in school three days later. Then Serpas — whose complaint had caused the punishment — had more reason to fear harassment.

“Suspension doesn’t help harassment or bullying,” he says. “It doesn’t address the attitudes.”

What would have happened if the school had instead tried restorative justice conferencing?

Restorative justice asks *Who was harmed? What are the needs and responsibilities of all the parties?* Serpas and the boy who bullied him would have met face-to-face, each with supporters present, in a facilitated conversation. Each would have been able to tell his version of the incident, without interruption. Serpas would have been able to express, one human being to another, how the bullying affected him. The young men would have been able to ask one another questions. Their supporters would also speak, letting the victim know he was not alone. In restorative justice, it’s important for the offender, too, to know that people care about him, that he has not been brought to the conference to be shamed. Someone who has been humiliated is more likely to burn with anger and confusion than to feel sincere repentance and undergo positive change. In a restorative justice conference, the goal is for the parties to reach an agreement for future behavior based on respect.

Restorative justice has roots in all of the world’s major religions. Here in the US, Native American traditional practices such as the council circle have been widely adopted while the Mennonite Church pioneered restorative practices in the criminal justice system. Howard Zehr, the “grandfather of restorative justice,” teaches at the Center for Justice & Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia but has also carried the philosophy and practice around the world, notably to New Zealand where conferencing became an essential part of restructuring the entire juvenile justice system, making it very different from the harshly punitive approach that has characterized treatment of youth in the US over the past several decades.

Anyone who has been a crime victim or has worked in victims’ rights can hardly have failed to notice that even when there’s a successful prosecution and conviction, victims often remain consumed with grief, fear, and rage. Retribution is not enough. Though restorative justice does not replace punishment and incarceration, a victim’s needs — economic and emotional — must also be addressed and an offender needs to make amends in order for community harmony to be restored.

Canada, which had one of the highest youth incarceration rates in the Western world, also became a pioneer in restorative justice practices after recognizing the existing system was shameful — and not working. The same recognition is dawning in the US.

Texas, with one of the highest incarceration rates in the nation, turns out to be in the vanguard of restorative justice, having led the way in promoting victim/offender dialogue. While these programs were first intended to bring psychological relief to survivors, they turned out to play a major role in reducing recidivism rates. What Texas learned is that offenders are more likely to recognize the consequences of what they’ve done when they see the impact their crime has had on another human being. Restorative justice, far from coddling criminals, often led to true remorse, empathy, and moral growth. Restorative circles and conferencing have now been used in Texas to address hate crimes and bias-motivated incidents — exactly the sort of intervention Brandon Serpas wished for.

The restorative justice philosophy has step by step migrated from the prisons to the juvenile facilities to the schools — a positive sort of prison-to-school pipeline. In 2011, Texas was able to shut down three juvenile prisons in favor of community-based intervention. Ed White Middle School in San Antonio was perhaps the first public school to try out mediation within the school community and other restorative practices among students and between students and teachers.

In Minnesota, according to Riestenberg, the restorative justice philosophy was also tried first in the criminal justice system “but there was an easy leap to youth and the schools. People who wanted to try out something new went to the softest target.” Instead of trying to work with “somebody who’s been a thief for 35 years, there’s more hope with a 15-year-old first offender.” When kids got in trouble with law enforcement, their cases were diverted to restorative conferencing and when asked who they wanted on their side to help them, they often asked for a teacher. “Teachers are powerful and influential,” Riestenberg says. And when they saw the restorative process in action, teachers also saw how it could be applied to school discipline.

As early as 1998, the Minnesota Commissioner of Education was recommending restorative practices instead of traditional punishment. With federal funding in 2000, the Department of Corrections offered training which people from the Department of Education attended. Corrections wrote a restorative justice curriculum with the participation of Education to be sure it was compatible with schools.

Riestenberg consults on school climate issues around the country, and strongly recommends that programs be implemented schoolwide. Talking about peer mediation programs, she said “Even when you train some kids to be mediators, it only works well if all the teachers and staff and all kids have been taught. You have to start with the adults. Somebody needs to keep track of the training and somebody has to keep track whether people are using what they’ve been taught. Just like everyone in school knows how to read, how to add, how to use a computer, it requires everyone to have a base level of knowledge.”

