

Schools - How Peer Juries Came to Chicago Schools and Quickly Left

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Restorative Justice Came and Quickly Left

From Catalyst, Chicago

by **Rebecca Harris November 22, 2010**

Monroe Elementary Principal Edwin Rivera was excited to learn in fall 2008 that his school would receive grant money to start a restorative justice program. As a former counselor, Rivera is a strong believer in strategies that give schools an alternative to solve conflict and avoid suspensions.

Monroe got off to a promising start. Rebecca Davis, a social worker from SGA Youth & Family Services, helped facilitate peace circles in several classrooms and trained about 15 to 20 students to serve on a peer jury, which presided over a handful of mock cases before the end of the school year. School administrators were optimistic about the program's potential.

"I remember our conversation being, 'We're planting the seed and then we'll be ahead of the game'" for the coming year, Rivera says.

But the momentum was abruptly cut short when Rivera got an email from central office informing him that the program was ending.

"We were left guessing as to why it was discontinued," says Rivera.

Monroe was one of five schools that received grants after advocacy groups won an agreement from CPS in 2008 to target \$300,000 toward six pilot programs in restorative justice, a strategy that aims to lessen conflict through mediation, peace circles, peer juries and other strategies. At

the time, preventing school violence was a high priority in the minds of parents, teachers and students.

The pilot program ran until March 2010. But Monroe's participation was cut short, and several other schools started receiving grant services just weeks or months before the grant ended. As a result, the initiative has so far led to sustained restorative justice programs, targeted toward students, at just two schools: Duprey and Hay, where peer juries have taken hold. (See sidebar.)

At Duprey, a group of six peer jurors has heard two cases this year. Duprey, a former receiving school for students from overcrowded areas, has lost nearly half its student population since the grant ended; this year, it serves just 90 students.

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Restorative justice can cut suspensions and expulsions, which disproportionately impact African-American boys in CPS, according to the June 2009 issue of Catalyst In Depth . But ending the racial disparity will take more, says Jim Freeman, director of the Ending the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track program at the Advancement Project. Adults need to re-examine how they interpret student behavior, he says. "Most suspensions and expulsions are issued to students of color by white teachers and administrators."

Schools have also sought to improve behavior and curb discipline with more social-emotional learning, a program that also never took hold in CPS.

Since June 2010, CPS has not responded to repeated requests by Catalyst Chicago for an interview with staff who oversaw the pilot program and for other information about it, including how schools were chosen. (A Freedom of Information Act request filed in October is still pending.)

Advocates say that the grants could have yielded quicker results if CPS had taken input from the community about which schools were most interested in participating, since experts say teacher and principal buy-in is essential. Nancy Riestenberg, a violence prevention specialist at the Minnesota Department of Education, says that staff who are hostile to peer juries, for instance, can shake young people's self-confidence and keep them from taking it seriously.

Ellen Schumer, president of Community Organizing and Family Issues, known as COFI, asked the district to make parent, teacher, principal and local school council buy-in part of the grant selection criteria. COFI was asked by CPS in 2008 to submit a list of schools, but the district "did not select any that we proposed," Schumer notes.

A year later, in late summer 2009, CPS again asked COFI to suggest schools. The group suggested Jenner Elementary, but Jenner was not selected.

"I cannot give you any rhyme or reason why they picked those schools," says Edith Crigler, associate executive director of the Chicago Area Project, which conducted training for two of the

schools. At Whitney Elementary, one of the six schools the district initially selected for the program, school administrators were not interested when she approached them, Crigler recalls.

Two other schools served by Chicago Area Project, Reavis and Reed, were able to spend less than half of their funds before the grant's deadline. From a \$125,000 grant, says Crigler, "I had billed them for less than \$50,000."

From interviews with school administrators and outside agencies that were to provide training, it's clear that the effort was hindered by insufficient manpower and time.