As author of *Circle in the Square: Building Community and Repairing Harm in School*, Riestenberg advocates the circle process not just as a way of responding to trouble but of building connectedness and relationship before trouble occurs. The group sits in a circle and the teacher leads the way setting some guidelines and reiterating core values of the group. As a talking piece gets passed from hand to hand, each person in the group has a chance to speak without interruption or objection from the others while the teacher shows interest, respect, and concern for each one. The subject may be seemingly innocuous, such as favorite flavors of ice cream, a way of building on commonalities. Kids may just be asked to “check in” with their feelings and what’s going on in their lives. The circle sometimes offers an assessment tool quite different from testing, as when students express their attitudes toward arithmetic. The circle can ask what it feels like to be bullied, or may have students respond to a specific classroom incident, always with kids speaking from the heart, listening respectfully to others even when in disagreement.



Circles can be used to boost basic academic skills. The Ojai Foundation in California offers lesson plans, for example, giving students index cards on which they write their names. The cards are then passed around and everyone writes words of appreciation for their fellow students under their names. What seems like an exercise in being recognized and in enhancing self-esteem also gets kids to put thoughts in writing.

It should be obvious, however, that if parents are going to lobby for restorative circles in schools, they will also have to address class size and policies that take flexibility and spontaneity away from teachers and instead lock them into daily lesson plans tied to standardized test preparation.

Restorative practice looks at the why of student misbehavior, not just the what, and seeks ways to address the problem. Riestenberg gives the example of a shoving and pushing match that erupted on a long, slowly moving cafeteria line. It turned out some American-born students were joking that the pizza was running out and there wouldn’t be enough to go around. This sent panic through a group of kids who’d come from a refugee camp where being polite and holding back often meant going hungry. Here’s where being “trauma-sensitive” overlaps with

restorative justice. In this case, no one was punished. Instead the school realized that when pizza — the most popular meal — was served, there should be more than a single long line.

Riesterberg has written, “Restorative measures provide the way to hold two contradictory ideas in our heads at the same time — a person can be both a victim and an offender, and we need not ignore either fact. Given the multiple experiences some children have with victimization, this notion is enormously useful when a child hurts someone else. We, as community, can acknowledge both truths, and in doing so provide real support and true accountability. We can in the process also hold ourselves accountable.”

Even Minnesota, however, hasn’t seen full and sustainable implementation in the public schools. A matter of resources. For a while, there’s money for community organizations and state agencies. County courts and the probation department get involved as do university faculty members, not just in the School of Education, but the Law School. (In other states, university support has come from other programs including Psychology, Criminology, Health, Conflict Resolution, and Peace & Justice Studies.) But as programs begin to scale up, funding dries up. School administrators, constantly tasked with new programs to implement, find there’s never enough time or personnel. And in our mobile society — maybe more mobile than ever due to budget cuts and public employee layoffs — schools too often lose people with expertise.

But those same people, says Riesterberg, move to other schools and other organizations and carry their passion and knowledge with them.

Which is exactly what happened in Belfast, Maine.

More than 15 years ago, the State of Maine legislated a court diversion program for juveniles. Community groups trained as volunteers to facilitate restorative conferences but implementation faltered when local law enforcement failed to buy in. Several years later, three collaborating groups led a renewed effort. As Barb Blazej of the Peace & Reconciliation Studies program at the University of Maine in Orono recalls, her program obtained funding and so did a similar initiative directed by Pam Anderson at the University of Maine School of Law in Portland. They were joined by the newly formed nonprofit Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast (RJP) in Belfast. When the university-based funding was cut, RJP kept the work going with Blazej, still teaching at Orono, also coming on board to coordinate the Restorative School Practices of Maine division of RJP. Anderson, now retired, continued to consult with the nonprofit.

Just as Riesterberg suggests, RJP became a leader because people with expertise move around. In this case, T. Richard Snyder, Ph.D., former dean at New York’s Union Theological Seminary, had used restorative practices with Sing Sing prison inmates. After retiring to the midcoast region, he joined the board of the Maine Council of Churches, co-chaired the Restorative Justice Committee, and began meeting in Belfast with the Waldo County sheriff. At about the same time, Margaret Micolichek who had learned restorative work in the Boston area also made the move north. The two joined forces in the Unitarian Universalist Church Social Justice Committee. The church was able to provide some initial funding and Snyder began to hold community forums. Over the course of 18 months, he prepared the ground, reaching out to all stakeholders.

“Our focus,” says Micolichek, “has been to really make it be the community itself, to have the community buy into it. We think about sustainability and we work a lot with getting other congregations on board to recruit volunteers and for financial support.”

A juvenile conferencing program began with referrals from Juvenile Probation Officers in the local office of the Department of Corrections. Then Snyder worked to build additional positive relationships with local law enforcement by offering something the sheriff wanted — mentors for formerly incarcerated men facing the challenges of reentry — rather than by initially pushing a restorative justice agenda. Micolichek, by then RJP’s executive director, began overseeing referrals and the connections between volunteers and criminal justice. One hundred twenty-five volunteers participated as mentors, all trained in restorative justice philosophy and practice so that they could bring

that mindset and those skills to their service. The Sheriff's Department kicked in funding. With success and a raised profile, RJP began to receive some funding from local banks and businesses as well.

The relationship with the Sheriff's Department developed even more when the Waldo County Jail was slated to be closed down. Instead, influenced by the presence of the RJP mentoring program, the facility was transformed to a reentry center: county and state inmates spend 6-18 months preparing for release with an intensive program of therapy as well as employment and literacy skills. RJP provides mentoring, as always, but in addition, while in orientation, all residents attend an introduction to restorative justice class with a focus on accountability, obligations, impact, and repairing harm. Micolichuk and a co-facilitator began to offer a 7-week class that looked at communications and pro-social activities the formerly incarcerated could do in the community. In this way, the RJP mentor was able to help with the transition to society and the process of giving back.

Taking restorative justice into the schools also meant building relationships. A natural place to start was with the assistant principal of the middle school in Belfast who had experience with peer mediation and was therefore especially interested and open to his school being the pilot project. Within six months of implementation there was a 70% decrease in the number of office referrals resulting in detentions.

RJP continues to scale up and now serves four counties directly. Micolichuk, having returned to Maine after restorative justice work in Southeast Asia, is now a consultant. Snyder helped found the statewide Restorative Justice Institute of Maine while trainings are offered by the Peace & Reconciliation Studies Program at the University of Maine, in partnership with the Restorative Practices Collaborative of Maine, a coalition of trainers and facilitators that promotes and teaches the restorative approach throughout the state.

### **School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports**

"Reading is the world," Garfield principal José Huerta told me. "Reading is everything. And 25% of our kids come in at below reading level. We have to start there because if they can't read, they're not going to be successful."

Did I mention? Claude, at age 19, was illiterate.

Rather than waste precious classroom time on testing, reading levels are assessed for incoming Garfield students the summer before they enter the 9th grade. They are then scheduled, as needed, for individualized attention from teachers and through the Read 180 program. Throughout the school, Language Arts instruction was increased from 60 to 90 minutes a day. "We're not going to make excuses," says Huerta. "*These kids fell behind in reading in elementary school and further behind in middle school. We can't waste our time worrying about the past. We work with who we have.*" Instead of spending funds on iPads and laptops, Huerta hired math and literacy coaches. "In one semester many students begin to read at their grade level. By the end of the school year, they're all at 9th-grade reading level."

With confidence — instead of humiliation — in their school performance, Huerta was convinced students were less likely to be truant or disruptive in class. "We took suspension off the table. We can't teach them if at home. We need them here." But lowering the suspension rate — which gets all the attention — was just a "by-product" of everything else that was put in place to change the culture of the school. "We now have kids that are connected with their teachers and are engaged in extra-curricular activities."

When I met him, Huerta had been principal for 3-1/2 years, charged with turning around a failing school in a high-poverty, high crime neighborhood with a student body 99% Latino.

You don't just throw out an existing discipline policy, he explains, without preparing the ground for the new one. This meant months of meeting with teachers — in large groups and small, with students, with parents, engaging the entire community. All students had to be convinced that they were welcome, that Garfield wanted them and believed in them.

Given the right support, he believes, all kids will do well in school. No student wants to fail. Significantly, he believes that no parent wants their child to fail.

About 80 parent volunteers are on campus each day. When students arrive, they aren't checked by security guards and metal detectors but by volunteers and school personnel who greet them with smiles. (There is still an armed police officer on the campus, but his mission is strictly to respond to real crime rather than to enforce school discipline.) The day I visited, mothers were concerned because a man in a white van had recently tried to pull girls from a neighboring school into his vehicle. As a result of that concern, early each morning, the community came together to secure the perimeter of Garfield High School.

Elsewhere in the county, Edward Madison, a South LA leader of the parent group CADRE, said, "Parents — not just kids — get pushed out." In his experience, when African American parents tried to get involved in their children's school, they were charged with bad parenting and told the problems were their own fault. Spanish-speaking parents have complained to me their children's schools lack interpreters and never communicate with them at all.

At Garfield, instruction is not bilingual but Huerta and many other teachers and administrators — as well as the pediatrician who is on campus 20 hours a week — are fully bilingual. Spanish-speaking parents and guardians have their own organization and regular meetings at school to learn about issues affecting their kids — including information about programs for gifted students. They can attend classes on anger management, dealing with teenagers, presentations on asthma, diabetes, obesity.