"To make it work, you need someone to head it up," says Oscar Reed, who has done extensive restorative justice training in Minneapolis Public Schools and other districts across Minnesota. "(Teachers') plates are already full."

At Monroe, "a lot of the teachers were a little reluctant to try something new," says Dan Silva, the school's dean, who was largely responsible for overseeing the pilot's implementation. "They get upset because you're taking classroom time from them."

Some teachers were won over by participating in a peace circle held by Rebecca Davis to help them understand the process. She built support by holding more circles with teachers and meetings to discuss the specifics of the peace circles for students.

Teachers were also initially skeptical about peer juries, although they became more open to the idea as they learned more, Silva says.

But by the time Rivera learned that the district was cutting the program, it was too late to figure out how to sustain the effort without money from central office. Without time to come up with another solution, Silva would have been the logical person to keep it going, but as the school's disciplinarian and a part-time bilingual teacher, he had too much on his plate.

Classroom peace circles have been discontinued, but Monroe has instituted weekly advisory periods for team-building activities and meetings. Five teachers, out of about 40, continue to hold peace circles during the advisory time.

At Reed Elementary, Principal Dina Everage says she was not able to meet with the agency that was slated to coordinate services for a peer jury until less than four months before the grant ended. As a result, the staff did not receive any real training.

"Ideally, we would meet in the summer with principals and staff and students, and then get it launched in September," rather than February, says Andrew Tonachel, the trainer from Alternatives, Inc., who worked with Reed's peer jurors. "We struggled to get a core group that really could picture what this was, and own it. With more time, and with a different approach initially in terms of doing some team-building, we might have been able to overcome that."

Emika Canty, a veteran counselor and case manager who started at Reed in January 2010, barely had time to attend the two peer jury trainings each week, let alone do extra work recruiting

students and promoting the program. “It was hard with her schedule, and being new to the school,” Everage says.

Canty notes that it is often difficult to find teachers who are willing to volunteer to facilitate such programs. “Adults want to be compensated for their time,” she says.

Students showed up inconsistently, Canty says. They were unfocused, and lacked the coping and problem-solving skills the program needed. After just four weeks, the grant ended, leaving the students without enough skills or training to hear cases.

Everage hasn’t given up, though. Last year, she worked with teachers to identify students with leadership ability and more time available, and got staff from central office to facilitate trainings. And she still hopes to get the program up and running again this year.

“Some of our students have to understand what a program is before they can be active in it,” says Everage, who notes one lesson she learned: Principal involvement is a key factor in peer jury success. Taking a field trip to visit another school’s peer jury program could have helped, she observes, and she could have asked the outside agencies involved with the school to go from classroom to classroom to explain what peer juries do and recruit interested students.

Riestenberg notes that marketing is important. Students should be aware that if they ever get into trouble or are hurt by a peer, “you can ask for this,” she adds.

Meanwhile, time is not on Everage’s side. This year, she has only six teachers. And the school’s phase-out has been sped up: Reed is closing at the end of the year.

Staff and parents at Reavis Elementary say the program has been beneficial, although restorative justice practices have yet to take deep root with students.

Assistant Principal Andalib Khelghati says that a few months after administrators began meeting with CPS in December 2008, the school included a workshop on peace circles in a professional development day. Two teachers got coaching on how to incorporate a morning meeting for students into their classrooms, he says. Reavis even had school-wide community meetings on Mondays and Fridays.

But amid everything else going on at the school, it became difficult for teachers to commit energy toward training, Khelghati says. “We felt the teachers were involved in too many things. It just would have felt too overwhelming.”

The training has reduced conflict among parents, though. “Parents take much more of a ‘let’s roll up our sleeves and help our school’ attitude,” Khelghati notes.

Tracy Occomy Crowder, an organizer at COFI who helped conduct the training, says the initial goal was to get parents involved in the “reflection room,” where students in the Elev8 after-school program can sit and talk with a social worker if they are having behavior problems or don’t feel like participating.

But the reflection room was just getting off the ground, and the training had to happen immediately before the grant ran out. “It was too soon to put those two pieces together,” says Heather Ireland, program manager for Elev8 at Reavis. The training instead became an opportunity for parents to talk about discipline and other things they might want to change in the school.

Parent Charlene Campbell, vice-chair of Reavis’ local school council and member of COFI’s parent arm, POWER-PAC, lobbied with other parents for the school’s Elev8 program to bring the trainers back this year without CPS funding. The group began meeting again in October and training will run through at least mid-December.

“We are using what we learned before to try and set some goals up [and] to establish conversations with the principal so that we can have a good rapport to work towards that goal,” she says.

One of Campbell’s goals: Get parents involved in the reflection room and expand its hours, so it can be used during the school day.

The scattershot implementation of restorative justice has left grassroots community groups disillusioned about the district, says Ana Mercado, a youth organizer at Blocks Together, one of the groups that pushed for the pilot grants.

“We’ve said, ‘If it’s not going to come from the top, we’re going to develop our own pilots and make them work from the grassroots up,’” she says.

In March 2010, just as the grant ended, COFI unveiled a “parent-to-parent guide” on restorative justice, a large, 12-page booklet that gives parents specific examples of practices and stories about schools that have successfully adopted them.

COFI held two parent trainings that drew about 100 participants. Some, like Paderewski parent Debra Thomeson, were interested in starting a peer jury at their schools.

At the training, students from Marshall High talked about their peer jury. “They really did a good job selling it,” Thomeson said later. “That’s a great idea to help children feel more like they have a say in what’s going on.”

Alternatives, Inc. is also looking at new ways to get restorative justice programming into the schools. From spring 2009 to summer 2010, the agency’s staff went into seven elementary after-school and summer programs run by the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago to teach students about conflict resolution and restorative justice. The YMCA staff running the programs also received training in using restorative justice to resolve discipline issues. At one high school, Alternatives helped design a peer mediation program. The initiative cost about \$90,000.

“At a couple of schools, it took six months before the staff was really open to the idea that we would be able to help them,” says Karen Lambert, a restorative justice specialist at Alternatives Inc. “[But] they were talking to each other and hearing success stories.”

Now that the joint program is over, Alternatives and the YMCA are planning how to expand it and integrate the concepts throughout the school with support from faculty, says Lambert. “For students to hear the same message from the teachers really strengthens the program.”

Parent involvement has shored up longstanding restorative justice programs in CPS, including three that are funded by the Juvenile Justice Division of Cook County courts at Brunson and Key elementary schools and Wells High.

Lynn Morton, a POWER-PAC parent who helped organize the program at Brunson, says it got off the ground in 2005 as an all-volunteer effort, although parents who run it are now paid a stipend of \$10 an hour through a state grant. Altogether, she says, the three programs run on about \$25,000 a year.

The peace center program serves about 12 to 15 students at a time, who are referred by school administrators, teachers or parents (although some come of their own accord). Students come for about two hours once a week for 6 to 10 weeks. Boys come on one day, and girls on another.

The goal is to give children the opportunity “to feel safe and talk about what’s going on in school, what’s going on in the home, and getting them to see how each one of their behaviors [affects] their community, their school, their classroom,” Morton says.

Parent volunteers are on Brunson’s campus during most school days to work with current and former peace center students who get in trouble.

“If you don’t have the parent and community buy-in, it’s not going to be sustainable,” Morton says. “When there was no funding, my volunteers showed up at Brunson every day that they were scheduled to be there. It’s purely people-power.”

Even so, she hasn’t given up on pressing CPS to do more to bring restorative justice efforts to schools throughout the district. “I’m going to hold out hope,” she says.

Riestenberg notes that it’s a big step forward for Chicago—the third biggest district in the country—to even have restorative justice in its student discipline code.

“People watch Chicago closely,” Riestenberg says. “This is the biggest school district that I know of that has it in their discipline code. It’s an essential first step, because now, people have leverage.”

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