To accomplish much of this, Garfield — like the Nashville schools — has partnered with local agencies and organizations so that drug counseling and a health clinic (which is available not only to students but to parents and community members) and other services are sited on-campus.

To address discipline, Garfield implemented SWPBIS (School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports), a process by which the school tracks data on what misbehavior has resulted in what discipline. Each school sets up behavioral expectations for everyone on campus, to be understood and applied fairly and consistently by everyone. Under SWPBIS, there are clear tiers of response to behavior. First, a classroom intervention by the teacher. Next, a referral to a counselor, nurse, or a Pupil Services and Attendance (PSA) Counselor — what we used to call a truant officer — to address a specific problem.

If someone is excessively absent due to untreated chronic illness or bullying, the PSA counselor finds solutions. The PSA tracks families down when they are evicted or homeless and makes sure homeless students have everything they need to stay part of the school — from transportation to school supplies to prom dresses to caps and gowns for graduation. With repeat offenders, the counselor will meet with parents and have them commit to getting their children to school on time. Bringing parents in to meet at the District Attorney's office is used only as a last resort.

"What does a suspension do?" Huerta demanded. "For not sharpening their pencil, for chewing gum, you're going to send them to the Dean so they can get suspended? Just to get them out of your life for 60 minutes?"

If a kid acts up in science class, Garfield administrators proceed on the assumption that the student doesn't understand the lesson. The kid will then spend lunchtime inside with a science tutor. If the problem is indeed that the student needed tutoring, the problem should be solved. If the disruptive behavior had nothing to do with academics, the kid quickly gets the idea that if he wants to spend lunch with his friends instead of with a tutor, he'd better start behaving.

Young people with multiple problems — for example, both physical and mental health, homelessness, drugs — will be referred to a collaborative team to have specialized plans developed to keep them in school and out of trouble.

In California, school funding is based on attendance. With more kids showing up every day, Garfield received enough money so that Huerta could hire more counselors as well as a psychiatric social worker.

When you walk around Garfield High School, you see students paying attention in class or working quietly and intently in small groups. The buildings are, for the first time in recent memory, graffiti-free. There's no rowdiness at lunchtime when students sit eating and chatting with friends around cafe tables. Over ten years ago, kids used to be jumped into gangs right in the Garfield restrooms. Today, there's no sign of gang affiliation. "I'm not naive," Huerta says. "I'm sure students might be involved in gangs or crews, but we don't see any gang affiliated activity on campus. Once in a while," he admits, "some students dress a little funny. They're teenagers. But we call it to their attention that they need to protect themselves by dressing appropriately and not attracting negative attention."

Gang membership, however, is not something that gets talked about.

This brought to mind something Connie Rice of the Advancement Project told me several years ago. She concluded it had been a mistake when she and others had brokered gang truces. She now believes this sort of negotiation serves to validate the gang identity. Instead, she suggested treating gang leaders as people with influence in the community rather than representing the gang. (I note that her brain child — the Urban Peace Academy which trains gang interventionists — has "Peace" in its name, not "Gangs.")

So Garfield seems to be getting it right: if students find respect and loyalty and a sense of family at school, they may not feel the need to turn to gangs for connectedness and pride.

When Russlyn Ali was assistant secretary for civil rights at the US Department of Education, she noted that many schools in low-income neighborhoods with minority populations don't even try to offer quality education. Some middle schools don't bother with algebra, AP courses are unknown in high school, and so students — even the brightest — are not prepared for college. Garfield is different. The Garfield master schedule affords extra time and attention for algebra, English Language Arts, and offers the most AP courses in the school district. The 2013 graduating class is heading off to some of the nation's most selective colleges—to Ivy League schools, to MIT, while students from Garfield gained more admissions to UCLA than students from any other high school in the state.

At a recent graduation, Huerta was nervous at first when he saw the young people had decorated their caps with a slogan. Then he read it: *Nerd Herd*. So much for the negative stereotype by which students of color don't want to be associated with academic success. At Garfield these days, it's cool to be a nerd.

"There's no magic bullet," Huerta says. "Some people come here and want forms or documents. They want some bylaws or some rules that will tell them what we've done to make it work, but it's not that easy. It's a compilation of strategies we implemented to change the culture of the school. And it's all of us working together to achieve student success."

The Garfield story is still being written. As long as poverty remains the primary determinant of low academic performance, unequal opportunity in the US will continue to mean hurdles for many kids in East LA and elsewhere. But schools like Garfield both raise the bar and lower the hurdles.

Huerta says, "Once you make students believe in themselves and they respect you, and you respect them, it's just magical."

**Diane Lifer** is an author, playwright, and activist. Her books include [The Blessing Next to the Wound](#).